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## END

She was born.

Small but healthy, a fortnight early. Through a soft misty rain on her third morning her father drove her home, slowly, swaddled tight against her mother's chest, her mother kissing her cheek over and over.

Her father's face was rough and tired from work and lack of sleep. He couldn't stay to see them get settled because he had to go straight to work, so he left his wife and his first child alone in their newbuilt bungalow in a small estate at the foot of the hill where he'd been raised, where all his people before him had farmed the land and lived their lives.

His heart was light as he drove away. He was doing his duty by his woman and this new woman who was his daughter, these two people he was sworn to provide for and protect. The obligation was heavy but would be worn lightly. He'd never shirk nor resent the burden of this work he had now to do. Everything had a glow about it, a sharp halo of pure light, and the long straight road between the village and the town stretched itself before his car obediently. The sun had pushed itself up across the new day, the rain had stopped and the clouds were washed and bright.

A figure in the distance, hunched and dark-suited, slouching towards the town, turned half around at the sound of his

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engine, and stood to wait. He slowed and stopped and reached across to open the passenger door from the inside and the man sat in, a man he knew, a man whose sons were his friends, whose daughter he'd courted for a while one long summer years ago, a man he liked and respected and who smelt on this spring morning like yesterday's drink, a smell safe and familiar, like apples windfallen and turning rotten.

God bless you, the man said. Any stir? And he smiled and told the man his news, and the man slapped his own knee and offered his bony hand across to shake the new father's hand, saying, Well now, well now, God is good, welcome to her, welcome to her, and may God be good to her all her days. What'll ye call her? I don't know yet. We don't know yet. Eileen wants to wait a little while. To see what name reveals itself, she says. And the passenger laughed then, high and loud, and slapped his knee again. That's a good one! Ha-ha thee, faith, I have it all heard now. Reveal itself! Well, anyway, it's as good a way as any. What's in a name? A rose by any other name would smell as sweet.

And they were laughing as the creamery truck rounded the only bend between the town and the village of the new father's ancestors, and thundered towards them wide of the centreline, a good shade too fast, and in a flash and a heartbeat both men ceased to be.

## BLOSSOMS

She was four in her earliest memory, or maybe just turned five.

It was springtime so it must have been near her birthday. The cherry blossom tree was heavily flowered at the edge of the small front garden; it was itself the greater part of the memory. Or maybe it was her birthday, because someone was taking a photograph and she was standing beneath the cherry blossom tree with sunlight dancing green and pink across the grass, her grandmother on one side of her and her mother on the other side, each of them holding one of her hands, as though they might at any moment start to tug in their opposite directions and pull her clean apart.

But that violence must have attached itself to the memory afterwards. She surely hadn't thought it at the time. What was clearest about the memory was their reflection in the long window at the front of the small house, how clear it was, the tartan of her mother's short skirt, the heavy grey of her grandmother's cardigan, the way they were linked to each other like a daisy chain. And the back of the man who was taking the photograph, long and white-shirted, his head bowed downwards to the old-fashioned camera that he had held out from himself, low down below his stomach.

Why did she remember the image of his back so clearly

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and not his front, his face? Why had she fixated on their reflection and not their realness? It never happened anyway, her mother told her years later, when she asked who the man was that had taken the photo. I can guarantee you, she said, that no man stood out there on that lawn and took a photograph of you and your grandmother and me. Where is it, so, if it really happened? The photograph. Did you ever see this famous photograph at your grandmother's house or here in this house or anywhere else for that matter?

She wondered why her mother was so adamant about the memory's falseness. She knew her mother was wrong, of course. It had really happened, almost exactly as she said, with just a few details up for argument, like whether or not it had been her birthday, and who the man was that her mother said never existed. It could have been one of her father's brothers, though neither of them had long backs, or some relative or other who had faded from their lives. It could have been a neighbour. It could, she supposed, have been a boyfriend of her mother's, though her mother denied that she'd ever entertained a suitor, even for a moment. Her husband might have been gone from this world but he was and always would be her husband and that was all there was to it now for good and for glory. The memory was real, though. The cherry blossom blazing pink, the grass warm under her feet, her grandmother's hand, her mother's soft hand.

## F R E E D O M

Saoirse was the name that revealed itself. Freedom. Once in the kitchen she heard her mother saying maybe it was foolish. A foolish choice. I wasn't in my right mind and Father Ambrose even asked me at the time was I sure and of course I said I was. He asked would I not consider Mary, after you, or Bridget, after my own mother. Maybe I should have, Mary, should I? If she ever goes to America the Yanks won't have a clue how to pronounce it.

But Nana retorted, Yerra Yanks my eye, what in the name of God and His Blessed Mother would cause you to worry about some Yank getting his tongue in a knot in some far distant time? What do you or any of us care about that shower? We owe the Yanks nothing, girl, least of all the consideration of pronounceable names. All they ever did was twist names to their own ease, anyway. That place is full of O'Brains and Mahonerys and Mulligrews and Contertys and names that never existed because the donkeys on Ellis Island couldn't be bothered their lazy arses to write down people's names properly that were falling starving off of the boats and nor could their descendants that got all the jobs in the offices giving out visas and such.

Nana went on and on for a while like that, and she started to pretend to be one of the people in the office in America

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where people went to have their names made shite of, talking in a loud put-on accent, and her mother was laughing so much she could hardly take a pull of her cigarette properly. Anyway, said Nana, when the laughing was over. We had no choice but to call her that good name. After all the battles our people fought along the years against the English to be free. There were martyrs made on every road of this country. And Saoirse pictured Nana on her daily walk the two miles down from the farm on the hillside above the village, praying for the dead that lined the road.

She saw then from where she was sitting at her jigsaw on the floor in the doorway between the kitchen and the sitting room, almost out of the sight of her mother and grandmother, that the two women were holding hands across the table, and they were looking down at their joined hands. She wished in that moment that she could join their sadness, for the man in the photos over the fireplace and along both sides of the hallway with the dark hair and blue eyes and shining smile, father to her, son and husband to the women in the kitchen, but she couldn't. She felt about him only a deep curiosity, about how he had ever existed above his grave and outside of his own photographs, how she was exactly half of him and half of her mother. It was all a wonder.

## FATHERS

Every other house in the small estate that had children in it also had a father, a living one.

None of them looked like they were of much use except for cutting grass with the same shared lawnmower, taking turns to cut the verges and the small green area at the front of the estate and the smaller green at the back. Most of them worked in the town four miles from the village, leaving in the mornings wearing jackets and coming home in shirtsleeves, smoking as they parked their cars. Some of them drove vans with their names on the sides or the names of businesses, advertising their services, a plumber, a carpenter, a wholesale butcher, an electrician.

The butcher had a smiling cow on the side of his van. The cow had long eyelashes and bright green eyes. Nana thought it was very funny that the cow looked so happy. Look at her off, God help us, as happy as the day is long, not knowing she's for the high road. The poor old cows have an awful life, you know. Pregnant nearly as long as they're alive, never by choice, and their children whipped from them one after the other.

One of the fathers cycled to work and his children would wait at the front of the estate for him every evening. Saoirse would watch them from the front window, sitting on the wide sill, leaning her forehead against the cool glass. They'd start to

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get excited when they heard the sawing creaking noise of his bicycle chain on its cogs, the smaller one, the boy, hopping from one foot to the other and pointing out to the main road at the junction near the estate's entrance.

When their father rounded the corner at the junction and was in their sights they'd run towards him shouting, Daddy! Daddy! Daddy! at the tops of their voices, reedy and shrill, and she would sometimes hear her grandmother say to her mother, Will you listen to those children, the screeching out of them. What in the hell has them so excited? The same commotion every single day. I'd say they're a bit touched. Eileen, are those two children of the Joneses imbeciles or what are they? They couldn't be the full shilling anyway. Running out onto the main road like two leverets. You'd think the mother or the father would have them warned against doing that. Lord. Some people haven't a dust.

Living fathers, then, weren't much of a thing. Better to have a mother who smoked and wore sunglasses even when it wasn't sunny and had long hair, not like the other mothers whose hair was mostly short like their husbands', and a grandmother who was your mother's mother-in-law who walked down to see you nearly every day, and a father who was dead, forever young, sitting on a chair at a table with his own father and all his dead relations, playing cards, waiting for Judgement Day.

## POISON

It came in a letter.

One sunny day as she was lying on her stomach on the grass in the back garden, watching a beetle's black and purple back as it climbed a furry stalk towards the flat green leaves of a strawberry plant, Mother shouted from the kitchen, BASTARD! The sound of it travelled through the small house and out of the back door to the little garden, over the scraggly thorny bushes and the butterflies, the potato patch gone wild with weeds, the dandelions that turned from yellow umbrellas into fairies made of cottony light and flew away with one breath. All across that tangled city, that world of humming peace where a million tiny creatures lived their lives, all of which she loved, even the wasps, Mother's shout rolled and broke like a thunderclap and even the grass seemed to shiver in fright.

She rose to her feet and moved along the garden and the gable wall to the open kitchen door where she stood. Mother's and Nana's heads were nearly touching across the table, and smoke from cigarettes and steam from cups of tea ascended towards the ceiling in wispy, twisting clouds. One of Mother's hands was holding out a sheet of paper and the other hand was over her eyes and Nana was reaching for the letter. She raised her chin to read it through the bottom part of her glasses. Her

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head moved from side to side. As Saoirse crept closer to the door she could hear, softer now, almost in a whisper, her mother saying, Poison. Jesus Christ almighty, isn't that pure poison? How could he do this to me? My own brother. And I adored him, you know, I adored him. I'd have died and gone to Hell for him. How could my family believe such evil things?

And Saoirse heard her mother's voice breaking, cracking into pieces that came out of her in a line of ohs, oh, oh, oh. And Nana then, shushing her. Shush now, girl. Don't let the child hear you. Here, look, there's only one place for this kind of a thing. And Nana rising then and moving from her view towards the side of the kitchen, and the sound of the stove door being opened, and then slammed closed again. Now. That's the end of that foulness. Don't even think about it ever again. Anyone that blackens another like that will have to account for their words before Our Lord. And how will they explain themselves? Lies are the devil's language, and greed is grist for his mill.

Best to crawl back to the garden. To blow the dandelion fairies into the blue sky. To leave to the big people all the words so poisonous that they needed to be burnt in the stove. Slut, whore, bastard. They were all just sounds. And Mother and Nana, if you only waited, would always start to laugh again, and the world would find again its perfect peace.

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## MYSTERIES

They'd always surface again, though, those mysteries.

Eavesdropping was a way to solve them, but it demanded patience. Clues were elusive. She tried to remember a time when her mother had sat with her and told her anything of any substance about her own life, about the life she must have had before she met Saoirse's father, about her childhood or her teenage years or early adulthood. Had she had many boy-friends? Had she ever been anywhere? England or Europe or even Dublin or Cork? Saoirse knew she'd gone to a private school in Limerick. Something Hill. A picture always occurred to Saoirse when she imagined her mother's schooldays, of her mother walking along an avenue of yellow flowering bushes in a pleated striped skirt and white-edged blazer and prim knee-high socks, a straw boater cocked sideways on her head, but she knew that she was superimposing images from her Malory Towers books and the girls of Saint Clare's on her ideas of Mother's girlhood.

She realized that she and her mother rarely spoke properly at all. That most of Mother's speech was indirect, utterances flung around like fistfuls of confetti, vaguely aimed and scattered randomly. But she supposed this to be the way of all parent and child relationships. Her mother told her every single night that she loved her. I love you, my doty, as she tucked her

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in. I love you, my little sweetheart. My jewel. My perfect girl. And when she was too old to be tucked in Mother would say the words as Saoirse went to her bedroom, drawing her towards her if she were sitting down, sometimes fully into her lap, even later when she was grown to nearly her mother's height, Good-night, doty, goodnight, my sweet love. That was surely enough.

Mother had Nana to speak to about the important and boring things that occupied older people's minds. They sat at the kitchen table and whispered at each other, and sometimes she would still herself and train her ears to the rhythms of their voices, picking out random words from the smoky air. Things about Paudie and Chris and what would become of them, and how they'd never manage to divide a living between them from the bit of a farm, and what would happen if one of them wed, or both of them, but there was little prospect of that anyway, thanks be to God, for the time being. About someone called Richard, and Mother would say the words Daddy, and Mammy, and Auntie Elizabeth, and ranks of grim-faced, dark-clothed phantoms would array themselves before Saoirse's inner eye, and string themselves out along the cold stony shore of Mother's past, her secret other life, their mouths downturned in disapproval. And Saoirse was content to wonder and speculate and to draw inside herself vistas of possibilities, to build a castle of towers and battlements and to let it fill with all of Mother's whispered ghosts, all the sorrowful mysteries of the world.

## BLACKBIRD

Something banged one summer evening against the glass of the front window.

Mother and Nana started up from their seats and hurried outside, Nana blessing herself as she went. Saoirse followed after them, scared and curious. At the front of the house Mother and Nana stood looking around but there was nothing, and no sign of anyone out on the road or in next door's garden or along the hill or over on the green. That was only someone blackguarding, Eileen, Nana said, young fellas probably, firing stones. But Mother didn't answer, she was standing at the window looking down at the line of flowers where the narrow walkway beneath the window met the lawn. Among a cluster of grinning pansies, its little neck bent and one tiny glass eye still reflecting the light of the sun, lay a blackbird, not much more than a hatchling. Oh, Mother was saying, oh, little darling, you silly little thing. Nana looked and rolled her eyes and dismissed the dead bird with a wave of her hand. At least it wasn't bowsies anyway, she said. I'd hate to think that there were bowsies pelting stones around the place.

Nana went back inside but Mother didn't move. He never got to live his life, the poor little love. Saoirse tried to speak but she wasn't able to make any sound: a painful lump had formed itself in her throat, like she'd swallowed a stone. Tears were

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falling from her eyes and pooling at her chin and dripping from there onto the front of her dress, and she could hear someone making a low moaning sound. She looked around to see who it was before she realized it was herself. Mother had knelt down and picked the dead bird up in her hands and she was lifting it towards her face as if to kiss it, when Nana re-appeared at the corner of the house and said, Eileen! Don't put that maggoty fecking thing near your mouth! God only knows what it was carrying!

But Mother pretended not to hear her, and she kissed the blackbird on its lifeless wing before laying it back on its peaty deathbed. Saoirse turned and ran for the road, Nana shouting after her, Where are you going? And she shouted back as she ran, The priest's house, so he can do the last rites! and she could hear Nana shouting, Don't you dream of going near Father Cotter and he not a wet week in the parish, he'll think we're all away with the fairies, looking for sacraments for birds!

But the priest didn't mind. He crossed the lake road back to the estate, holding Saoirse's hand in his, and Nana met them halfway down the avenue, apologizing for her granddaughter's terrible imposition, and he said it was none at all, and he whispered a prayer above the blackbird, and Mother dug down into the flowerbed with her trowel, and they laid the baby blackbird in the earth.