

*August 1969*

*T*HE SEAL APPEARS FROM NOWHERE, an instant immutable presence in the sea – although he must have been swimming silently beneath the surface for some time without her knowing. Katherine shudders in the water; her thoughts are moving like fast cold spikes inside her head. Where has he come from? Is he lost? Has he come to feed? The seal's heavy muzzle thrusts toward Katherine; his nostrils – two dark inlets – flare: He is taking in her smell, her fear. His stiff eyebrow hairs, beaded with sea drops, crisscross the thick shadowy skin of his dark, wide head. Battle-scarred, his snout slopes to an ugly dull point where his long wiry whiskers afford him the seductive familiarity of a family dog. But it's his eyes – the eyes of this wild animal – that terrify Katherine the most; huge, opaque, and overbold, they hold on her like the lustrous black-egged eyes of a ruined man.

Briefly the seal's lips roll to display his sharp conical teeth, strong enough to dismember a large bird, she thinks, strong enough to rip her flesh. Her panic rises. If she turns her head away from him to look for help, even for a second, God knows what he'll do. He may strike. Seals startle easily, someone once told her, their behaviour as unpredictable as human love. Yet if she remains where she is . . .

They tread the cold sea together, Katherine and the seal. Above them, sandpipers drop their miserable cries as they fly. Splinters of high voices peak on the blue wind. In the distance, there is the low mechanical churr of a train. Around them, the sea continues its cool lamenting slap.

A sudden thought. Is he alone? Are there more seals? Are there cows or pups to aggressively protect?

The bobbing sea confuses the distance between them. It feels as though he is moving closer to her with every swell. She is keenly aware of her quivering limbs, of her too-quick breathing, of the saltwater in her mouth: a jagged dark fear filling her up. Her mind shrinks to the size of one thought: He may kill me.

Out of this fear there is the sudden impulse to reach out and touch him. Like the only way to stop the white panic of vertigo is to jump. To finish it. To decide to finish it. Or by reaching out, by touching, she might just connect with him, soothe him, soothe herself, make it mean something. Madness, she knows. But his heavy beauty is suggesting just this.

She doesn't do it.

She hears her husband, George, calling out for her from the shore, his voice travelling like a lone seagull's cry, searching for her. But she doesn't respond. Transfixed by the seal's gaze upon her, by this odd and uncomfortable gift of him, by the fear of the ever-opening sea, she remains.

The seal is the first to move. He shifts his head a little, as though he is beginning to lose interest in her, and he snorts abruptly, spraying her face with seawater, the spiky claws on his fore flipper breaking the surface of the water as he moves. He turns his head, creating thick dark wrinkles around his neck. But after his black eyes casually scan the horizon, they return to her. His eyes, those eyes, brimming black liquid pools, stare into her. They are asking something of her; they are waiting for her to answer him.

The sea blasts an icy wash over her body.

She hears George calling her again. This time, the sound of his voice is pitched with relief that he has spotted her in the water. His voice pulls at her. 'Katherine! Katherine!' he calls. Does he see the seal beside her? Does he see him? 'Katherine! Over here!'

A new spiral of fear kicks in at the sound of her husband's voice. What if George cannot reach her? What if he frightens

the seal and provokes it? She feels her stomach lurch, as though she might get sick. Reflux burns her throat. Her chest tightens. The eyes of the seal still hold on her. The left of his body is now remarkably still, his bulk buoyed by the obedient sea. That big grey head.

Against her common sense, she turns her body to look for George and sees him wave to her from the rocks, beckoning her to come to him. She opens her mouth, but she cannot find her voice. Instead, her mouth fills with seawater, a thick glide of salt blue into pink. She swallows some, spits out the rest.

When she turns back, the seal is gone. She hangs in a quiver of cold sea.



That morning, George had casually announced that he had taken a day's leave due to him from his job at the Water Commissioner's Office. Katherine, surprised by George's uncharacteristic spontaneity, had nonetheless decided it opportune to pack a picnic and take their girls – Maureen, Elizabeth, and Elsa – and baby Stephen out for the day to Groomsport beach. After all, the girls are already on their summer holidays and the weather is holding up so beautifully, she had thought.

By early afternoon, the Bedford family were well on the road from their home in east Belfast, their bottle green Morris Traveller winding its way through the fourteen miles of unremarkable countryside away from the city toward Groomsport town. Apart from Bangor and the small village of Ballyholme, there was only the occasional farmhouse to be seen, some scattered clusters of whitewashed buildings here and there, and one or two forsaken churches whose crumbling stone walls had long since exposed their sacred interiors to a disinterested sky.

Katherine let her head rest back on the warm leather of the car seat, her body heavy, as though the hot August sun were inside the car with her. She looked out of the window and saw the world passing her by. She watched as the mottled hedges of hawthorn and gorse, the trees, and telegraph poles moved

briskly into and then out of her view. Glancing beyond the low hills to the east, she caught a glimpse of sea. The blue sky offered a singular white cloud, as though it knew how to be summer.

Stephen was fast asleep on her lap, his plump, hot body rounded like a basking pigeon. Elizabeth and Elsa were jostling with each other beside her in the back of the car, whacking each other with a flat palm when they spotted a blue car on the road and sticking out their tongues at each other when they saw a brown car. Katherine's eldest daughter, Maureen, sitting in the front, was talking to her father as he drove, finding points of interest along the way. To Katherine, Maureen sounded older than her fourteen years, so amiable and agreeable was her tone, so ladylike and pleasantly curious. As her father drove, he occasionally lifted a hand off the steering wheel to point to a particular building or a stretch of land, and Maureen nodded her head and smiled politely and said that they had learned that at school, and her father said really, had they? Only when Elsa or Elizabeth stretched through the gap between the car seats to punch Maureen had she lost her composure to bark at her younger sisters and roll her eyes at them.

Katherine pressed her body against the car seat with some difficulty to adjust her position. Her skirt had crumpled up underneath her thighs and her nylons felt damp. She arched her lower back to ease Stephen's weight forward a little, being careful not to wake him, then, raising herself slightly, pulled her skirt back down to her knees.

'Everybody all right?' Her voice squeaked, as though she had forgotten how to use it. George responded with a 'Fine, thanks,' while Maureen did another little bobbing motion with her head. Elizabeth remained firmly scouring the road for blue cars, but Elsa turned to look at her mother.

'Are we nearly at Groomsport, Mummy?' Elsa smiled.

Katherine looked at her nine-year-old daughter, Elsa. Elsa was the only one of her children who looked like her. Maureen, Elizabeth, and Stephen all carried their father's swarthier complexion and his hair's blue-black sheen. To Katherine, in the

squat, shadowy light of the car's interior, Elsa looked translucent, a child starved of sunlight, her creamy skin melting into the gold of her hair, and all of her features – eyes, nose, and mouth – as gently placed as butter into warm milk.

'George!' Katherine called to her husband in the front of the car, 'We're nearly there, aren't we?'

'Yes, love, another few minutes,' George addressed the clear rectangular slice of his wife in the rearview mirror, then shifted his gaze back to the road.

Katherine and Elsa gave each other a wide smile, as though they had secretly known the answer all along, and then Elsa turned quickly to stick her tongue out at Elizabeth.

'No, that wasn't a brown car.' Elizabeth shook her head.

'It was so!' Elsa replied.

'It was dark grey, or maybe purple, but it wasn't brown.'

'Mummy, wasn't that car brown?' Elsa looked to her mother, but Katherine was careful not to take sides.

'I didn't see what colour it was, pet.'

'It was brown,' Elsa insisted.

'It-wasn't-brown,' Elizabeth pronounced her words very precisely to indicate to Elsa that she was putting an end to the argument. Then with a regal glide, she turned to look out of the window again. Elsa stuck her tongue out at the back of Elizabeth's head.

As they approached the town, the car passed a long iron railing fronting a factory. Fast, fat slices of sun fell across Katherine's face, making her feel nauseous. She breathed deeply and squinted in the glare of the sunlight. 'Oh look,' she said quietly, turning her head away from the sun, 'there's a brown car!'

But no one paid any attention to her remark. Maureen and George were still chatting in the front of the car and Elsa and Elizabeth were now both engrossed in reading *Nurse Nancy and the Forgotten Parcel* from a Twinkle comic.

As though, all along, he had simply been pretending to be asleep, Stephen stirred, already pointing at something. His eyes were barely open, but he had caught sight of trees and rooftops

and people, all of them worthy of his regard. He yawned and rubbed his eyes, then, pointing into the air again, he said to his mother ‘Mama, moon.’

‘Where’s the moon, darling? There’s no moon!’

‘Moon dere,’ he said emphatically, and, standing shakily on his mother’s lap, pointed out of the car window.

‘Does Stephen think that the moon is out, Mummy?’ Elsa smiled, amused at her little brother.

‘It’s been all the talk of the moon landing in the house over the past few weeks.’ Katherine kissed him. ‘Can you see the man on the moon, my pet?’ she teased Stephen affectionately. ‘Is he still there?’ Stephen clapped his hands gleefully against Katherine’s forehead. Katherine hugged her darling boy and, rubbing her lips against his cheek, she spoke into his skin. ‘And are you going to be an astronaut when you grow up and fly in a rocket to the moon?’

Stephen squealed with delight.

‘No, he’ll get a proper job like his father!’ George remarked quickly, lifting his head to smile at Katherine in the rearview mirror.

Katherine laughed and turned back to Stephen, settling him once more on her lap.

‘And will you take me to the moon with you when you go?’ she whispered.

‘Moon dere!’ Stephen said with a deeply earnest expression on his face. He pointed to the air again.

Elsa bent her body over toward Stephen and, moving her face close to his, said in a high, baby voice, ‘There’s no moon in the daytime, silly billy.’ She shook her head at Stephen. ‘No moon in the daytime.’

The way she pulled a face at Stephen made him laugh; his eyes became wide with delight and his laughter rippled like a warbling bird inside the car. He loved Elsa. He loved her. He wanted her to pull that face again. Elsa pulled that face. He threw his head back this time as he laughed, and Elsa laughed, too.

Maureen turned her head around from the front seat of the car to see what was going on. She couldn't help but smile.

George parked the car under a large ancient sycamore in a small concrete enclave just off the main Groomsport Road. The shade was welcome relief to Katherine.

She swung her legs out of the car and lowered Stephen onto the tarmac of the car park, where he immediately staggered into a little circular jig of excited anticipation. The three girls barrelled out of the car behind them and grabbed the bags and towels from the boot.

Groomsport – a small town of tidy streets, neat gardens, and well-scrubbed telegraph poles – was full of Union Jacks that day, for it was still the Protestant marching season in Northern Ireland. The flags hung languidly outside the shops and houses, however, as the breeze was too light to lift them. On the corner of the concrete enclave were a cluster of modest souvenir shops, the doorways of which were decorated with buckets and spades and plastic windmills tied with coloured string.

George, Katherine, and the four children followed the dusty brown path from the car park down to the beach. Banked high on either side of the path were mounds of dry marram grass, which brushed gently against their shoulders and arms as they walked.

Other digressions wound off the main path, like snail trails in a morning garden, created by eager day-trippers in their search for a private spot. A young man with untidy fairish hair moved briskly toward them along one of these smaller paths, looking down at his watch as though he were timing himself on his journey. He gently bumped against Katherine as he passed.

'Someone's in a hurry,' muttered George behind Katherine. But Katherine just smiled – it was too nice a day to complain about anything or anyone – and turned to watch the young man until he reached the car park and was gone.

From where they stood at the top of the sandbanks, the sea stretched before them like a cloth of blue jewels. Below them,

a dirty spray of stones and shells echoed the gentle curve of the beach. Bunches of dank seaweed were caught between the rocks that jutted out into the sea from the flat yellow sand. The blue sky was dotted with a trail of pearly clouds that moved across it like floats in a slow parade.

Katherine had packed a flask of tea, some ham sandwiches for herself and George, and raspberry jam pieces for the children. There were also some chocolate biscuits, a small bunch of bananas, and four packets of Perri crisps. There was a bottle of diluted orange squash and some plastic cups.

George carried a bundle of blankets and towels to a spot on the beach sheltered by a modest sand dune. There were already several families farther down on the western side of the shore. A young girl in a red polka-dot swimsuit could be heard screaming ‘Tom! Tom!’ as she ran after a boy who was flying a blue kite. Katherine stopped to look at the two children for a moment, taking in the full sweep of the bay.

‘We’ll sit here, shall we? We’ll get a lovely view of the bay if we sit here.’

George responded by spreading the blankets out. Katherine sat down with Stephen, who began to squirm, unsettled by the feel of the sinking soft, dry sand giving way beneath his feet.

‘Get changed and go for a swim,’ she said to the girls; ‘then you can eat.’

Maureen, Elizabeth, and Elsa looked at the other children on the beach, who were skipping excitedly at the edge of the waves, but seemed reluctant to make a move themselves.

‘Go on!’ Katherine urged them.

Maureen was the first to organise herself and change into her swimsuit beneath one of the towels, slipping off her slacks and blouse, making sure no one could catch a glimpse of her underwear. Elizabeth and Elsa stood watching Maureen, as though they might glean some secret meaning or girlish code by the manner in which she undressed beneath the towel.

When Maureen was ready, Elizabeth and Elsa swiftly moved to catch up with her, until all three of them were in their black

swimsuits and gingerly making their way toward the sea. Katherine watched her daughters move like three wading birds pecking at the sand with their spindly legs. A moment later, she turned to her husband.

‘George, would you like some tea?’

‘Yes, love.’

‘Can you take Stephen for me?’

Katherine began to unpack the picnic bag, laying the sandwiches and cups on the blanket.

She poured them both a small cup of black tea, pushing George’s cup into the sand beside him and then taking a quick sup from her own. They both sat silently for a moment. A light breeze shifted a thin whisper of sand around them.

Suddenly, throwing the remains of the tea from her cup into a nearby clump of beard grass, Katherine got up and, lifting her skirt, began to take off her nylons. George released Stephen gently from his hold to see if the child would stand unsupported on the soft sand. He turned and frowned a little at Katherine.

‘What are you doing?’

‘Going in for a swim.’

‘You may want to use one of the blankets to cover yourself,’ George said, turning to see if anyone was watching his wife undress.

‘There’s nobody looking.’

‘Just for your own comfort . . .’ George’s voice trailed off as he reached out to catch the teetering Stephen, ‘I’ve got you, buster,’ he said, then turned to Katherine again. ‘Katherine, I think you *should*—’

But Katherine ignored George. She pulled her white swimsuit quickly up over her body, fixing the straps over her shoulders, and left her clothes on the blanket as though they were the flimsy traces of a delicate skin.

Just a few steps short of the sea, Katherine stopped to look around her. The headland to the east of Groomsport bay narrowed into a slender spindle of rock, which curved in toward the shore like an arm enfolding the belly of sand. Rocky outcrops

jutted here and there at its tip, reachable only when the tide was out. To the west, children could be seen searching for stickle-back fish or velvet fiddler crabs in the salty pools near the small pier. The children's backs were bent, their flanks to the sun, their little plastic buckets swinging in the thin breeze.

The sea offered its familiar slide and sway of grey-blue waves, which occasionally slapped together and spurted out pieces of white foam. Mind, sea, and sky seemed all one. Katherine felt slightly revived by the sea breeze and by the quick sup of hot tea from the flask ('Nothing quenches a thirst more than a hot drink on a hot day,' she remembered her father saying).

Katherine heard Stephen calling her and looked back toward him. She watched as George lifted Stephen up into the air, up over his head into the wide blue. Stephen's limbs became rigid like the spokes of an invisible wheel. George then suddenly relaxed his arms and the child, squealing with excitement, plummeted down onto his father's chest.

Katherine looked at George and took him in, watched him for a while; then she turned and walked into the sea.

The water sliced into her, cold and invigorating.

She had always been a cautious swimmer, never quite conquering the skill of being able to put her face in under the water as she swam, never quite mastering the backstroke. But now she swam like a young girl, with sprays of seawater flying from her hair as she tossed her head purposefully from side to side. Keeping a keen eye on how far she was travelling from the shore, she soon passed out beyond her daughters as they played amid the salty waves.

A tingling rush surged through her body from the water's cold, but the impudent sun was a hot fist on her forehead. Seagulls flew above her, one of them holding a whole slice of white bread in its beak. Treading water for a moment, Katherine watched as the seagull with the bread suddenly flapped its wings to change direction, three other seagulls in hot pursuit. Katherine's eyes followed the birds as they flew toward the rocky outcrops east of the bay, where the spill of sun on the sea was like a big flat pearl.

Katherine decided to swim toward it.

Were they her daughter's squeals or the call of the seagulls on the wind? She could not tell. She swam on until she was no longer able to hear them nor to see George or Stephen on the shore.

Eventually, exhaustion caught up with Katherine and her breathlessness forced her to stop. She treaded water again, trying to gauge how far she was from the beach. A little too far out for comfort, she thought. Just a little. But look, she said to herself. Look at the sun on the sea. Listen to the lap of the water. The calm of this glassy blueness. A little bowl of paradise. She took it all in.

Closing her eyes, she lifted her face to the sun, cutting herself off. The full, hot, bright sun closing her off from everything else in the world. *I am only where the sun touches me*, she said to herself, *I exist only where the sun touches me*. She listened to the sound of the sea as it moved around her. The soft sound of the sea filled her head like music. A slow, infinite rhythm calming her, transporting her.

Then suddenly out of the deep, that great gunmetal grey head appeared beside her.



Now the air is charged with his absence. She cannot see the seal, but she can sense him near her. Her breathing is so sharp, it hurts her chest. She turns her head quickly from side to side. Where is he?

'Katherine! Katherine!' She hears George calling her again from the rocky outcrop. She struggles to swim toward him, making jerky movements in the sea, her breathing now taking on a frantic pace.

She spits out more seawater and tries to find her breath. Her heart thuds in her chest cold and hard, yet a traffic of hot sparks speeds through her body. She thinks of everything under the surface of the water. Just under the surface. Just right there. Any amount of things to pull her down. Ready to rise up and take her at any moment. She tries to blot out that thought, but she can't – the deep of the swollen sea beneath her opening up, revealing

its great height, upon which she now hangs, down from which she might fall. The sea's great salty depths. It is *all* she can think about.

She calls out to George, but her fear reduces her voice to a small sound. She feels something against her leg. Is that the seal underneath her? Are they his breathy bubbles beside her?

She emits a cold, sharp shriek. 'Wheeeerrree-is-heeee?'

George hurriedly pulls off his shoes and socks and hastily rolls up the ends of his trousers. 'Katherine!' he shouts to her. He slips off his leather belt. He wraps it around his hand, moving gingerly toward the edge of the rocks. The gelatinous sea algae is slippery underfoot. He spreads his toes to secure his step, but the rough, abrasive rocks that pierce the algae dig into the soles of his feet and unsteady him. He kneels down on the rocks and stretches out an arm to Katherine, leaning his upper body forward in order to give him more reach. With his free arm, he throws his belt toward Katherine. It is a thin, miserable length and will not reach her. He needs to move closer. *She* needs to move closer. But he sees that her panic is tiring her. Briefly, her face slips under the water and the top of her head becomes a smooth brown orb in the blue sea.

George quickly abandons his belt on the rocks. He crouches down, shifting his upper torso farther into the sea, as though he were edging his body through a low tunnel. Katherine's head appears up out of the water. George leans into the sea to grab her, but she is still too far away for him to reach her.

George heaves himself back up and rips off his shirt. He twists it into a rope and whips it into the sea. He turns sideways and submerges his upper body as much as he can. The cold sea bites at his chest. The jagged rocks cut his skin.

'Hold on to the shirt! Grab the shirt!' George calls to Katherine. The sea spray slaps his face. Katherine's head slips under the water again and disappears completely this time. When her head reemerges, her eyes are rolling.

The floating shirt and Katherine are only inches apart.

'Grab the shirt!' shouts George, furious at himself for not

being able to swim. This time, she seems to understand and her eyes fix on George. Her hand feebly reaches for the shirt. She finds it. Then the dark, wide head rises up out of the water beside her, disappears again. The shock awakens fresh panic in her and she pulls on the shirt. George is jerked forward but manages to cling to the edge of the rocks. He thrusts his free arm out and grabs hold of Katherine, pulling her toward him.

Katherine thrashes an arm, then a leg onto the rocks as though she were blind, but clumsily falls back into the water, scraping her legs. They begin to bleed beneath the sea. She grabs hold of George again as, this time, he flings his arm robustly around her waist. Finally he heaves her out of the water and throws his arms around her.

‘I thought I’d lost you.’ George hugs her. ‘I couldn’t see where you had gone.’ He kisses the top of her head.

Katherine tries to catch her breath.

‘You okay?’ He keeps his arms around her.

Katherine gasps for air.

‘What happened? Did something happen?’ he asks her, loosening his hold on her.

Katherine breathes deeply for a moment, then coughs violently. ‘I should have stayed nearer the shore,’ she splutters.

‘You sure you’re okay?’ George looks at Katherine.

Katherine nods her head a little. ‘I went out too deep – that’s all.’ She bends her torso over to catch her breath again. ‘I started to panic – I’m not as good a swimmer as I thought I was.’

‘What possessed you to swim so far away from us?’

‘I don’t know – I’m sorry – I wasn’t thinking.’ Katherine clears the last of the seawater from her throat. Her body is shaking. She feels something prickling her legs. ‘Oh,’ she says almost casually as she looks down, ‘I’m bleeding.’

‘We’ll get you sorted out, love.’ George lifts his sopping shirt from the rocks and, wringing the seawater from it, he gently dabs Katherine’s legs where they have been cut. Then he stands and brushes back her wet hair from her face. ‘That could have been nasty, Katherine.’

‘Oh, George! You’re bleeding, too.’ She touches his shoulder, where clear ribbons of seawater are infused with blood.

‘It’s nothing. Only a few scrapes. You sure you’re all right?’

‘Yes, I think so. It was the seal that panicked me.’

‘The seal?’

‘The seal – I was terrified he would hurt me—’ Then she stops and looks into George’s eyes. ‘Didn’t you see him?’

‘No, love, I didn’t.’

‘Right beside me.’

‘No, love – no, I didn’t.’

‘But he was just there—’ Katherine looks out at the wide sea, then back to George. She cannot believe that he did not see the seal. She feels confused, stressed. But she is out of the water now. She’s safe, thank God. Urgently, she wraps her arms around George’s torso, her face turned to one side, her cheek flush with the curve of his chest. His skin icy against hers.

‘He was right there,’ she says quietly.

Something is happening to her. Something has happened to her in the water. She thinks of the seal’s eyes.

‘You’re shivering,’ says George. ‘C’mon, let’s get you warm.’

Katherine lifts her head. ‘Where’s Stephen?’ she asks, with an urgency in her voice.

‘The girls have him,’ replies George reassuringly. ‘He’s fine.’

George reaches out and gently takes Katherine by the hand. She moves with him. They walk at a measured pace together back across the sand toward the children. A salty sea breeze begins to rise, whipping occasional strands of Katherine’s hair up and across her cheek as though they are urging her on.

Out in the broad silver sea, a last flickering movement; then all is still.

‘Okay, Mummy, you’re out.’

Wrapped in towels in the back of the car, Katherine struggles a moment to regain her concentration on the game in hand.

‘Oh, right, Elsa . . . but I haven’t guessed who you are yet.’

‘You were miles away, Mummy.’ Elizabeth’s voice is very matter-of-fact.

‘I thought I had one go left.’

‘No, Mummy, you don’t.’

‘You’ve used up your ten gos already,’ Maureen informs her sympathetically.

‘No, Mummy has one more go,’ says Elizabeth.

‘No, she doesn’t.’ Elsa makes a sharp face.

‘Mama-go-dere!’

‘Are you Ringo Starr?’ Katherine asks.

‘Mummy, you can’t guess!’ Elsa’s temper is rising.

‘Gregory Peck?’

‘Let her have one more go,’ chips in Maureen.

‘That’s not fair. And I told you, I’m *not* a singer,’ Elsa says firmly.

‘But you said you were singing.’

‘No, I didn’t *mean* singing.’

‘What *did* you mean?’ Elizabeth asks.

‘Alan Ladd.’

‘No, Mummy.’

‘He never sang,’ Elizabeth adds.

‘I didn’t *mean singing*, stupid.’

‘Have manners, Elsa.’ Katherine’s voice sounds vacant as she straightens her back against the car seat.

‘Dada dere!’

‘Are you dead or alive?’

‘Mummy, you asked that already.’ Maureen looks out of the window.

‘Did I?’ Katherine shakes her head, unable to remember.

Elizabeth gives her mother a gentle reminder. ‘He’s alive.’

‘Now that’s three more gos you’ve had!’ Elsa’s cheeks flush a stubborn red.

‘We saw this person on television last week in a film. He was wearing a funny hat and whistling in a train station.’ Maureen is losing patience with both Elsa and her mother.

‘Oh, yes – Ray Milland,’ says Katherine with relief.

‘Maureen, that was too much of a clue to give to Mummy!’

‘It was taking her ages to guess.’

‘But when you said wearing a funny hat and a train station and whistling, that just gave it away.’

‘Dada dere!’

‘Well – so!’ Maureen turns away from Elsa.

‘Oh, look,’ says Katherine flatly, ‘your father’s back with the ice cream.’

The ice cream is recompense to the children for cutting the day short, as George is eager to get Katherine warm again and back home.

Sitting with the car window open, Katherine can hear voices travelling from the far end of the street, the way summer air seems to hold sound on a long leash. Under the canopy of the ice-cream shop, a man buys a candy floss for his daughter. Plastic buckets hanging from the shop door tap together in the breeze like dull wind chimes. The shop window still displays the front page of the *Belfast Telegraph* from almost a month ago, a large blurry black-and-white photograph of two astronauts with the words ‘Footprints on the Moon’ underneath it.

Katherine, not wanting any ice cream, eats one of the leftover jam pieces from the picnic bag instead. Stephen stands on his mother’s lap. He holds a small dripping ice-cream cone in his hand, but his eyes are intensely fixated on the motion of his mother’s tongue. He grips her arm, his mouth imitating hers, biting on nothing. Katherine scoops a small dollop of butter and jam from the bread onto her finger and pops it into his mouth.

‘Mummy, my arms and legs are itchy,’ says Elsa.

‘Really, love?’ Katherine’s voice is hardly audible.

‘Mummy?’ Elizabeth rubs the back of her hand across her mouth as she speaks.

‘Yes?’

‘D’y remember when you were an opera singer before you got married?’

‘Well, not a proper opera singer, Elizabeth. It was just

a hobby,' says Katherine, making an effort to engage in conversation.

'That was in the olden days, wasn't it, Mummy?' Elsa has a serious expression on her face.

Katherine smiles gently and nods her head.

'Daddy keeps telling us that you were so good that you could have done opera singing for your real job,' Elizabeth says respectfully.

'I know he does.' Katherine glances briefly over at George.

George turns around to Katherine from the front seat of the car. Unusually, his large arms are bare. His wet shirt is in a canvas bag in the boot of the car, so he wears only his vest and trousers. 'Well, that's the truth of it, isn't it?' he says to Katherine and bites on his cone.

Katherine remains silent.

'Well, why didn't you, then?' Elsa chirps.

'Sorry, love?' Katherine says quietly.

'Why didn't you do opera singing for your proper job?'

'Your mother had a family to raise.' George offers Katherine a paper napkin to wipe Stephen's face, but she refuses it with a shake of her head and uses instead the edge of her towel.

'Tell us again about the stage,' says Elizabeth.

Katherine knows how much the children enjoy the familiarity of the stories she tells about her amateur musical-theatre days, but, cold and shocked after her encounter with the seal, she now struggles to find the energy.

'Well . . . there were lots of different sets to show different places . . . there were street sellers' baskets and wooden wheelbarrows for the marketplace and—'

'But the fruit in the street sellers' baskets wasn't real fruit, was it, Mummy?' Elsa delights in the pretence of it all.

'That's right, love. It was only rolled-up paper painted to look like fruit.' Katherine continues slowly. 'And there were lots of fancy costumes and—'

'But you already had a proper job anyway,' says Elizabeth, interrupting her mother as she bites on the end of her cone.

‘Oh, yes – a very exciting job as an accounting clerk in the Ulster Bank.’ Katherine attempts humour. The girls smile. ‘That was when I was walking out with your father, but when we got married, I had to leave.’

“‘Walking out,’” Maureen repeats, laughing to herself.

‘Nanny Anna said that that’s how people used to talk to each other in the olden days.’ Elsa takes over the conversation with an authoritative tone.

‘What do you mean?’ Maureen makes a disparaging face at Elsa.

‘She said people didn’t talk like we talk now; she said people sang everything in them days.’

Maureen starts to laugh at Elsa. ‘No they didn’t.’

‘Yes they did!’ Elsa glares at Maureen, then shoves her tongue down into the end of her ice-cream cone. Maureen starts singing in a mock operatic style, ‘Can I have another ice cream please, Mother!’

Now Elizabeth begins to laugh.

‘Shut up!’ Elsa says sharply to her sisters, embarrassed now that she may have been fooled a little by Nanny Anna.

‘Manners, Elsa,’ says George.

‘That didn’t sound like opera singing to me,’ Elsa snaps at Maureen.

‘How would *you* know what opera singing sounds like anyway?’ Maureen snaps back.

Conscious that Katherine is still tired and distant, George wants to lighten the tone. ‘I’ll have you all know, young ladies, that your mother was the finest singer the length of the Castle-reagh Road!’

The three girls chime together, ‘We know, we know!’

Katherine fixes the towel around her shoulders. She feels removed from all the chat in the car, as though something is pulling her away from it.

‘Mummy?’ Elizabeth sparks with a new thought. ‘Maureen saw a plop floating in the water.’

It takes Katherine a moment. ‘She saw what?’

‘I did not!’ Maureen is instantly annoyed that Elizabeth has mentioned this. ‘It was seaweed, a lump of seaweed! I *thought* it was something else, but when I looked at it again, it was *seaweed*!’ Maureen says the word *seaweed* very emphatically. She shakes her head at Elizabeth.

‘But you said it was a plop. You said!’

‘I only *thought* it was one, but it wasn’t.’ Then changing the subject quickly, Maureen says, ‘Mummy, can I have a packet of crisps?’

Katherine doesn’t answer.

Maureen registers her mother’s solemn mood and so rummages in one of the picnic bags to get the crisps herself.

‘Whose plop was it?’ Elsa has apparently not followed the course of the conversation at all, her imagination having been so arrested by Elizabeth’s initial image.

‘It wasn’t a plop. It was nobody’s plop!’ Maureen replies, exasperated.

‘Easy girls,’ George chips in. He looks at Katherine to check on her.

‘Can I have a packet of crisps, too?’ asks Elizabeth gently. She has clocked Maureen’s reaction to their mother and now is a little concerned.

‘And me,’ says Elsa.

Maureen throws a packet of crisps from the picnic bag to each of her sisters.

‘Wouldn’t surprise me,’ says George, attempting to draw Katherine out of herself. ‘I’ve found a few things floating in there myself. Haven’t I, Katherine?’

Katherine doesn’t answer.

‘Like what, Daddy?’ Elsa becomes interested now.

‘Only last summer, I went in for a swim—’

‘Daddy, you can’t swim,’ Elsa chirps.

‘Sssh! Let daddy tell.’ Maureen is beginning to doubt her own judgment about the seaweed.

‘Elsa’s right, he can’t swim.’ Elizabeth has found the little paper pouch of salt in the middle of her bag of Perri crisps and is biting it open.

‘My arms and legs are really itchy,’ Elsa complains to the air, scratching herself.

—and just as I was coming back to shore, just by the shingly part of the beach, I lifted my head up out of the water and there bobbing up and down right in front of my eyes, was – a hand! You remember this story, don’t you, Katherine?’

Katherine remains quiet.

‘Ugh!’ Maureen grimaces. Elizabeth and Elsa’s expressions are held in a curious, hardened stare.

‘Can you believe it,’ continues George ‘a hand.’

‘A human hand?’ asks Maureen, checking.

‘Oh yes.’

‘That’s horrible, Daddy.’

‘So, I thought that I had better get out of the water quickly and go tell the police.’

‘Pl-op,’ shouts Stephen.

‘But just as I stood up in the sea, the fingers of the hand started to wriggle. Like this!’ George moves his fingers ominously, imitating the severed hand. The three girls visibly shrink back. Their grimaces are identical now.

‘I was petrified. I began to move quickly out of the water, but the hand began to move quickly, too.’ George ripples his fingers. ‘The hand began to quiver and turn and then it began to swim! I moved as fast as I could, but the hand was swimming after me. I got out of the water and began running up the beach. I looked around and the hand was running after me, and then suddenly the hand jumped off the sand and grabbed me like – THIS!’

George flings his wriggling hand out and grabs Elsa by the shoulder. Elsa’s body jolts and then she screams. All the girls scream. Then Maureen laughs. Elizabeth shakes her arms out in front of her as if to free herself from the fright. Stephen gives a nervous cry at all the commotion, but he is comforted by

Katherine. After a few moments, the noise settles and the air in the car becomes once again a natural quiet.

George is disappointed that his story hasn't raised even a smile from Katherine, so subdued has she been since her swim. He turns to her. 'Darling, what's wrong? You okay?'

'Yes. Yes. I'm okay.' But Katherine's sense of preoccupation is growing even as she speaks to George, intensifying moment by moment.

'Maybe rest when you get home. You had a bit of a panic getting out of your depth in the water, love; it's bound to have shaken you a little. You had a bit of a shock.'

'Yes, perhaps you're right,' Katherine says. 'George?'

'Yes?'

'Are you *sure* you didn't see the seal?'

'No, love, I didn't see it. This place isn't really known for seals. Maybe it was seaweed or driftwood or something . . .'

'I love seals,' offers Elizabeth; 'they're so cute.'

'Maybe it was somebody's big gy-normous plop!' Elsa giggles.

'I don't understand it . . .'

Katherine mutters to herself. 'How could you not have seen the seal? He was right in front of you . . . He was right there . . .'

'How are your legs?' George asks.

'They're still really itchy,' says Elsa.

'No, Elsa love, I wasn't talking to you. I was talking to your mother.'

Elsa frowns. George immediately registers his daughter's mood and responds to her. 'Well then. And how *are* your legs, Elsa?'

Elsa's frown tightens.

Katherine, says in a faraway voice, 'George, let's go home. I really want to go home.'

George takes her in. 'Okay, love,' he says tenderly, and starts the car. 'Everybody ready?' His voice lifts cheerily, but he receives a low groan as an answer from the children. Flicking the right indicator on, George now steers the Morris Traveller off from

the side of the road, narrowly missing a passing car as he does so. He gives the horn a toot, then drives on.

Katherine shivers and adjusts the towel around her shoulders again with one hand, trying to hold Stephen with the other. Everyone in the car is quiet now. Stephen snuggles into Katherine as she lets her head rest back against the car seat.

Soon all of the children drift into their own world. George hums to himself as he drives.

Sitting wrapped in her towels, Katherine feels as though she is still in the cold, deep sea. Thoughts are lapping all around her now, stirring up from the deep, rising to the surface. Thoughts she now cannot stop. She closes her eyes. Thoughts of someone that she has blotted out throughout her married life but which – if the truth be told – have never gone away.

Thoughts of *him*.

As the Bedford family car turns the sharp bend onto the street where they live, Katherine sees Mr. McGovern standing outside his grocer's shop in his white nylon shop coat. She gives him a small wave from the back of the car. Mr. McGovern waves back to her as though he is putting up his hand at school, his arm long, his palm flat to the air.

When the car pulls to a stop in their driveway, George turns to Katherine.

'You look very pale, love.'

'I'm fine. I just feel very tired, that's all.'

George carries in the picnic bags and the blankets and asks Maureen, Elizabeth, and Elsa to help with the swimsuits and towels. Their reluctance makes them pick poorly at the items, like magpies at clumps of moss. Maureen carries one towel only, holding it disdainfully from one corner, as it is damp, sandy, and streaked in jam. Elizabeth takes only *her* swimsuit. Elsa trails the biggest towel along the ground, gathering pieces of dirt as she goes.

'C'mon, girls, smarten up there now.' George is half jovial, half

annoyed. He lifts Stephen, who is chewing on a jam piece that he has found on the floor of the car, and takes him into the house. Maureen and Elizabeth answer their father with a sullen look, but their tempo remains unchanged. As they walk, they deposit thin trails of silty sand, as though they are spilling out of themselves.

Stephen heads straight for Katherine, who is standing in the kitchen, still wrapped in towels. With a piping complaint, Stephen grabs at her.

‘Okay, pet, just give me a moment,’ she says in a daze.

‘Mama up!’ Stephens pulls on Katherine as though she is a bell rope.

‘Wait now.’

‘Up!’

The telephone rings in the hall and Elizabeth goes to answer it. A moment later, she calls to her father, ‘Daddy, it’s the station!’ George drops the bag he is carrying on the kitchen floor and rushes to take the telephone from Elizabeth. His work as a retained fireman makes frequent demands on his free time, a fact that has always bothered Katherine, as if – she often complains – his job as a civil engineer isn’t demanding enough.

Maureen enters the kitchen, carrying a bag from the car. Katherine turns to her.

‘Maureen, take Stephen for me, will you?’

Without waiting for Maureen’s reply Katherine moves swiftly out of the kitchen, as though propelled by some pressing need. She passes George in the hall and goes upstairs.

‘Come here to me, mister,’ she hears Maureen call after Stephen.

Upstairs, Katherine walks quickly into her bedroom and closes the door behind her. Laundry has been left on the end of the bed. George’s shirts are ironed and hanging on the handle of the wardrobe door. Katherine opens the wardrobe, kneels down, and, rummaging through the blankets and linen that are stored at the bottom of it, eventually pulls out a small box covered loosely with a cloth. She pulls the cloth off the box and opens it. Inside the box there is something covered in waxy paper. She opens the paper

and reveals a small porcelain statuette of an old man, a needle and thread in one hand, a piece of cloth in the other. The smooth, bald head of the statuette had broken off when she had let it slip from her hands the day George was helping her move out of her mother's flat. She holds both pieces in her hand and looks at them.

As she lifts the paper in which the statuette had been wrapped, she feels the jolt it gives. She opens it out. She invites it in. It is a music sheet containing some of the music and lyrics from the opera *Carmen*. Before she sang at every rehearsal, she would take out her little handheld mirror and her lipstick from her handbag and ease orange-red across her lips. Then, folding her music sheet in half – this piece of paper in front of her – she would push it against her mouth to remove the excess. Scattered all around the page like a swarm of orange-red insects are her rosebud lipstick kisses. A sheet music full of kisses, little signals of orange-red love, each one a promise that she would nurture the spirit of her dreams until they came true. She reads: '*Si tu ne m'aimes pas, Si tu ne m'aimes pas, je t'aime; Mais si je t'aime, si je t'aime prends garde a toi!*' She looks at the bottom of the music sheet where a short translation of the lyrics is written in a very neat hand: 'Love you not me, love you not me, then I love you—' But she cannot continue reading. Her mind flashes with an image grim and disturbing. No, don't go there (and yet she feels the need to). No, not that. She blots it out.

The bedroom door opens and George steps a little into the room. 'Katherine, you should get dressed, love. You'll catch your death—' He is stopped in his tracks when he sees what Katherine is holding in her hand. He knows immediately what it is. 'That was the station—' he says to her, but he cannot hide his anxiety at what he sees.

'I gathered that,' says Katherine quietly.

'There's been a lot of trouble in the city.'

'Oh.'

'So they've called me in – I've been instructed to liaise with two other retainees before touching base.' He stands looking at Katherine. 'Please, Katherine, don't . . . please. Let it go.'

Katherine looks at George, her eyes now filling up with tears. ‘No, don’t, Katherine . . . please . . . I can’t . . .’

The telephone rings again. George turns away from Katherine and leaves the room to answer it.

Katherine gathers herself up off the floor, not bothering to put away the porcelain statuette or the music sheet. She blindly follows after George. She catches up with him in the hall.

‘What time will you be back?’ she asks him solemnly.

George puts the telephone down and looks at Katherine. ‘I’ve no idea. I won’t know how bad things are until I get there.’ He walks into the kitchen. Katherine follows him.

‘But they’ll be able to tell you at the station, won’t they? They’ll be able to brief you before you go?’ she says.

‘Katherine, you know only too well it’s not that simple.’

‘Do I?’ Katherine’s tone is harsh.

‘Yes, you do!’ George glares at Katherine. Then, checking himself, he lowers his head. He pushes past Katherine to get the car keys from the kitchen table.

‘And why do you have to liaise with two other retainees?’ Katherine pursues George, her tone becoming more strident. ‘When did this start?’

‘Any uniform’s a target now! Aren’t you aware of what’s going on?’ He grabs the keys.

‘But there’s always trouble around this time of year,’ she snaps. ‘Always trouble around the Orange marches – and then all that trouble with the Apprentice Boys’ parade in Derry – you just expect it.’ She’s almost shouting at him now.

‘This is different – something’s building. I don’t know – it’s – it’s very tense in the city.’ Georges tries to steady himself.

‘You’re overreacting, George! It’ll all blow over as usual and we’ll all be back to complaining about the unemployment and the weather and—’

‘How the hell do you know!’ George barks at Katherine, pushing past her toward the front door.

Suddenly, Stephen walks into the corner of the kitchen table with a wallop. After a moment of silence – the air heavy with what

is to come and his mouth having fallen open like that of a drowning fish – he pitches into his cry. Katherine lifts him up in her arms, rubbing and kissing his head. His cry is piercing and he squeezes his eyes tightly at the unfairness of it all, making two deep, wet creases around his mouth, as though it is melting with saliva.

‘So what time will you be back?’ Katherine follows George, Stephen in her arms.

‘I told you, I’ve no idea.’ George strains to talk over Stephen. ‘Let me see the situation first – see how many of us have been called – I don’t know.’ He addresses Katherine over his shoulder as he moves. Katherine pursues him back out into the hall and stands in front of him.

‘Then you’ll ring me.’ Katherine is biting at her words now.

‘If I’m near a damn telephone!’

‘Of course you’ll be near a *damn telephone*, George. You’ll have to be in contact with the station. You’ll—’

‘Mum!’ Maureen calls from upstairs. ‘Elsa’s not feeling well.’

Stephen is still crying. He is feeding off the energy around him. The pitch of his cry is getting higher.

‘Mum!’

‘Wait!’ Katherine shouts up to Maureen over the crying.

‘Don’t just walk off like that!’ she shouts at George now. George stops.

“‘Walk off?’” ‘He repeats her words sharply. Then he turns squarely to Katherine. His face is hard, incredulous.

‘Don’t just walk off without—’ Katherine is becoming increasingly agitated. ‘Don’t just walk off like that George – don’t!’ Her words, like her thoughts, are fragmenting now.

George turns away from Katherine. His lips are tight with anger. He says nothing. Katherine persists.

‘George!’

George turns to Katherine and thrusts his head in toward her, the blood draining from his face.

‘What exactly do you expect of me, Katherine? What exactly is it that you want from me? How exactly do I disappoint you?’

It all comes out in a rush. There is a moment's silence. Katherine looks startled.

'What? What do you mean, George?'

George holds his look at Katherine; then, almost immediately, he moves away from her again. 'Nothing, I mean nothing. It's nothing.'

'George, don't say that. Talk to me!'

George opens the front door.

'Mum!'

'George, come back! Don't walk away from me like that! Talk to me!' Katherine moves quickly onto the front steps.

'Mum – Elsa feels sick.'

'All right!' Katherine snaps at Maureen. 'George!' She moves down the steps. Stephen is still crying in her arms. 'George, what do you mean?'

George turns abruptly to Katherine, 'You *know* what I bloody mean!'

Katherine stops and looks at George. She says nothing.

George holds a hard stare. 'You know *exactly* what I bloody mean!'

He swings away from Katherine and, opening the car door, adds between gritted teeth, 'And I have a bloody job to do!'

Stephen is pulling at Katherine. His back is arched and his head is thrown back. His face is red. He is crying to the sky.

'George,' Katherine says quietly, and watches as he drives away.

Slowly, she walks back into the kitchen with Stephen's body squirming on her hip. He kneads his tiny fists into his eyes as though he were rubbing them out. He flings his head on Katherine's shoulder again, a sleepy, sad cygnet tired of holding his height.

It was true that the very life events that should have brought Katherine and George closer together as a couple seemed to have edged them further apart.

Katherine remembers that even on their wedding day, a pensiveness had followed them like a dust breeze at their backs, creating around them the sound of an almost-detectable pulse. She remembers the church small and quaint, like a doll's house. There were lilies in wide vases, settled in their symmetry, giving out a creamy, heady scent. There was the smell of frankincense and myrrh. There were white ribbons on the ends of the pews. Six tall candles graced the altar. As she walked up the aisle, the congregation passed their coughs along the pews as if passing a collection basket. She wore two rows of neat pearls around the lace neckline of her white silk wedding dress. George waited at the altar for her, shifting nervously from foot to foot. The priest had the pink glossiness of a skin not used to daylight.

At the reception afterward, they danced together as tentatively as they had danced the first night they had met at the Belfast Palais de Danse, introduced to each other on the grand staircase by a mutual friend, who then fled to recover a dropped glove by the circling glass doors. But, by the end of their wedding day, it had felt as though they were still waiting for the wonderful thing to happen.

Ever since Katherine had known George, he had always exuded a sullen determination in the way in which he approached things – a sense that life was a series of tasks that had to be done. This trait in him she had found attractive when they first met, as though it offered her stability and reassurance. However, since their honeymoon, she had noticed that there was a different edge to his determination. There was a darker, more destructive quality to it.

Katherine remembers the evening they moved into their new house (this small semidetached two-bedroom house in which they have lived now for fifteen years). George had walked out to the back of the property, brimming with new purpose, taking in the unfamiliar surroundings with a deep breath, and rolling his shirtsleeves up to his elbows. But, ten minutes later, he had returned to the kitchen full of irritation. With his shoulders hunched and his brow furrowed, he had pulled roughly

at the stacked cardboard boxes in the hallway, tripping over a rolled-up offcut of linoleum that they had purchased for the new house, and had then stomped back out to the garden with a large spade clutched firmly in his hand. Katherine had followed him, and had found him savagely hammering the back lawn with the edge of the spade.

‘It’s full of fucking turnips!’ he had said, glaring at her red-faced, as though it had somehow been her fault that he had found them. ‘There must be hundreds of them!’

‘Surely not hundreds,’ she remembers saying, but George could not be humoured.

‘I’ll have to grow a bloody new lawn from seed,’ he had muttered through jagged breaths, and then had resumed his frantic digging. He had stayed out all evening, until the last lip of daylight had slipped into dusk, and had then worked on into the night. She had called him to come in to eat, but George had insisted he stay outside and dig. So she ate alone.

The rest of the evening was spent quietly unpacking and placing their shared things about the house. In the back room of the house (which opens out into, and is really part of, the kitchen), she installed the two-bar electric fire that had been given to them by her mother, plugging it in to test if it still worked – why wouldn’t it? The little fan whirred above the red bulb and made the light flicker through the scratched painted coal shapes (it was all pretend) and released the smell of heated dust into the evening air. Across the back of the brown leatherette sofa, which they had picked up from a secondhand furniture shop three days before, she placed a grey woollen throw with mint green edges. It slid off the sofa immediately, as easily as syrup off a hot spoon (as she had predicted it would – she remembers having made a mental note to sort it out; she had yet to get around to it). On the brown linoleum, which had been included in the price of the house, she placed a rug with regular little patterns of green-yellow flowers caught in serrated borders of crimson and blue. With some effort, she hung the long, heavy drapes, which she had made herself, either side of the back door, covering its glass with a milky net

curtain. The drapes would come in useful for the winter – she realised she was a little ahead of herself hanging them in summer – and she fussed over their tidiness so that they fell on either side of the door like two long pillars of burned honey.

On the mantelpiece above the electric fire she placed a favourite and edge-worn photograph of herself with her father in Tollymore Forest, a place they had regularly visited on holiday when she was a child. Beside it she put an ever so slightly out-of-focus photograph of herself and George on their honeymoon in Mexico. Under a Latin American sun, they stood together, George's arm placed awkwardly around her shoulders. Their flimsy salt white straw sombreros were pushed back a little on their heads, so that they squinted into the new light with an embarrassed awe.

Finally, after checking that George's supper was still warm enough, she unpacked a sheet and two blankets and, leaving a light on in the kitchen, took herself up to their cold new bed and lay listening to the *thwat-thwat-thwat* of the garden spade outside, wishing that the first evening in their new home together had held a little more tenderness.

And the turnips kept coming. Just when George thought he had dug up the last of them, more would appear like stubborn, blank, disembodied heads. They forced their way up through the lawn and flagged their long, slender turnip tops. To her, the turnips were an unexpected harvest, and whether they were boiled, roasted, diced, or mashed, she made sure that every one of them was eaten. 'Think of the starving black babies of Africa,' she would say to George as she handed out yet more bowlfuls of turnip.

After many seasons of frenzied digging, the reluctant turnips disappeared, leaving the soil dry-brown and broken. Yet George, for months after, would stalk the garden, head low, like some horticultural vigilante, eyes intent on finding just one more, finding the one he had missed, ready with his spade. She would stand watching him from the kitchen window, see the sweat break out across his forehead and down his temples. He would walk slowly across the stunted earth as though he were trying to stalk and kill something. Buried things that he needed

to unearth and destroy. Buried things that he needed to empty himself of. Too many buried things.

In time, the garden became theirs and the grass grew back without George's having to sow one single seed. It gracefully became a verdant cradle for their young children, Maureen and Elizabeth, where on summer afternoons they would sometimes be found among the long and tender new blades, curled, baby-fleshed, asleep, like soft blackberries having fallen from the bush. Katherine had often said that she would have made pies from them and eaten them. And George had seemed more at ease, more sure of his step. Becoming a father had been good for him, Katherine had thought. Since Maureen and Elizabeth had been born, he had been happier.

It was when Elsa was born, however, that she saw George's irascibility rise again. More intensely this time. Perhaps because Elsa was born at home, perhaps because of that, she kept telling herself, George had appeared more vulnerable and had begun to behave as though he believed that the whole house was under siege.

Outside the window of the bedroom, where she was in labour with Elsa, bees had made a hive. With the impending birth, the busyness of the bees had barely been noticed. But that evening, as contractions began and she felt herself opening, as a freshly healed wound might be opened, reopened, accidentally, irreversibly, the bees night-gathered. She felt the impending force of her baby's descent as a thousand honey-laden bees hummed a melodious and rhythmical welcome song, a droning lullaby for the buttery baby. Daylight had soberly nudged its way in and Elsa was born. George had stood at the bedside of mother and baby as though he were a visitor in his own house, respectful and distant, his tender attention tempered by puzzlement that he could father a child so fair, so golden.

After the birth – her thighs blood-streaked and purposeless from the long labour – Katherine had wept from exhaustion and joy and had kissed the blue-hued skin of her pointy-headed baby. But George, it seemed, could only worry about the bees.

‘The bees have to be killed; the hive has to be destroyed,’ George had announced with a defiant anger.

‘Bees? What bees?’ Katherine had said, holding their new baby, the cadences of labour still fresh and warm.

And so the bee killer had been called in to smoke the bees out, a little man in a big hat. ‘I’ll put on my bee suit for protection,’ the man had said to George like a child reading aloud, as though, in a final act of courtesy, he himself dressed up as a bee to do the deed.

For weeks after Elsa’s birth, dead bees could be found all over the house, singular, sad, furry, redundant cases. Their still wings a thin transparent film, the colour of gently caramelized onion. Light, dried bodies semaphorically cut short and with the quietness of their purpose frozen. They lay around the house in corners, behind cupboards, reminders of a cruel and unnecessary demise. Some were even found outside, scattered by the fuchsia bush that grew by the coal shed. Under the cardinal purses of sickly nectar, they were little dark dots of death.

By eight o’clock, Stephen is settled and Maureen and Elizabeth have their faces washed, their teeth brushed, and are clambering willingly into bed. The paper blind in their bedroom is pulled closed, but the curtains are left open so they can still see in the milky evening light without having to turn on their bedside lamp.

Unusually, no decade of the Rosary is said that evening. Katherine has seen clearly, despite the curtailment of the picnic, how tired the day has made them all. She herself feels curiously emptied.

Before she goes in to say good night to the girls, Katherine slips into her own bedroom, taking care not to wake Stephen, who is fast asleep in his cot in the corner of the room. She tidies away the towels and her white swimsuit, which she had left on the floor (she had had to find her warmest clothes to wear, so chilly had she felt since her swim). She kneels and picks up

the broken pieces of the statuette, which are still lying by the wardrobe, and wraps them in the paper that has the lyrics from *Carmen* written on it. She places the paper parcel back inside the box and she covers the box with the cloth. She places it deep in at the back of the wardrobe and closes the wardrobe door. But this time, the statuette doesn't feel hidden enough. It still feels visible. Present. If she had a key for the wardrobe door, she would lock it. Keeping everything in. Layer upon layer. Skin upon skin.

Katherine goes in to kiss Maureen and Elizabeth good night, their bodies heavy now with approaching sleep. Then she turns to Elsa.

After George had left for the station, Katherine had found Elsa lying on top of her blankets in bed like a small sea animal exposed by a departing tide. Elsa had said she felt nauseous and dizzy. Katherine had placed a glass of water by Elsa's bedside table.

Now she sits Elsa up in the bed and brings the glass of water to her lips.

Elsa wants to sleep, but the heat of her body is keeping her awake. Her own skin has hidden it from her until now, and now it is sheer intensity. The delay of sunburn, how it fools us. Katherine cannot believe how burned Elsa's body is. The back of her limbs and torso are still white, but the front of her body is an increasing red. Katherine helps Elsa stretch back out on top of the blankets, a rubric in her white cotton vest and pants, as though she is an offering to the gods. Elsa's arms and legs are splayed in her effort to avoid them making contact. She feels her skin might split and crack in the bends of her arms and around her knees. Nothing is turning down the temperature of her veins. Even the air above and around her body is rippling and eddying like a mirage, shimmering purls of hot air. She is a road on a hot day, giving it all back. *Make it stop, Mummy, Please, make it stop.*

But all Katherine can do for Elsa is to give her skin a momentary distraction. Katherine dabs clumps of cotton wool soaked

in calamine lotion along the length of Elsa's arms and legs and across her throat and chest. The cotton wool has drunk the lotion in and is loath to share. Elsa's red skin is becoming patchy. She looks like an Indian fakir, her body caked in chalky paint.

Elsa does not say too much; her voice has lost its pace. And so the bedroom is quiet, as though it is the quietness that heals, and maybe it is. The delicacy of the child's downward gaze, the glassiness of her stare, her body preoccupied with her burning skin. The sun has altered her, making her a peculiar child, and now, as it dips in the pearly evening sky, her skin has ignited in its absence. Poor Elsa, Katherine thinks. It's her fair skin; it's her golden hair. Maureen, Elizabeth, and Stephen – none of them got burned by the sun.

'How did you get so burned, pet?' asks Katherine.

'When you went swimming, I pretended I was a starfish. I lay in the sand, waiting for you to come back. I wanted you to see me.'

'Oh, Elsa.'

'But you were ages – Daddy was worried.'

'I'm so sorry, love.'

Katherine sits beside Elsa, as she does not sleep. They are quiet and still together again. Elsa gradually calms as Katherine gently strokes her hair.

'Mummy? . . . Mummy?' Elsa's voice croaks.

'What is it, love?' Katherine replies, slowly turning her head to Elsa.

'Can I have some more lotion?'

'Of course . . . here, pet.' Katherine pours the calamine lotion onto a fresh clump of cotton wool and presses it gently against Elsa's skin. The simple action brings Elsa relief. Katherine looks at her daughter and smiles at her. Elsa's face is immobile, as though it is a fake face and she is just looking out of it, and she does not smile back. Perhaps, Katherine thinks, she could distract Elsa a little more with some easy conversation. Perhaps she could even distract herself after the strange day she's had.

‘Do you know what you remind me of, Elsa?’

‘What?’ Elsa replies.

‘You remind me of the way, when I was little, I used to wait and watch for moths in the garden of our old house.’

Elsa casts her eyes up to look at her mother. Katherine continues to dab the wet lotion-soaked cotton wool against Elsa’s skin.

‘Well – it was a patch of grass beyond the garden of the old house, the one we had before we lived over the chip shop. I would sneak out there at night in the summertime when everyone else had gone to bed. I don’t know how I heard about the moths, how I knew they might be there. I think I remember my mother telling me that they were attracted to the plants that grew among the grasses there – the nicotiana, honeysuckle, the night-scented stock . . .’

Katherine’s voice, though tender, has a settled, dark quality to it. She places her hand gently on Elsa’s forehead. ‘Anyway, I remember the first time I saw them, I couldn’t believe it . . .’ Katherine takes a deep breath. ‘Oh, they were beautiful, so they were, Elsa. Pure-white moths rising and falling above the grass, as if they were dancing, moving toward me, hovering over me. I remember lying down in the grass on my back in my white nightdress – just like you are now, just in the same shape that you’re making. I somehow believed I would be irresistible to them, that I could trap them, as though I were a light in the dusk.’

Katherine brushes her hand over Elsa’s hair.

‘And sometimes, believe it or not, they would actually settle on me; one or two of them, maybe more, they would settle on me if I kept really still. And then I would tilt my head up to look at them, but their white wings would blend into the white of my nightdress, so that it looked as though we were all the same. Then suddenly they would fly away from me, up above me again.’

‘We learned at school that moths are moths because they shed their old skin.’ Elsa’s voice sounds gravelly. ‘That there’s a new them hiding inside a little case that comes out when it’s ready.’

Meta-mor-phosis is what it's called. We learned that from Sister Marion.' Elsa seems pleased with herself for remembering what she had learned in biology class.

'Yes, love, yes, that's right,' Katherine says gently.

'Maybe I'm having meta-mor-phosis right now, Mummy. Maybe I'll get a new skin.' Elsa attempts a little smile, but it hurts.

'I've no doubts, Elsa. Your sunburn will be sore for a little while, but then it'll get better.' Katherine strokes Elsa's hair again. She can now feel a dark swell rising within her. 'And d'ye know, pet, one night a whole swarm of moths came; a whole swarm of pure-white moths covered me from head to toe. I couldn't believe it. I remember thinking, This must be what it feels like to be in Heaven.' Katherine's voice falls almost to a whisper. She turns and dips her head to look at Elsa. 'My mother scolded me for lying in the damp grass in my nightdress . . . but my father said I must be very special for that to have happened, for me to have seen so many of them, for them to have covered me like that. He called them "ghost moths." He said that some people believed that ghost moths were the souls of the dead waiting to be caught, and some people believed that they were only moths.'

'And what did you believe?' Elsa stares at her mother, eager to hear what she has to say.

But Katherine does not answer. Ever since her encounter in the cold sea that day, the thoughts of *him* have continued to grow with every hour. Memories flooding through her veins like an electric river. Something she cannot seem to stop. A searing, biddable tide flowing through every part of her, gathering force and pushing her to the edge of a precipice.