



It was sometimes called Brigid's Cave, the echo cave, and if you shouted your question loud enough in the right direction you got an answer instead of an echo. In the summer it was full of girls calling out questions, girls who had come for the summer to Castlebay. Girls who wanted to know would they get a fellow, or if Gerry Doyle would have eyes for them this summer. Clare thought they were mad to tell the cave their secrets. Specially since people like her sister Chrissie and that crowd would go and listen for private things being asked and then they'd scream with laughter about them and tell everyone. Clare said she'd never ask the echo anything no matter how desperate she was, because it wouldn't be a secret any more. But she did go in to ask about the history prize. That was different.

It was different because it was winter anyway, and there was hardly anyone except themselves in Castlebay in winter; and it was different because it had nothing to do with love. And it was a nice way to come home from school that way down the cliff road: you didn't have to

talk to everyone in the town, you could look at the sea instead. And suppose she did go down that crooked path with all the Danger notices on it, then she could go into the cave for a quick word, walk along the beach and up the real steps and be home in the same time as if she had come down the street talking to this person and that. In winter there was hardly any business so people waved you into shops and gave you a biscuit or asked you to do a message for them. She'd be just as quick going by Brigid's cave and the beach.

It had been dry, so the Danger bits weren't so dangerous. Clare slid easily down the cliff on to the sand. It was firm and hard, the tide had not long gone out. The mouth of the cave looked black and a bit frightening. But she squared her shoulders; it looked just the same in summer yet people went in there in droves. She shifted her schoolbag to her back so that she could have both hands free to guide herself and once she got used to the light there was no difficulty seeing the little ridge where you were meant to stand.

Clare took a deep breath: 'Will I win the history prize?' she called.

'Ize ize ize ize,' called the echo.

'It's saying yes,' said a voice just beside her. Clare jumped with the fright. It was David Power.

'You shouldn't listen to anyone else, it's like listening in to confession,' Clare said crossly.

'I thought you saw me,' David said simply. 'I wasn't hiding.'

‘How could I see you, didn’t I come in out of the light, you were lurking in here.’ She was full of indignation.

‘It’s not a private cave, you don’t have to keep shouting Cave Occupied,’ David retorted loudly.

‘Pied pied pied pied,’ said the cave.

They both laughed.

He was nice, really, David Power, he was the same age as her brother Ned – fifteen. They had been in Mixed Infants together, she remembered Ned telling someone proudly, wanting to share some experience with the doctor’s son.

He wore a tie and suit when he came home from school, all the time, not just when he went to Mass on Sundays. He was tall and he had freckles on his nose. His hair was a bit spiky and used to stick up in funny directions, one big bit of it fell over his forehead. He had a nice smile and he always looked as if he were ready to talk except that something was dragging him away. Sometimes he wore a blazer with a badge on it, and he looked very smart in that. He used to wrinkle his nose and tell people that it only looked smart when you didn’t see a hundred and eighty blazers like that every day at his school. He’d been at a boarding school for over a year but now it was closed because of scarlet fever. Only the Dillon girls from the hotel went to boarding school and of course the Wests and the Greens, but they were Protestants and they had to go to a boarding school because there wasn’t one of their own.

‘I didn’t think it would answer really, I only tried it as a joke,’ she said.

'I know, I tried it once as a joke too,' he confessed.

'What did you ask it as a joke?' she inquired.

'I forget now,' he said.

'That's not fair – you heard mine.'

'I didn't, I only heard eyes eyes eyes.' He shouted it and it called back the three words to him over and over.

Clare was satisfied. 'Well I'd best be off now, I have homework. I don't suppose you've had homework for weeks.' She was envious and inquiring.

'I do. Miss O'Hara comes every day to give me lessons. She's coming . . . oh soon now.' They walked out on to the wet hard sand.

'Lessons all by yourself with Miss O'Hara – isn't that great?'

'It is, she's great at explaining things, isn't she, for a woman teacher I mean.'

'Yes, well we only have women teachers and nuns,' Clare explained.

'I forgot,' David said sympathetically. 'Still she's terrific, and she's very easy to talk to, like a real person.'

Clare agreed. They walked companionably along to the main steps up from the beach. It would have been quicker for David to climb the path with Danger written on it, it led almost into his own garden, but he said he wanted to buy some sweets at Clare's shop anyway. They talked about things the other had never heard of. David told her about the sanatorium being fumigated after the two pupils got scarlet fever; but all the time she thought that he was talking about the big hospital on the hill where people

went when they had TB. She didn't know it was a room in his school. She told him a long and complicated tale about Mother Immaculata asking one of the girls to leave the exercise books in one place and she thought that it was somewhere else and the girl went by accident into the nuns' side of the convent. This was all lost on David, who didn't know that you never under pain of *terrible* things went to the nuns' side of the convent. It didn't really matter to either of them, they were no strain on each other, and life in Castlebay could be full of strains so this was a nice change. He came into the shop and, as there was nobody serving, she took off her coat, hung it up and found the jar of Clove Rock. She counted out the six for a penny that he was buying and before she put the lid on the jar she offered him one courteously and took one herself.

He looked at her enviously. It was great power to be able to stand up on a chair in a sweetshop, take down a jar and be free to offer one to a customer. David sighed as he went home. He'd have loved to live in a shop like Clare O'Brien, he'd have loved brothers and sisters, and to be allowed to go up to the yard and collect milk in a can when the cows were being milked, or gather seaweed to sell to the hot sea baths in bundles. It was very dull going back to his own house now to his mother saying he should really have some sense of what was what. It was the most irritating thing he had ever heard, especially since it seemed to mean anything and everything and never the same thing twice. Still, Miss O'Hara was coming tonight, and Miss O'Hara made lessons much more interesting

than at school, he had once been unwise enough to explain to his mother. He thought she would be pleased but she said that Miss O'Hara was fine for a country primary school but did not compare with the Jesuits who were on a different level entirely.

Clare was sighing too, she thought it must be great altogether to go back to a house like David Power's where there were bookcases of books in the house, and a fire on in that front room whether there was anyone sitting in it or not. And there was no wireless on, and nobody making noise. You could do your homework there for hours without anyone coming in and telling you to move. She remembered the inside of the house from when she had been up to Dr Power for the stitches the time she had caught her leg on the rusty bit of machinery. To distract her Dr Power had asked her to count the volumes of the encyclopedia up on the shelf and Clare had been so startled to see all those books in one house for one family that she had forgotten about the stitches and Dr Power had told her mother she was as brave as a lion. They had walked home after the stitches with Clare leaning on her mother. They stopped at the church to thank St Anne that there hadn't been any infection in the leg and as Clare saw her mother bent in prayer and gratitude in front of the St Anne grotto she let her mind wander on how great it would be to have a big peaceful house full of books like that instead of being on top of each other and no room for anything – no time for anything either. She thought about

it again tonight as David Power went up the street home to that house where the carpet went right into the window, not stopping in a square like ordinary carpets. There would be a fire and there'd be peace. His mother might be in the kitchen and Dr Power would be curing people and later Miss O'Hara would be coming to give him lessons all on his own without the rest of a class to distract her. What could be better than that? She wished for a moment that she had been his sister, but then she felt guilty. To wish that would be to want to lose Mammy and Daddy and Tommy and Ned and Ben and Jimmy. Oh and Chrissie. But she didn't care how wrong it was, she wouldn't mind losing Chrissie any day of the week.

The calm of the shop was only temporary. Daddy had been painting out in the back and he came in holding his hands up in front of him and asking someone to reach out a bottle of white spirit and open it up this minute. There was an awful lot of painting going on in the wintertime in Castlebay, the sea air just ripped the coats off again and the place looked very shabby unless it was touched up all the time. Mammy came in at the same moment; she had been up to the post office and she had discovered terrible things. Chrissie and her two tinkers of friends had climbed on the roof of Miss O'Flaherty's shop and poked a long wet piece of seaweed through to frighten Miss O'Flaherty. They could have given the unfortunate woman a heart attack; she could, God save us all, have dropped stone dead on the floor of her own shop and then Chrissie



O'Brien and her two fine friends would have the sin of murder on their souls until the Last Day and after. Chrissie had been dragged home by the shoulder, the plait and the ear. She was red-faced and annoyed. Clare thought that it was a good thing to have frightened Miss O'Flaherty who was horrible, and sold copy books and school supplies but hated schoolchildren. Clare thought it was real bad luck that Mammy happened to be passing. She smiled sympathetically at Chrissie but it was not well received,

'Stop looking so superior,' Chrissie cried out. 'Look at Clare gloating at it all. Goody-goody Clare, stupid boring Clare.'

She got a cuff on the side of her head for this performance and it made her madder still.

'Look, she's delighted,' Chrissie went on, 'delighted to see anyone in trouble. That's all that ever makes Clare happy, to see others brought down.'

'There'll be no tea for you, Chrissie O'Brien, and that's not the end of it either. Get up to your room this minute, do you hear. This *minute*.' Agnes O'Brien's thin voice was like a whistle with anger, as she banished the bold Chrissie, wiped the worst paint off her husband's hands with a rag that she had wet with white spirit, and managed at the same time to point to Clare's coat on the hook.

'This isn't a hand-me-down shop,' she said. 'Take that coat and put it where it's meant to be.'

The unfairness of this stung Clare deeply. 'We always leave our coats there. That *is* where it's meant to be.'

'Do you hear her?' Agnes looked in appeal to her

husband, did not wait for an answer but headed for the stairs. Chrissie up there was for it.

‘Can’t you stop tormenting your mother and move your coat?’ he asked. ‘Is it too much to ask for a bit of peace?’

Clare took her coat down from the hook. She couldn’t go up to the bedroom she shared with Chrissie because that would be like stepping straight into the battlefield. She stayed idling in the shop.

Her father’s face was weary. It was so *wrong* of him to say she was tormenting Mammy, she wasn’t, but you couldn’t explain that to him. He was bent over in a kind of a stoop and he looked very old, like someone’s grandfather, not a father. Daddy was all grey, his face and his hair and his cardigan. Only his hands were white from the paint. Daddy had grown more stooped since her First Communion three years ago, Clare thought; then he had seemed very tall. His face had grown hairy too – there were bits of hair in his nose and his ears. He always looked a bit harassed as if there wasn’t enough time or space or money. And, indeed, there usually wasn’t enough of any of these things. The O’Brien household lived on the profits of the summer season which was short and unpredictable. It could be killed by rain, by the popularity of some new resort, by people overcharging for houses along the cliff road. There was no steady living to be gained over the winter months, it was merely a matter of keeping afloat.

The shop was oddly-shaped when you came in: there were corners and nooks in it which should have been shelved or walled off but nobody had ever got round to it,

the ceiling was low and even with three customers the place looked crowded. Nobody could see any order on the shelves but the O'Briens knew where everything was. They didn't change it for fear they wouldn't find things, even though there were many more logical ways of stocking the small grocery-confectioner's. It all looked cramped and awkward and though the customers couldn't see behind the door into the living quarters it was exactly the same in there. The kitchen had a range, with a clothes line over it, and the table took up most of the space in the room. A small scullery at the back was so poky and dark that it was almost impossible to see the dishes you washed. There was one light in the middle of the room with a yellow light shade which had a crack in it. Recently Tom O'Brien had been holding his paper up nearer to the light in order to read it.

Agnes came downstairs with the air of someone who has just finished an unpleasant task satisfactorily. 'That girl will end on the gallows,' she said.

She was a thin small woman, who used to smile a lot once; but now she seemed set in the face of the cold Castlebay wind, and even when she was indoors she seemed to be grimacing against the icy blast, eyes narrow and mouth in a hard line. In the shop she wore a yellow overall to protect her clothes, she said, but in fact there were hardly any clothes to protect. She had four outfits for going to Mass, and otherwise it had been the same old cardigans and frocks and skirts for years. There were always medals and relics pinned inside the cardigan; they

had to be taken off before it was washed. Once she had forgotten, and a relic of the Little Flower which had been in a red satin covering had become all pink and the pale blue cardigan was tinged pink too. Agnes O'Brien had her hair in a bun which was made by pulling it through a thing that looked like a doughnut, a squashy round device, and then the hair was clipped in. They never saw her doing this, but once they had seen the bun by itself and it had alarmed Clare greatly because she hadn't known what it was.

The dark and very angry eyes of her mother landed on her. 'Have you decided that you would like to belong to this family and do what's required of you? Would it be too much to ask you to take that coat out of my way before I open the range and burn it down to its buttons?'

She would never do that, Clare knew. She had hoped her mother might have forgotten it during the sojourn upstairs. But the coat was still going to be a cause of war.

'I told her, Agnes, my God I told her, but children nowadays . . .' Tom sounded defeated and apologetic.

Clare stuffed her school coat into a crowded cupboard under the stairs and took a few potatoes out of the big sack on the floor. Each evening she and Chrissie had to get the potatoes ready for tea, and tonight, thanks to Chrissie's disgrace, it looked as if Clare was going to have to do it on her own. In the kitchen sat her younger brothers Ben and Jim; they were reading a comic. The older boys Tommy and Ned would be in from the Brothers shortly, but none of this would be any help.

Boys didn't help with the food or the washing up. Everyone knew that.

Clare had a lot to do after tea. She wanted to iron her yellow ribbons for tomorrow. Just in case she won the history essay she'd better be looking smart. She would polish her indoor shoes, she had brought them home specially, and she would make another attempt to get the two stains off her tunic. Mother Immaculata might make a comment about smartening yourself up for the good name of the school. She must be sure not to let them down. Miss O'Hara had said that she had never been so pleased in all her years teaching as when she read Clare's essay, it gave her the strength to go on. Those were her very words. She would never have stopped Clare in the corridor and said that, if she hadn't won the prize. Imagine beating all the ones of fifteen. All those Bernie Conways and Anna Murphys. They'd look at Clare with new interest from now on. And indeed they'd have to think a bit differently at home too. She longed to tell them tonight, but decided it was better to wait. Tonight they were all like weasels and anyway it might look worse for Chrissie; after all she was two years and a half older. Chrissie would murder her too if she chose to reveal it tonight. She took upstairs a big thick sandwich of cheese, a bit of cold cooked bacon and a cup of cocoa.

Chrissie was sitting on her bed, examining her face in a mirror. She had two very thick plaits in her hair; the bits at the ends after the rubber bands were bushy and didn't

just hang there like other people's, they looked as if they were trying to escape. She had a fringe which she cut herself so badly that she had to be taken to the hairdresser to get a proper job done on it, and at night she put pipe cleaners into the fringe so that it would curl properly.

She was fatter than Clare, much, and she had a real bust that you could see even in her school tunic.

Chrissie was very interested in her nose, Clare couldn't understand why but she was always examining it. Even now in all the disgrace and no meal and the sheer fury over what she had done to Miss O'Flaherty she was still peering at it looking for spots to squeeze. She had a round face and always looked surprised. Not happily surprised, not even when someone was delivering her an unexpected supper.

'I don't want it,' she said.

'Don't eat it then,' Clare returned with some spirit.

She went back downstairs and tried to find a corner where she could learn the poem for tomorrow; and she had to do four sums. She often asked herself how was it that with six people living in that house who were all going to school, why was she the only one who ever needed to do any homework?

Gerry Doyle came in as she was ironing her yellow ribbons.

'Where's Chrissie?' he asked Clare in a whisper.

'She's upstairs, there was murder here, she gave Miss O'Flaherty some desperate fright with seaweed. Don't ask for her, they'll all go mad if you even mention her name.'

‘Listen, would you tell her . . .’ He stopped, deciding against it. ‘No, you’re too young.’

‘I’m not too young,’ Clare said, stung by the unfairness of it. ‘But young or old, I don’t care, I’m not giving your sappy messages to Chrissie, she’ll only be annoyed with me, and you’ll be annoyed with me, and Mammy will beat the legs off me, so I’d much prefer you kept them to yourself.’ She went back to the ribbons with vigour. They were flat gleaming bands now, they would fluff up gorgeously tomorrow. She couldn’t get herself up to the neck in Chrissie’s doings because there would be trouble at every turn. She must keep nice and quiet and get ready for tomorrow, for the look of surprise on Mother Immaculata’s face, and the horror on Bernie Conway’s and Anna Murphy’s.

Gerry Doyle laughed good-naturedly. ‘You’re quite right, let people do their own dirty work,’ he said.

The words ‘dirty work’ somehow cut through all the rest of the noise in the O’Brien kitchen and reached Agnes O’Brien as she pulled the entire contents of the dresser’s bottom cupboard on to the floor. Tom had said that she must have thrown out the length of flex he was going to use to put up a light outside the back door. She was sure she had seen it somewhere and was determined that the project should not be postponed.

Tommy and Ned were going through the paper for jobs as they did every week, marking things with a stubby purple pencil; Ben and Jimmy were playing a game that began quietly every few minutes until it became a slapping

match and one of them would start to cry. Tom was busy mending the wireless which crackled over all the activity.

‘What dirty work?’ Agnes called: a grand fellow, that Gerry Doyle, but you had to watch him like a hawk. Whatever devilment was planned he had a hand in it.

‘I was saying to Clare that I’m no good at any house-work, or anything that needs a lot of care. I’m only good at dirty work.’ He smiled across, and the woman on her knees in front of a pile of tins, boxes, paper bags, knitting wool, toasting forks and rusted baking trays, smiled back.

Clare looked up at him with surprise. Imagine being able to tell a lie as quickly and as well as that. And over nothing.

Gerry had gone over to the job consultation, saying he heard there was going to be a man from a big employment agency in England coming round and holding interviews in the hotel.

‘Wouldn’t that be for big kind of jobs, for people with qualifications?’ Ned asked, unwilling to think anyone would come to Castlebay to seek out him or his like.

‘Have sense Ned, who is there in this place with any qualifications? Won’t it save you shoe leather and the cost of writing off to these places if you wait till this fellow arrives and he’ll tell all there’s to be told?’

‘It’s easy on you to say that.’ Tommy, the eldest, was troubled. ‘*You* don’t have to go away for a job. You’ve got your business.’

‘So have you,’ Gerry pointed to the shop.

But it wasn’t the same. Gerry’s father was the



photographer; during the winter he survived on dances, and the odd function that was held. In summer, he walked the length of the beach three times a day taking family groups and then out again at night into the dance hall where the holiday business was brisk and where there would be a great demand to buy prints of the romantic twosomes that he would snap. Girls were his biggest customers, they loved to bring back holiday memories in the form of something that they could pass around the office and sigh over when the dance was long over. Gerry's mother and sister did the developing and printing, or they helped with it, which was the way it was described. Gerry's father expected the only son to take an active part, and since he had been a youngster, Gerry had tagged along learning the psychology as well as the mechanics of the camera.

You must never annoy people, his father had taught him, be polite and a little distant even, click the camera when they aren't at all posed or prepared and then if they show interest and start to pose take a proper snap. The first plate was only a blank to get their attention. Remind them gently that there's no need to buy, the proofs will be available for inspection in twenty-four hours. Move on and don't waste any time chatting when the picture is taken, have a pleasant smile but not a greasy sort of a one. Never plead with people to pose, and when gaggles of girls want six or seven shots taken of them remember they're only going to buy one at the most so pretend to take the snap more often than taking it.

Gerry's beautiful sister Fiona had long dark ringlets; when she wasn't working in the darkroom in their house during the summer she sat in the wooden shack up over the beach selling the snaps. Gerry's father had said that a town like Castlebay was so small you could never have a business if you tried to get big and expand and hire people. But keep it small and run it just with the family and there would be a great inheritance for Gerard Anthony Doyle.

But Gerry never had the air of a boy about to step into a secure future. He examined the paper with the O'Brien boys as eagerly as if he would be having to take the emigrant ship with them.

How did he know whether there'd be a living for him here? His father was always saying that all it needed was a smart-alec firm to come in for the summer and they'd be ruined. Who knew what the future would bring? Maybe people would want coloured photography, there could be newfangled cameras, it was living on a cliff edge his father always said. At least in O'Brien's they could be sure that people would always want bread and butter and milk. They'd want groceries until the end of the world and as long as the trippers kept coming wouldn't they be selling ice creams and sweets and oranges until the Last Day as well?

Gerry always made everything sound more exciting than it was. He saw a future for Tommy and Ned where they'd work in England and then, just when all the English would be wondering what to do and where to go for the summer holidays, Ned and Tommy would come back home to Castlebay, get behind the counter, help out with

the shop and have a great holiday as well. And they'd be fine fellows at the dance because they'd be so well up in everything after being in England. Tommy complained that it wouldn't be much of a holiday coming home to work like dogs in the really tough part of the year when O'Brien's was open from eight o'clock in the morning until midnight. But Gerry just laughed and said that would be their investment, that was the only time of the year that there'd be work for all hands. The rest of the year they'd be falling over each other with no one to serve, but in the summer the whole family should be there to make sure that everyone got a bit of sleep anyway and to keep the thing going. It was like that in all seaside towns. Gerry was very convincing. Tommy and Ned saw it all very rosily, and really and truly Gerry was right, shouldn't they wait till the man came and had a list of jobs for them instead of scanning all the ads which told them nothing when all was said and done?

Clare had turned the iron on its end by the range; she was folding the blanket and the scorch sheet and wondering where to replace them since everything from the dresser seemed to be on the floor. Gerry Doyle was sitting on the table swinging his legs and she got a sudden feeling that he was giving her brothers wrong advice. They weren't capable and sure like he was, they were the kind of people who agreed with everyone else.

'Would this man who came offering jobs in the hotel, would he be offering the kind of jobs where you could get on or jobs you'd just have to work hard at?'

They were surprised that she spoke. Her father took his head out of the shell of the wireless.

‘It’s the same thing, Clare girl, if you work hard you get on. If you don’t, you don’t.’

‘But trained like, that’s what I mean,’ Clare said. ‘You remember when that Order came and the girls were all going to be taken off to do their Leaving Certificate and learn a skill if they became postulant nuns.’

Ned roared with scorn. ‘A postulant nun! Is that what you’d like us to be, wouldn’t we look fine in the habit and the veil?’

‘No that’s not what I meant. . .’ she began.

‘I don’t think the Reverend Mother would take us,’ Tommy said.

‘Sister Thomas, I really think we’re going to have to do something about your voice in the choir,’ Ned said in mincing tones.

‘Oh I’m doing my best, Sister Edward, but what about your hobnailed boots?’

‘Sister Thomas, you can talk, what about your hairy legs?’

Benny and Jimmy were interested now.

‘And you’ve got to give up kicking football round the convent,’ said Ben.

‘Nuns kicking football,’ screamed Jimmy with enthusiasm. Even Mammy on her knees and having triumphantly found the bit of flex was laughing and Dad was smiling too. Clare was rescued unexpectedly.

‘Very funny, ha ha,’ Gerry Doyle said. ‘Very funny

Mother Edward and Mother Thomas, but Clare's right. What's the point of getting a job on a building site without any training as a brickie or a carpenter? No, the real thing to ask this fellow is nothing to do with how much, but what kind of a job.'

Clare flushed with pleasure. They were all nodding now. 'I nearly forgot why I came,' Gerry said. 'The father asked me to have a look at the view from different places, he's half thinking of making a postcard of Castlebay, and he wondered where's the best angle to take the picture from. He wondered would there be a good view from your upstairs. Do you mind if I run up and have a look?'

'At night?' Clare's father asked.

'You'd get a good idea of the outlines at night,' Gerry said, his foot on the stairs.

'Go on up lad.'

They were all back at their activities and nobody except Clare had the slightest idea that Gerry Doyle aged fifteen and a half had gone upstairs to see Chrissie O'Brien aged thirteen.

Nellie was on her knees with the bellows when David came in. 'I'm building up a nice fire for your lessons,' she told him.

Her face was red with the exertion and her hair was escaping from the cap she wore. She never seemed comfortable in the cap, it was always at the wrong angle somehow on her hair and her head seemed to be full of hairpins. Nellie was old, not as old as Mummy but about

thirty, and she was fat and cheerful and she had been there always. She had a lot of married brothers and an old father. When David was a young fellow she used to tell him that she was better off than any of them, in a nice clean house and great comfort and all the food she could eat. David used to think it was lonely for her in the kitchen when they were all inside but Nellie's round face would crack into a smile and she assured him that she was as well off as if she'd married a Guard, or even better off. Her money was her own, she had the best of everything and every Thursday afternoon and every second Sunday afternoon off.

David started to help with the fire but Nellie stood up, creaking, and said it was going fine and wasn't that his teacher coming in the gate.

Angela O'Hara's red bicycle was indeed coming up the gravel path. She was tall and slim, and she always wore belts on her coats as if it were the only way they'd stay on. Other people had buttons, but of course other people didn't fly around on the bike so much. She had red-brown hair that was sort of tied back but with such a loose ribbon or piece of cord that it might as well not be tied back at all. She had big greenish eyes and she used to throw her head back when she laughed.

Miss O'Hara wasn't at all like other grown-ups. She wanted to know did they all get a refund of fees because the school had to close for the scarlet fever. David didn't know, he said he'd ask, but Miss O'Hara said it didn't matter, and not to ask because it might seem as if she was

looking for more money, which she wasn't. David had forgotten that she was being paid to teach him, it wasn't the kind of thing you'd think about, he sort of believed that Miss O'Hara did it for interest. She had found that very funny. She said in many ways she would well do it for interest but the labourer was worthy of his hire as it said somewhere in the gospels, and if she were to do it for free what about the fancy order of priests he was with – they certainly didn't do it for free. David said he thought the main cost was the food and the beds in the dormitories, he couldn't imagine that the actual lessons would cost anything.

She came for an hour every evening, after she had finished up at the school and called in on her mother. Mrs O'Hara was all crooked from arthritis and David thought that she looked like an illustration of an old tree in one of the children's books he used to read. A book probably tidied away neatly by his mother for when it would be needed again. Miss O'Hara had two sisters married in England and a brother, a priest, in the Far East. She was the only one who had never travelled, she told him. He asked what would have happened if she had travelled and her mother had got all crippled living by herself.

'Then I'd have come back,' Miss O'Hara had said cheerfully. Since her sisters were married and her brother was a priest she would have been the one to look after her mother anyway.

The O'Hara house was out a bit on the road towards the golf course, and Miss O'Hara cycled everywhere on

her big red bicycle with the basket of exercise books in the front. There were always copy books and when it rained she had them covered with a waterproof sheet. She wore a long scarf wound round her in winter and if there was a wind sometimes her long hair stood out behind her in a straight line. David's mother once said she looked like a witch heading for the cliffroad and you'd expect her and the bicycle to take flight over the seas. But his father had refused to let a word of criticism be spoken of her. He said that nobody knew how much she did for that crippled mother of hers, morning noon and night, and wasn't it proof to note that when poor Angela O'Hara went on her two weeks holiday a year somewhere they had to have three people in and out of that house to mind the mother and it was never done satisfactorily even then. His mother didn't like Miss O'Hara, it had something to do with her not admiring things or not being excited enough about his mother going to Dublin for outings. It had never been said, it was just a feeling he had.

The table with his books on it was near the fire and Nellie would bring in a pot of tea and a slice of cake or apple tart.

Miss O'Hara always talked to Nellie more than she talked to his mother, she'd ask about Nellie's old father out in the country and the row with the brothers and had they heard from the sister in Canada. She'd giggle with Nellie about something new that Father O'Dwyer's housekeeper had said. The woman's name was Miss McCormack, but everyone called her Sergeant McCormack because she tried



to run not only Father O'Dwyer and the church but the whole of Castlebay too.

Miss O'Hara came in now, her hands cold from clenching the handlebars in the wind, and she held them out to the fire.

'God, Nellie, isn't it a sin having a great fire like this banked up just for David and myself. We could work in the kitchen, you know, beside the range.'

'Oh, that wouldn't do at all!' Nellie was horrified.

'You wouldn't mind, David?' she began . . . and then suddenly changed her mind. 'No, don't take any notice of me, I always want to change the world, that's my problem. Aren't we lucky to have this grand place in here, let's make the most of it. Nellie, tell me what are they building on the side of Dillon's? It looks like an aerodrome.'

'Oh, that's going to be a sun lounge, I hear,' Nellie said, full of importance. 'They're going to have chairs and card tables maybe in the summer, and tea served there too.'

'They'd need to have rugs and hot-water bottles if it turns out anything like last summer. Come on, college boy, get out your geography book, we're going to make you a world expert on trade winds, you're going to make them green and yellow striped with jealousy when you get back to that palace of a school of yours. We'll show them what a real scholar is, the way we breed them in Castlebay.'

Paddy Power was tall and thick-set, with a weather-beaten face. His face was beaten by weather of all kinds, but

mainly the sharp wind that came in from the sea as he walked up lanes to people's houses, lanes where his big battered car wouldn't go. He had a shock of hair that grew in all directions as if he had three crowns on his head; it had been brown and then it was speckled but now it was mainly grey. Because of his bulk and his alarming hair he sometimes looked fierce, but that was before people got to know him. He had a great way of talking, a kind of good-natured bantering until he could see what was wrong; his talk was merely to relax the patient until he could see where the piece of grit in the eyes was, or the splinter in the hand, the glass in the sole of the foot or feel for the pain in the base of the stomach without too much tensing and alarm.

He was a burly man who never found clothes to fit him and never cared about them either. Life was far too short, he said, to spend time in a tailor's talking rubbish about lines and cuts and lapels. But for all his bulk and his haphazard attitude to his appearance, he was a healthy man and he was able to go down the path from his own garden to the sea and swim for nearly six months of the year and to get a game of golf a week as well. But Paddy Power was tired today; it had been a very long day and he had driven seventeen miles out to see a young woman who would be dead by Christmas but who talked cheerfully of how she knew she'd be better when the fine weather came. Her five children had played noisily and unconcerned around the feet of the doctor and the pale young husband just sat looking emptily into the fire. He had also had to

have an unpleasing chat with one of the Dillon brothers from the hotel and speak seriously about liver damage. No matter how carefully he tried to phrase it, he had ended up with a blank wall and a great deal of resentment. Today it had ended with Dick Dillon telling him to mind his own bloody business, and that Paddy Power was a fine one to talk, half the county could tell you that he was drunk as a lord three years ago at the races, so he was in a poor position to cast stones. There were two bad cases of flu in old people, where it was settling in on chests that were never strong, he could see both of them turning into pneumonia before long. People talked about the *good seaside air*, and the *bracing breezes*. They should be here in a doctor's surgery in winter, Paddy Power thought gloomily, there'd be less of the folksy chat then.

Molly said that David was getting on like a house on fire with his lessons, and that he did two hours on his own each morning.

'She's a fine scholar Angela, isn't it a pity that she never got the recognition for it,' Paddy said, wearily taking off his boots and putting on his slippers.

'Never got any recognition? Isn't she a teacher above in the school with a big salary, hasn't she all her qualifications, that's not bad for Dinny O'Hara's daughter.' Molly sniffed.

'You miss the point, Moll. That's a bright girl and she's stuck here in Castlebay teaching children to be waitresses and to serve their time in shops. And what kind of a life does she have in that house? I mean the Little Sisters

wouldn't do as much for their flock as Angela does for her mother.'

'Oh I know, I know.' Molly was anxious to leave it now.

'Still, a man on a white horse may ride into town one day for her yet.' He smiled at the thought.

'I'd say she's a bit past that now,' Molly said.

'She's only twenty-eight years of age, a year older than you were when we got married, that's what she is.'

Molly hated when he spoke about things like that in front of Nellie. Molly hadn't grown up here, she came from a big town and she had been at school in Dublin. She didn't like anyone knowing her business nor indeed her age.

She looked at herself in the mirror, no longer young but not too bad. She had made a friend of the buyer in that shop in Dublin and now there was no problem in getting clothes. Nice wool two-pieces, loose enough so that you could wear a warm vest and maybe even a thin jumper under them. You needed a lot of layers in Castlebay. And Paddy had given her nice brooches over the years so that she always looked smart. No matter who came to the house, Molly Power looked well-dressed and ready to receive them, her hair was always neat and well-groomed (she had a perm every three months in the town) and she always used a little make-up.

She examined her face. She had been afraid that the climate in this place might have made her lined or leathery like a lot of the women, but then they probably didn't use any face cream even.

She smiled at herself, turning her head slightly so that she'd see the nice clip-on earrings she had got recently to match the green brooch on her green and grey wool two-piece. Paddy saw her smiling and came and stood behind her with his hands on her shoulders.

'You're right about yourself, you're gorgeous,' he said.

'I wasn't thinking that,' she said indignantly.

'Well, you should have been,' he said. 'A glamorous thing, not like a mother and wife.'

She thought about being a mother for a moment. She had believed it would be impossible. So many false alarms. The weeks of delight followed by the miscarriages at three months. Three times. Then two babies born dead. And then when she hardly dared to believe it, David. Exactly the child she wanted. Exactly.

Angela thought David was a grand little fellow. He looked like an illustration from those Just William books, with his hair sticking up, his shoelaces undone and his tie crooked. When he worked he sort of came apart.

Wouldn't it be lovely to teach bright children all the time without having to pause for ever for the others to catch up. She looked at him as he worked out a chart of the winds and gave it to her triumphantly.

'Why are you smiling?' he asked suspiciously.

'I don't know. I could be losing my mind. I've noticed myself smiling nowadays whenever any child gets anything right, it's such a shock you see.'

He laughed. 'Are they all hopeless at the school here?'

‘No, not all, some are as smart as paint. But what’s the point? Where will it get them?’

‘Won’t it get them their exams?’

‘Yes, yes it will.’ She stood up a bit like a grown-up who wasn’t going to follow the conversation on with him. He was disappointed.

Angela cycled home from Dr Power’s house into the wind. Her face was whipped by it and the salt of the sea stung her eyes. Any journey in winter seemed like a voyage to the South Pole, and she wondered for the millionth time would they be better if she moved her mother to a town. Surely this wet wind coming in through every crack in the cottage must be hard on her, surely it couldn’t be healthy living in a place that was only right for seals and gulls for three quarters of the year. But then she mustn’t fool herself: if they moved to a town it would be for herself, so that she could have some life. Let’s not pretend it would be for her mother’s poor old misshapen bones. And anyway what more life would there be for her in a town? She’d come in as a schoolmarm with an ailing mother, that’s if she were to get a job at all. A schoolmarm who was freewheeling down to thirty. Not something that was going to light many fireworks. Stop dreaming, Angela, head down, foot down, pedal on, only a few more minutes now, the worst bit is over, you’re past the blasts of wind from the gap in the cliff. You can see the light in the window.

People called it a cottage because it looked small from

the front but in fact there was an upstairs. It was white-washed and had the formal little garden with its boxed hedge and tiny path up to the door.

She wondered how they had all fitted there when her father was alive, when they were children, they must have been crowded. But then her parents had slept in one room upstairs, the three girls in another and Sean, the only boy, in the third. And downstairs the room which she had now made into a bedroom for her mother had been a kind of sitting room she supposed. There had been no books in it in those days, there had been no shining brass ornaments, no little bunches of flowers or bowls of heather and gorse like she had nowadays. But of course in those times the small house had been home for a drunk, an overworked and weary mother and four youngsters all determined to get away from it as soon as possible. How could there have been time for the luxury of books and flowers?

Her mother was sitting on the commode where Angela had put her before going up to the Powers'. She had dropped her stick and the other chair was too far away so she had nothing to support her and couldn't get up. She was uncomplaining, and apologetic. Angela emptied the chamberpot and put Dettol in it, she got a basin of soapy water and a cloth for her mother and helped her to wash herself and put on powder. Then she slipped the flannel nightdress that had been warming on the fireguard over her mother's small bent head and helped her to the bed in the room adjoining the kitchen. She handed her the rosary beads, her glass of water and put the clock where she

could see it. She didn't kiss her mother, they weren't a kissing family. She patted her on the folded hands instead. Then Angela O'Hara went back into the kitchen and took out the essays which would be handed back next day. There was no doubt about the winner, that had been obvious all along, but she wanted to write a little paragraph on the end of all the others. They had done the essay in their free time to enter for the prize that she had provided. She wanted to give them some encouragement, some visible proof that she had read them, even the illiterate ones.

She wet a pot of tea and settled down with the wind howling outside and very shortly the sound of her mother's gentle snores about ten feet away.

Clare O'Brien had arrived early at school. The back of her neck was almost washed away, such a scrubbing had it got. The stain on her school tunic was almost impossible to see now, it had been attacked severely with a nail brush. Her indoor shoes were gleaming, she had even polished the soles, and the yellow ribbons were beautiful. She turned her head a few times to see them reflected in the school window, she looked as smart as any of the others, as good as the farmers' daughters who had plenty of money and got new uniforms when they grew too big for their old ones, instead of all the letting down and letting out and false hems that Clare and Chrissie had to put up with.

She thought the day would never start. It was going to



be such an excitement going up there in front of the whole school. And there would be gasps because she was so young. Years and years younger than some of them who had entered.

Chrissie would be furious of course, but that didn't matter, Chrissie was furious about everything, she'd get over it.

Clare walked to the end of the corridor to read the notice board. There was nothing new on it, maybe after this morning there might be a notice about the history prize. There was the timetable, the list of holidays of obligation during the year, the details of the educational tour to Dublin and also the price of it, which made it outside Clare's hopes. There was the letter from Father O'Hara, Miss O'Hara's brother who was a missionary. He was thanking the school for the silver paper and stamp collecting. He said he was very proud that the girls in his own home town had done so much to aid the great work of spreading Our Lord's word to all the poor people who had never heard of Him.

Clare couldn't remember Father O'Hara, but everyone said he was marvellous. He was very tall, taller than Miss O'Hara, and very handsome. Clare's mother had said that it would do your heart good to see him when he came back to say Mass in the church, and he was a wonderful son too, she said. He wrote to his mother from the missions, she often showed his letters to people – well, when she had been able to get out a bit she had.

Father O'Hara made the missions sound great fun

altogether. Clare wished he would write a letter every week. She wondered what did Miss O'Hara write to him. Would she tell him about the history prize this week?

There was Miss O'Hara now, coming in the gate on her bicycle. Mother Immaculata had a face like the nib of a pen.

'Could I have a word, Miss O'Hara, a little word please. That's if you can spare the time.'

One day, Angela promised herself, she would tell Mother Immaculata that she couldn't spare the time, she was too busy helping the seniors to run the potin still and preparing the third years for the white-slave traffic. But not yet. Not while she still had to work here. She put her bicycle in the shed and swept up the armful of essays wrapped in their sheet against the elements.

'Certainly Mother,' she said with a false smile.

Mother Immaculata didn't speak until they were in her office. She closed the door and sat down at her desk; the only other chair in the room was covered in books so Angela had to stand.

She decided she would fight back. If the nun was going to treat her as a disobedient child over some trivial thing as yet unknown, and let her stand there worrying, Angela was going to draw herself up so high that Mother Immaculata would get a crick in her neck looking up. Angela raised herself unobtrusively on to her toes, and stretched her neck upwards like a giraffe. It worked. Mother Immaculata had to stand up too.

'What is all this about a money prize for an essay

competition, Miss O'Hara? Can you explain to me how it came up and when it was discussed with me?

'Oh, I've given them an essay to do and I'm awarding a prize for the best one.' Angela smiled like a simpleton.

'But when was this discussed?' The thin pointed face quivered at the lack of respect, or anxiety at discovery.

'Sure, there'd be no need to discuss every single thing we did in class Mother, would there? I mean, would you ever get anything done if we came to you over what homework we were going to give them and all?'

'I do *not* mean that. I mean I need an explanation. Since when have we been paying the children to study?'

Angela felt a sudden weariness. It was going to be like this for ever. Any bit of enthusiasm and excitement sat on immediately. Fight for every single thing including the privilege of putting your hand into your own very meagre salary and giving some of it as a heady excitement which had even the dullards reading the history books.

It was like a slow and ponderous dance. A series of steps had to be gone through, a fake bewilderment. Angela would now say that she was terribly sorry, she had thought Mother Immaculata would be delighted, which was lies of course since she knew well that Immaculata would have stopped it had she got wind of it earlier. Then a fake display of helplessness, what should they do now, she had all the essays corrected, look here they were, and the children were expecting the results today. Then the fake supplication, could Mother Immaculata ever be kind enough to present the prize? Angela had it here in an

envelope. It was twenty-one shillings, a whole guinea. Oh and there was a subsidiary prize for another child who had done well, a book all wrapped up. And finally the fake gratitude and the even more fake promise that it would *never* happen again.

Mother Immaculata was being gracious now, which was even more sickening than when she was being hostile.

‘And who has won this ill-advised competition?’ she asked.

‘Bernie Conway,’ said Angela. ‘It was the best, there’s no doubt about that. But you know young Clare O’Brien, she did a terrific one altogether, the poor child must have slaved over it. I would like to have given her the guinea but I thought the others would pick on her, she’s too young. So that’s why I got her a book, could you perhaps say something Mother about her being . . .’

Mother Immaculata would agree to nothing of the sort. Clare O’Brien from the little shop down by the steps, wasn’t she only one of the youngest to enter for it? Not at all, it would be highly unsuitable. Imagine putting her in the same league as Bernie Conway from the post office, to think of singling out Chrissie O’Brien’s younger sister. Not at all.

‘But she’s nothing like Chrissie, she’s totally different,’ wailed Angela. But she had lost. The children were filing into the school hall for their prayers and hymn. Mother Immaculata had put her hand out and taken the envelope containing the guinea and the card saying that Bernadette Mary Conway had been awarded the Prize for Best

History Essay. Mother Immaculata left on her desk the neatly wrapped copy of Palgreave's *Golden Treasury* for Clare O'Brien for Excellence in History Essay Writing.

Angela picked it up and reminded herself that it was childish to believe that you could win everything.

Mother Immaculata made the announcements after prayers. Clare thought the words were never going to come out of the nun's thin mouth.

There were announcements about how the school was going to learn to answer Mass with Father O'Dwyer, not serve it of course, only boys could do that, but to answer it, and there must be great attention paid so that it would be done beautifully. And there was a complaint that those girls in charge of school altars were very lacking in diligence about putting clean water in the vases. What hope was there for a child who couldn't manage to prepare a clean vase for Our Lady? It was a very simple thing surely to do for the Mother of God. Then there was the business about outdoor shoes being worn in the classroom. Finally she came to it. Mother Immaculata's voice changed slightly. Clare couldn't quite understand – it was as if she didn't *want* to give the history prize.

'It has come to my notice, only this morning, that there is some kind of history competition. I am glad of course to see industry in the school. However, that being said, it gives me great pleasure to present the prize on behalf of the school.'

She paused and her eyes went up and down the rows of girls who stood in front of her. Clare smoothed the sides

of her tunic nervously. She must remember to walk slowly and not to run, she could easily fall on the steps leading up to the stage where Mother Immaculata, the other nuns and lay teachers stood. She would be very calm and she would thank Miss O'Hara and remember to thank Mother Immaculata as well.

'So I won't keep you in any further suspense . . . ?' Mother Immaculata managed to draw another few seconds out of it.

'The prize is awarded to Bernadette Mary Conway. Congratulations Bernadette. Come up here, child, and receive your prize.'

Clare told herself she must keep smiling. She must not let her face change. Just think about that and nothing else and she'd be all right. She concentrated fiercely on the smile; it sort of pushed her eyes up a bit and if there were any tears in them people wouldn't notice.

She kept the smile on as stupid Bernie Conway put her hand to her mouth over and over, and then put her hand on her chest. Her friends had to nudge her to get her to her feet. As she gasped and said it couldn't be true, Clare clenched her top teeth firmly on top of her lower teeth and smiled on. She saw Miss O'Hara looking round at the school and even looking hard at her. She smiled back hard. Very hard. She would never let Miss O'Hara know how much she hated her. She must be the meanest and most horrible teacher in the world – much meaner than Mother Immaculata – to tell Clare that she had won the prize, to

say all those lies about it being the best thing she had read in all her years teaching. Clare kept the smile up until it was time to file out of the hall and into their classrooms. Then she dropped it; it didn't matter now. She felt one of her ribbons falling off; that didn't matter now either.

The girls brought sandwiches to eat in the classroom at lunch, and they had to be very careful about crumbs for fear of mice. Clare had made big doorsteps for herself and Chrissie since her big sister was still in disgrace. But she hadn't the appetite for anything at all. She unwrapped the paper, looked at them and just wrapped them up again. Josie Dillon, who sat beside her, looked at them enviously.

'If you're sure?' she said as Clare passed them over wordlessly.

'I'm sure,' Clare said.

It was raining, so they couldn't go out in the yard. Lunchtimes indoors were awful, the windows were all steamed up and there was the smell of food everywhere. The nuns and teachers prowled from classroom to classroom seeing that the high jinks were not too high; the level of noise fell dramatically as soon as a figure of authority appeared and then rose slowly to a crescendo once more when the figure moved on.

Josie was the youngest of the Dillons, the others were away at a boarding school but it was said that they wouldn't bother sending Josie, she wasn't too bright. A big pasty girl with a discontented face – only when someone suggested food was there any animation at all.

‘These are lovely,’ she said with a full mouth to Clare. ‘You’re cracked not to want them yourself.’

Clare smiled a watery smile.

‘Are you feeling all right?’ Josie showed concern. ‘You look a bit green.’

‘No, I’m fine,’ Clare said. ‘I’m fine.’ She was saying it to herself rather than to Josie Dillon who was busy opening up the second sandwich and looking into it with pleasure.

Miss O’Hara came into the classroom and the noise receded. She gave a few orders: pick up those crusts at once, open the window to let in some fresh air, no it didn’t matter how cold and wet it was, open it. How many times did she have to say put the books away *before you* start to eat. And suddenly, ‘Clare, can you come out here to me a minute.’

Clare didn’t want to go, she didn’t want to talk to her ever again. She hated Miss O’Hara for making such a fool of her, telling her that she’d won the prize and building up her hopes. But Miss O’Hara had said it again. ‘Clare. Now, please.’

Unwillingly she went out into the corridor which was full of people going to and from the cloakrooms getting ready for afternoon classes. The bell would ring any moment now.

Miss O’Hara put her books on a window sill right on top of the Sacred Heart altar. There were altars on nearly every window sill and each class was responsible for one of them.

‘I got you another prize, because yours was so good. It



was really good and if you had been competing with people nearer your own age you'd have won hands down. So anyway I got this for you.' Miss O'Hara handed her a small parcel. She was smiling and eager for Clare to open it. But Clare would not be bought off with a secret prize.

'Thank you very much, Miss O'Hara,' she said and made no attempt to untie the string.

'Well, aren't you going to look at it?'

'I'll open it later,' she said. It was as near to being rude as she dared to go, and in case it had been just that bit too much she added, 'Thank you very much.'

'Stop sulking, Clare, and open it.' Miss O'Hara's voice was firm.

'I'm not sulking.'

'Of course you are, and it's a horrible habit. Stop it this minute and open up the present I bought you so generously out of my own money.' It was an order. It also made Clare feel mean. Whatever it was she would be very polite.

It was a book of poetry, a book with a soft leather cover that had fancy flowers painted on it with gold-leaf paint. It was called *The Golden Treasury Verse*. It was beautiful.

Some of the sparkle had come back into the small face with the big eyes. 'Open the book now and see what I wrote.' Angela was still very teacherish.

Clare read the inscription aloud.

'That's the first book for your library. One day when you have a big library of books you'll remember this one, and you'll take it out and show it to someone, and you'll

say it was your first book, and you won it when you were ten.'

'Will I have a library?' Clare asked excitedly.

'You will if you want to. You can have anything if you want to.'

'Is that true?' Clare felt Miss O'Hara was being a bit jokey, her voice had a tinny ring to it.

'No, not really. I wanted to give you this in front of the whole school, I wanted Immaculata to give it to you, but she wouldn't. Make you too uppity or something. No, there's a lot of things I want and don't get, but that's not the point, the point is you must go out and try for it, if you don't try you can't get anything.'

'It's beautiful.' Clare stroked the book.

'It's a grand collection, much nicer than your poetry book in class.'

Clare felt very grown up: Miss O'Hara saying 'Immaculata' without 'Mother' before it. Miss O'Hara saying their poetry textbook wasn't great! 'I'd have bought a book anyway if I'd won the guinea,' she said forgivingly.

'I know you would, and that eejit of a Bernie Conway will probably buy a handbag or a whole lot of hairbands. What happened to those nice yellow ribbons you were wearing this morning?'

'I took them off, and put them in my schoolbag. They seemed wrong.'

'Yes, well maybe they'll seem right later on, you know.'

'Oh they will, Miss O'Hara. Thank you for the beautiful book. Thank you, *really*.'

Miss O'Hara seemed to understand. Then she said suddenly, 'You *could* get anywhere you wanted, Clare, you know, if you didn't give up and say it's all hopeless. You don't have to turn out like the rest of them.'

'I'd love to . . . well, to get on you know,' Clare admitted. It was out, this thing that had been inside for so long and never said in case it would be laughed at. 'But it would be very hard, wouldn't it?'

'Of course it would, but that's what makes it worth doing, if it were easy then every divil and dirt could do it. It's because it's hard it's special.'

'Like being a saint,' Clare said, eyes shining.

'Yes, but that's a different road to go down. Let's see if you can get you an education first. Be a mature saint not a child saint, will you?'

The bell rang, deafening them for a moment.

'I'd prefer not to be a child saint all right, they're usually martyred for their faith, aren't they?'

'Almost invariably,' Miss O'Hara said, nearly sweeping the statue of the Sacred Heart with her as she gathered her books for class.

Chrissie and her two desperate friends Peggy and Kath had planned a visit to Miss O'Flaherty's to apologise. Gerry Doyle had apparently told Chrissie last night that this was the best thing to do by far. After all, she knew it was them, they'd all been caught and punished by their parents, why not go in and say sorry, then Miss O'Flaherty would have to forgive them or else everyone would say she was a mean

old bag who held a grudge. Chrissie hadn't gone along with this in the beginning but Gerry had been very persuasive. What could they lose, he argued? They didn't need to *mean* they were sorry, they only needed to say it, and then it would take the heat off them all so that they could get on with the plans for the party in the cave, otherwise they would all be under house arrest. Do it soon, and put your heart and soul into it, had been Gerry's advice. Grown-ups loved what they thought were reformed characters. Lay it on good and thick.

Clare was surprised to see the threesome stop outside Miss O'Flaherty's shop. She was sure they'd have scurried past but they were marching in bold as brass. She pretended to be looking at the flyblown window display that had never changed as long as she knew it, but she wanted to hear what was coming from inside the shop.

The bits that she heard were astonishing. Chrissie was saying something about not being able to sleep last night on account of it all, Peg was hanging her head and saying she thought it was a joke at the time but the more she thought of it, it wasn't a bit funny to frighten anyone. And Kath said that she'd be happy to do any messages for Miss O'Flaherty to make up for it.

Miss O'Flaherty was a big confused woman with hair like a bird's nest. She was flabbergasted by the apology and had no idea how to cope.

'So anyway, there it is,' Chrissie had said, trying to finish it up. 'We're all as sorry as can be.'

‘And of course we’re well punished at home,’ added Kath. ‘But that’s no help to you, Miss O’Flaherty.’

‘And maybe if our mothers come in you might say that we . . .’

Miss O’Flaherty had a jar of biscuits out. There would be no more said about it. They were harmless skitters of girls when all was said and done, and they had the good grace to come and admit their wrongdoing. They were totally forgiven. She would tell all their mothers. They skipped out of the shop free souls again. Clare was disgusted with them. Miss O’Flaherty was horrible and she deserved to be terrified with bits of seaweed. Why were they saying sorry now at this late stage? It was a mystery.

She didn’t get much enlightenment from Chrissie, who was annoyed to see her.

‘I’m sorry, Peg and Kath, but my boring sister seems to be following us around.’

‘I’m not following you, I’m coming home from school,’ Clare said. ‘I have to come home this way, it’s too windy to walk on the cliff road.’

‘Huh,’ said Kath.

‘Listening,’ said Peg.

‘You’re so *lucky* that you don’t have any sisters younger than you,’ Chrissie said. ‘It’s like having a knife stuck into you to have a younger sister.’

‘I don’t see why. We don’t think Ben and Jimmy are like knives,’ Clare argued.

‘They’re normal,’ Chrissie said. ‘Not following you

round with whinges and whines day in day out.’ The other two nodded sympathetically.

Clare dawdled and looked into the drapery. She knew everything off by heart in that window too. The green cardigan on the bust had been there for ever, and the boxes of hankies slightly faded from the summer sun were still on show. Clare waited there until the others had rounded the corner. Then she walked slowly on down the street towards the big gap in the cliffs where the steps went down to the beach, back home to O’Brien’s shop which everyone said should be a little gold mine since it was perched on the road going down to the sea. It was the last shop you saw before you got to the beach so people bought their oranges and sweets there, it was the first shop you met on the way back with your tongue hanging out for an ice cream or a fizzy drink. It was the nearest place if you sent a child back up the cliff for reinforcements on a sunny day. Tom O’Brien should be making a small fortune there people said, nodding their heads. Clare wondered why people thought that. The summer was the same length for the O’Briens as for everyone else. Eleven weeks. And the winter was even longer and colder because they were so exposed to the wind and weren’t as sheltered as people all along Church Street.

Molly Power said that it was lonely for David having no friends of his own and perhaps they should let him ask a friend to stay. The doctor thought that there were plenty of young lads in the town, boys he had played with before

he went off to boarding school. But Molly said it wasn't the same at all, and shouldn't they let him ring his friend James Nolan in Dublin and invite him for a few days. His family could put him on the train and they could meet him. David was delighted, it would be great to have Nolan to stay, Nolan had sounded very pleased on the phone. He said it would be good to get away from home, he hadn't realised how mad his relations were. They must have got worse since he'd gone to boarding school and he hadn't noticed. David told him it would be very quiet after the bright lights of Dublin. Nolan said the lights of Dublin weren't as bright as that, and his mother wouldn't let him go to the pictures in case he got fleas. He couldn't wait to get to the seaside.

'And will my class increase by a hundred per cent?' Angela O'Hara asked him when she heard that Nolan was coming to stay.

David hadn't thought of that. He didn't know. It was something he hadn't given any thought to.

'Never mind.' Angela had been brisk. 'I'll sort it out with your parents. But we had a plan for twenty days' work to cover the time you were at home, if Mr Nolan arrives that will cut six days out of it. What are you going to do? Abandon it or try to do the work anyway?'

He was awkward and she rescued him.

'I think you'd rather not have Nolan seeing you taught lessons by a woman. It's a bit like a governess, a country schoolteacher coming to the house.'

'Oh no, heavens, nothing like that.' David's open face

was distressed. ‘Honestly, if you knew how much I’ve learned since working with you, I’d be afraid to let on in case they’d never send me back to the school again, they’d put me into the convent here.’

He was a mixture of charm and awkwardness. It was very appealing. The image of his bluff kind father and yet with a bit of polish that must have come from his mother thrown in.

‘Why don’t I set out a bit of work for you and Mr Nolan to do each day. Say an hour and a half or two hours. I’ll correct it, without coming in on top of you at all, and that way there’s no embarrassment.’

The relief flooded his face.

‘Is Mr Nolan as bad at Latin as you are?’ she asked.

‘A bit better, I think. He’s going to need it too you see, he’s going to do Law.’

‘Is his father a barrister?’

‘A solicitor,’ David said.

‘That makes it nice and easy,’ she said with a bitter little laugh.

David was puzzled, but she changed the subject. It wasn’t David Power’s fault that the system was the way it was. A system that made it natural that David Power should be a doctor like *his* father, and James Nolan of Dublin a solicitor like his father, but made it very hard for Clare O’Brien to be anything at all. Angela squared her shoulders: hard, but not impossible. Hadn’t Clare the best example in the land sitting teaching her? Angela, youngest daughter of Dinny O’Hara, the drunk, the ne’er-do-well,



the man looking for every handout in Castlebay. And she had got the Call to Training, and higher marks in the college than any other student, and they had scrimped to send her brother to the missions, and she had nieces and nephews in comfortable homes in England. Nobody in the town could pity them when they walked behind her father's coffin five years ago. If Angela could do it with a drunken father and a crippled mother, then Clare could do it. If she cared enough, and today it looked as if she cared almost too much.

'So, College Boy,' she said to David, 'let's get on with the hedge school before the gentry come down from Dublin and catch us with our love for books!'

'You're great, Miss O'Hara,' David said admiringly. 'Wasn't it a pity you weren't a man, you could have been a priest and taught us properly.'

Molly Power was very anxious that things should be done right for David's young friend, and there were endless instructions to Nellie about breakfast on trays and getting out the best silverware until David begged that they just come downstairs as usual. Then they'd have to do their homework for Miss O'Hara before they felt free, but what a long day stretched ahead. Nolan loved the beach being so near, it was almost like having your own private swimming place, he said enviously, to be able to climb over a stile at the end of the garden and have a path going down to the sand and the caves. A path with *Danger* written all over it. Nolan tried out the Echo Cave and the

other smaller caves. He wore Wellington boots and slid and scrambled over the rock pools, he picked up unusual shells, he walked out to the end of the cliff road to see if the Puffing Hole was blowing. He walked the course on the golf links and planned that he and David should take lessons next summer. He couldn't believe they were allowed to go to the cinema at night. In Dublin he had only been to matinees and that was before his mother had heard of all the fleas.

Nolan was very popular in Castlebay. He was so handsome for one thing, small, with pointed features and hair that didn't stick out in angles like David's but fell in a sort of wave across the front of his forehead. He had very sharp eyes which seemed to see everything, and he wore his clothes with style, turning up his collars and striding round with his hands buried deep in his pockets. He used to joke about being short and said that he suffered from a small-man complex like Napoleon and Hitler.

He was polite to Mrs Power and insatiable for medical details from Dr Power. He praised Nellie's cooking and he said that he thought Castlebay was the most beautiful place in Ireland. In no time he was an honoured guest. Even Angela O'Hara liked him. He wrote out his preparation dutifully in small neat writing, and Angela had immediately sent him a note on the first batch of corrected work: 'Kindly make your writing much less fancy and much more clear. I have no idea whether or not you have written the correct ending on the cases of the nouns. I will not be mocked.'

‘She must be quite a character, why don’t we meet her?’ he asked David.

David wasn’t really sure, but he knew that it somehow reflected discredit on him. ‘She’s shy,’ he lied, and felt worse.

Next day they saw a figure like a dervish flying past on a red bicycle. The machine did a dangerous turn and an envelope of papers was thrown from the basket to David.

‘Here you are, College Boy, save me facing the winds over your way.’

David caught them neatly.

‘This is the man who doesn’t know the neuter plural from a hole in the ground,’ she shouted cheerfully. ‘You’ve got to make the adjectives plural too, my friend. No use just throwing them there and hoping they’ll decline themselves.’

‘Can’t you come and teach us up at the house?’ Nolan called out flirtatiously.

‘Ah, too much to do, but aren’t we doing fine by correspondence course?’ Her hair stretched out behind her in the wind, blowing like someone in an open car in a film. She wore a grey coat and a grey and white scarf.

‘She’s gorgeous,’ breathed Nolan.

‘Miss O’Hara?’ David said in disbelief. ‘She’s as old as the hills.’

They were still laughing over what age Miss O’Hara would be when Nolan was twenty-five, the age he thought he might take a bride, when they met Gerry Doyle. He had Wellingtons and a fisherman’s jersey and somehow he

seemed much more suitable for the place than they were. Gerry was about the only one who would ever ask him what his boarding school was like, and what they had to eat and what kind of cars fellows' parents had.

'I was thinking they might burn that school of yours down if it has the plague,' Gerry said agreeably. He thought it was all more serious than they were being told, plague and pestilence and scarlet fever, otherwise why would they close down a big important school? He suggested too that they should look out for germs when they got back, in stagnant pools or in the curtains.

David made a mental note to talk to his father about it when he got home.

'Do you want to come to a midnight feast, isn't that the kind of thing you have in your place all the time, before the plague and all?'

'I was at one and we were caught,' David said sadly.

'I was at that and another, the other wasn't caught,' Nolan said as a matter of record.

'Yes well, tomorrow night in the Seal Cave starting at eleven-thirty. If you could bring a few sausages and your own bottle of orange or even beer.'

'Can we?' Nolan's eyes were shining.

'Why not? This is Castlebay, this isn't a backwater like Dublin,' David said bravely, and Gerry Doyle told them that there'd be girls and tins of beans and sausages . . .

Gerry Doyle had told Chrissie not to say a word to Tommy and Ned about the party in the cave. It wasn't that he had anything against them but they were the kind who

could accidentally let something slip. He wasn't even telling his own sister, he said, because she was the same. Chrissie was pleased that Fiona wasn't coming and so were Peggy and Kath. Fiona looked a bit too attractive for their taste; she was fourteen of course, which would make her look a lot better, just automatically, than the rest of them but still they all felt a bit second best when Fiona was there. And of course Chrissie wouldn't think for a moment that Tommy and Ned should be invited, they were far too uncertain – they'd wonder aloud for days and in the end they'd all be found out and the picnic in the cave would be stopped. Gerry had said that there'd be about a dozen of them or so, no point in alerting the whole town. They were to meet there at eleven-thirty, and everyone was to try to make their own way in twos and threes at most. So as not to be noticed.

Clare stirred in her bed when she saw Chrissie's legs swing to the floor on the other side of the room. To her surprise, Chrissie was fully dressed. She was moving very quietly and feeling round for her shoes. The light of the Sacred Heart lamp fell on her as she was picking up what looked like a great lump of sausages and rashers from the shop! Chrissie was actually wrapping these stealthily in white paper and darting nervous glances at Clare's bed.

In a flash Clare understood she was running away. In a way this was great. She would have a bedroom to herself, she wouldn't be tortured by Chrissie morning noon and night any more. There would be less rows at home. But in another way it wasn't great. Mammy and Daddy were

going to be very upset and the Guards would be here in the morning and Father O'Dwyer and people would walk along the cliffs when the tide came in looking for a body as they always did whenever anything happened in Castlebay. And there would be prayers for her and Mammy would cry and cry and wonder where she was and how she was faring. No, Clare sighed reluctantly, better not to let her run away, it was going to be more trouble than it was worth.

Chrissie looked at her suspiciously when she heard the sigh.

'Are you running away?' Clare asked casually.

'Oh God in heaven, what a sorrow it is to have such a stupid sister. I'm going to the toilet, you thick turnip you.' But there was fear in her voice.

'Why are you dressed up in your clothes and taking sausages and bacon if you're just going to the toilet?' Clare asked mildly.

Chrissie sat down on the bed, defeated. 'Oh, there's an awful lot of things I'd like to do to you, you're a spy, you were born a spy, it was written on you plainly, you'll never do anything else except follow people round and make their lives a misery. You hate me and so you destroy everything I do.'

'I don't hate you, not really hate,' Clare said. 'If I hated you properly wouldn't I let you run away.'

Chrissie was silent.

'But Mammy would be desperately upset and Dad too, I mean they're going to be crying and everything. It's not

that I'm spying, I just thought I'd ask where you were going in case they think you're dead or something.'

'I'm not running away. I'm going out for a walk,' Chrissie said.

Clare sat up in her small iron bed. 'A *walk*?' she said.

'Shush. Yes, a walk, and we're going to have a bit of a meal on it.'

Clare raised herself up and looked out the window behind the Sacred Heart statue and the little red lamp. It was pitch dark outside. Not a thing stirred in Castlebay. 'Are Peggy and Kath going too?'

'Shush. Yes. And Clare . . .'

'Is it a picnic?'

'Yes, but you're not coming, you're not going to spoil every single thing I'm doing, you're not going to ruin it for me.'

'Oh, that's all right if it's only a picnic.' Clare had snuggled down under the blankets again. 'I just didn't want the fuss if you ran away. That's all.'

There was a small red travelling clock on the kitchen mantelpiece. David took it to bed with him. Nolan said that he'd wake all right in the spare room but David didn't want to take any chances. The clock was under David's pillow and its alarm was muted but it woke him from a deep sleep. For a while he couldn't think what was happening, and then he remembered. He had the bottle of cider and the sausages packed neatly in his school gym and games bag. Nolan had bought four bottles of stout and

two packets of marshmallow biscuits which he said were great if you toasted them over a fire. Gerry Doyle had said there would be a bonfire in the back of the Seal Cave and that they knew it would work because they had tried it out already. There was a part of the cave which was perfect for it.

The only problem was Bones, the dog. David's father said that Bones would go up and lick the paws of any intruder or assassin but he'd bark the house down if you went in or out yourself. He was more of a liability than a watchdog. David and Nolan had decided to bring Bones with them to the midnight feast. It was either that or drug him and though Nolan preferred the notion of knocking him out for a few hours David had been too strictly brought up, in a house where even aspirins were locked away, to think that this was remotely possible.

He crept into the spare room and Nolan was indeed dead asleep but woke eagerly.

'I was only thinking with my eyes shut,' he said.

'Sure, and snoring with them shut too,' David said.

They shushed each other and crept down the stairs. Bones jumped up in delight and David closed his hand around the dog's jaw while stroking his ear at the same time. This usually reduced Bones to a state of foolish happiness and by the time Nolan had eased open the door they were safe. Bones trotted down the garden to the back wall ahead of them, finding nothing unusual in the hour. David and Nolan with their torches in their pockets stumbled. They couldn't shine a light until they were over



the stile, it would surely be the one moment that David's mother was going to the bathroom and would look out the window and then waken the neighbourhood.

But down the path which said Danger they used their torches, and slipped and slid more than they walked. It was dry now but it had been raining earlier and the twisty path had a lot of mud.

'This is fantastic,' Nolan said, and David swelled with pride. When they got back to school Nolan would tell everyone of the terrific time he had in Power's place and the others would look at him with respect. He had always been slow to tell people about Castlebay, it sounded like such a backwater compared to the great places they all came from, but looking at it through Nolan's eyes he realised there was much more to it than he had thought.

Down on the beach Bones ran round like a mad thing, up to the edge of the sea and back again, barking excitedly, but he could bark for ever down here, the sound of the waves crashing and the wind whistling would carry it far away. Dr and Mrs Power wouldn't even hear it in their dreams.

The Seal Cave was dark and mysterious-looking. David was quite glad he wasn't on his own. There was a big fire at the back; Gerry was right, there *was* a part of it that was dry and not dripping with slime. They had begun the cooking and rashers dangled dangerously on long sticks and a couple of toasting forks. There were at least a dozen people around the fire. There were giggling girls nudging each other and breaking into loud laughter. That was Peg

and Kath, he knew them to see; and Chrissie O'Brien from the shop. David looked around for Clare but she was too young probably. Chrissie couldn't be more different to Clare, he thought. Screeching with laughter and knocking the food off other people's forks. Clare was solemn and much gentler somehow.

David had never had stout before, but the others were drinking it. It almost made him throw up, it didn't taste like a drink should taste. Manfully he finished one bottle and began another. Nolan seemed to like it and he didn't want to look a sissy. Gerry Doyle seemed to notice though.

'You could have some champagne cider if you liked, it's a different taste, nice sort of drink,' he suggested.

David sipped some: now this was more like it. Sweet and fizzy, very nice indeed.

Gerry, small and eager, was hunched up over the fire. He looked very knowledgeable.

David held his glass up to the light, 'It's good stuff this,' he said appreciatively.

Later when he was getting nowhere after the groping had begun, Gerry marked his card again. No use trying anything with that one, she just laughed all the time. There was the one who would be more co-operative. A manly wink which David returned unsteadily. Gerry Doyle was a good friend to steer you in the right direction.

There were mystery ailments all over Castlebay next day, but against all the odds nobody broke ranks and the midnight feast was never discovered. Chrissie O'Brien had

come back home covered in mud with cuts all down her legs where she had fallen coming up the steps from the strand, and she was sick twice into a chamberpot in the bedroom. Clare said grumpily she hoped that these midnight feasts weren't going to be going on all the time. Chrissie was too busy plotting the morrow and how she would explain her ripped and mud-covered coat, to answer Clare. In the end she decided she would go out early before anyone saw the state she was in and then she could fall again and be considered too sick to go to school. It worked too, nobody noticed that half the mud had dried and the scabs on her legs had started to heal. Chrissie's friend Peggy managed to get to school and stick the day but Kath had been sick in the classroom and had to be sent home.

Up in Power's house there seemed to be no explanation for the burn that had appeared as if by magic on James Nolan's mouth. In fact it had come from his eating a sausage directly from the long bit of skewer it was cooked on, but it was announced as being something that had come upon him unexpectedly during the night. Molly Power worried endlessly what his parents would say when he got back and fussed interminably about it when she wasn't fussing about David who was as white as a sheet and had to go to the bathroom every few minutes. The third peculiar thing in the house was Bones. He had apparently let himself out in the night and was found asleep in the garage with a cooked sausage in his paws. Dr Power told her that in the long run it was often better not

to think too hard and try too earnestly to solve all problems. Sometimes it was better for the brain to let things pass.

Gerry Doyle's father told him at breakfast that there had been terrible caterwauling in the middle of the night and did he know anything about it? It sounded like a whole lot of women or girls crying on the doorstep. Gerry looked at him across the table and said that he thought he had heard that mad dog of the doctor's wailing and baying around the town during the night – could that have been it? It could, his father thought doubtfully and sniffed around him. 'This place smells like Craig's Bar,' he said to his wife and stamped off to what they all called his office, the front room beside the main bedroom. Gerry's mother got annoyed and started to slam out the breakfast dishes in a temper.

'Brush your teeth for heaven's sake, Gerry, and eat an orange or something before you go to school.' Fiona was not only kind she was practical.

Gerry looked at her gratefully. 'I had a feeling there might be a bit of a trace,' he grinned.

'Trace?' said Fiona. 'You nearly knocked us all out. Was it great fun?'

'It was in a way.'

'I wish you'd have let me . . .'

'No.' He was very firm.

'But I'm older even than some of them who were there.'

'That's not the point. You're not that type. No one must

ever say that anyone was messing around with *you*. You are all I've got, I've to look after you.'

He was serious. Fiona looked taken aback.

'You've got all of us . . . like we all have . . .' she said uncertainly.

'What have we got? We've got Dad, who lives in his own world. When did Dad say anything that wasn't about the business?'

'He just mentioned Craig's Bar, didn't he?' Fiona laughed.

'Yes.' Absent-mindedly he took a peppermint out of his pocket and unwrapped it.

'What's wrong?' she asked, her big dark eyes troubled.

'I don't know. It's just he's so dull and unadventurous. How are we ever going to get on if we stay as timid as he is? And Mam . . . Well, honestly.'

'She's a bit better, I think,' Fiona said softly. They had not talked about this before.

'She's not. You say that because she went out to the garden and hung out the clothes. You think that's some kind of success. She hasn't been out of the house for six months. Six months. Tell me if that's normal or not normal.'

'I know. But what can we do? They don't want to tell Dr Power.'

'It's all his fault, he thinks that if we tell Dr Power there's going to be some kind of trouble.'

At that moment, Mr Doyle reappeared, small and dark like his son, with the same quick smile and almost elfin

face. 'I'm only wondering does anyone in this house intend to go to school or have we all graduated without my knowing about it?'

'I'm just off. Dad, I may be going past David Power's house, will I ask his father to come and have a word with . . .?'

'If anyone needs a doctor they'll go and see Dr Power and if they're not able to go, Dr Power will be brought to them,' said his father sternly. That was that. Gerry went to brush his teeth as had been suggested, and met his mother creeping along by the wall, alarmed by the word 'doctor'.

'Don't worry, Mary, go back into the kitchen, there's no need for a doctor,' his father said.

He called at the surgery that evening.

'Well, Gerry?'

'I don't know, Dr Power.'

'It can't be too serious an ailment if you've forgotten it already.' The old doctor was cheerful.

'It wasn't an ailment at all.'

'Good, good. Was it something wrong with someone else?' The man's eyes were sharp.

Gerry seemed to hesitate. 'No, I suppose people have to look after their own illnesses, don't they?'

'It depends. If you saw a wounded man lying on the road you wouldn't say he'd better look after his own illness.'

'No, it's not like that.'

'Would you like to tell me what it is like?'

Gerry made up his mind. 'No, no. Not now. I came to know if David and James Nolan would like to go out this evening? For a bit of a laugh like?'

Dr Power was thoughtful. 'I think there's been enough laughs for the moment. I think it's time the laughing died down for those two and they got a bit of work done.'

Gerry looked him in the eye. 'Does that mean they can't come out? Is that what you're saying?'

'You're as bright as the next man, Gerry, you know what I'm saying, and not saying.'

'Right. Tell them I called and was sorry they weren't allowed out.'

'No, I won't, because that's not the message. Tell them yourself if you want to.'

Gerry Doyle's great skill was knowing when not to push it any further. 'You're a hard man, Dr Power,' he said with a grin, and he was off.

Paddy Power wondered whether he had been going to ask about his anxiety-ridden father or his withdrawn, possibly phobic mother. Maybe the boy hadn't noticed anything wrong with either of them. He was a funny lad.

A parcel arrived for Angela, a small flat box. It was a beautiful headscarf from the parents of James Nolan. 'Thank you so very much for all the help with tuition, your pupils in Castlebay must be very lucky to have such a gifted teacher.' It was a square with a very rich-looking pattern on it, the kind of thing a much classier woman would wear. Angela was delighted with it. She showed it

and the letter to her mother but it was a bad day and the old woman's joints were aching all over.

'Why shouldn't they be grateful to you, why shouldn't they send you something? It's money they should have sent. Doesn't the postman get paid for delivering letters?'

Angela sighed. She told David about it that evening. 'Wasn't it very thoughtful of them?' she said.

'They have great polite ways up in Dublin,' David said wistfully. 'We'd never have thought of giving you a thing like that, and we should have.'

'Don't be silly, College Boy. I was only telling you so that you'd know your friend appreciated the lessons and all that.'

'He thought you were very good-looking,' David said suddenly.

'I thought he wasn't bad himself, but a bit small for me. How old is he, about fifteen?'

'Yes, just.'

'Oh well, that's no difference at all, tell him I'll see him when he's about twenty-five, I'll be coming into my prime about then.'

'I think that would suit him fine,' David laughed.

It was shortly before the school re-opened that David met Gerry Doyle again.

'Have you had any good drinking nights since the cave?' Gerry asked.

'I think I'm going to be a Pioneer. I was never so sick. I was sick eleven times the next day,' David said truthfully.



‘Well at least you held on to it until you got home,’ Gerry said. ‘Which was more than some people managed. Still, it was a bit of a laugh.’

‘Great altogether. Nolan said he’d never had such a night.’

‘He was telling me you’ve got a record player of your own, a radiogram in your own bedroom, is that right?’

‘Not a radiogram with doors on it, but a record player yes, you plug it in.’

‘How much would they be?’ Gerry was envious.

‘I’m afraid I don’t know, it was a present, but I could ask.’

‘I’d love to see it,’ Gerry Doyle said.

David’s hesitation was only for a second. His mother had never *said* he wasn’t to have Gerry Doyle into the house but he knew she wouldn’t approve. ‘Come on, I’ll show you,’ he said.

Any other lad in Castlebay might have held back but not Gerry Doyle. He swung along the cliff road companionably with David as if he had been a lifetime calling on the doctor’s house socially.

The summer houses looked dead, as they passed, like ghost houses and it was hard to imagine them full of families with children racing in and out carrying buckets and spades, and people putting deckchairs up in the front gardens.

‘Wouldn’t you need to be cracked to rent one of those for the summer?’ Gerry nodded his head at the higgledy-piggledy line of homes.