

1949

The kitchen was full of the smells of baking. Benny put down her school bag and went on a tour of inspection.

‘The cake hasn’t been iced yet,’ Patsy explained. ‘The mistress will do that herself.’

‘What are you going to put on it?’ Benny was eager.

‘I suppose Happy Birthday Benny.’ Patsy was surprised.

‘Maybe she’ll put Benny Hogan, Ten.’

‘I never saw that on a cake.’

‘I think it is, when it’s a big birthday like being ten.’

‘Maybe.’ Patsy was doubtful.

‘And are the jellies made?’

‘They’re in the pantry. Don’t go in poking at them, you’ll leave the mark of your finger and we’ll all be killed.’

‘I can’t believe I’m going to be ten,’ Benny said, delighted with herself.

‘Ah, it’s a big day all right.’ Patsy spoke absently as she

greased the trays for the queen cakes with a scrap of butter paper.

‘What did you do when you were ten?’

‘Don’t you know with me every day was the same,’ Patsy said cheerfully. ‘There was no day different in the orphanage until I came out of it and came here.’

Benny loved to hear stories of the orphanage. She thought it was better than anything she read in books. There was the room with the twelve iron beds in it, the nice girls, the terrible girls, the time they all got nits in their hair and had their heads shaved.

‘They must have had birthdays,’ Benny insisted.

‘I don’t remember them,’ Patsy sighed. ‘There was a nice nun who said to me that I was Wednesday’s child, full of woe.’

‘That wasn’t nice.’

‘Well, at least she knew I was born on a Wednesday . . . Here’s your mother, now let me get on with the work.’

Annabel Hogan came in carrying three big bags. She was surprised to see her daughter sitting swinging her legs in the kitchen.

‘Aren’t you home nice and early? Let me put these things upstairs.’

Benny ran over to Patsy when her mother’s heavy tread was heard on the stairs.

‘Do you think she got it?’

‘Don’t ask me, Benny, I know nothing.’

‘You’re saying that because you *do* know.’

‘I *don’t*. Really.’

‘Was she in Dublin? Did she go up on the bus?’

‘No, not at all.’

‘But she must have.’ Benny seemed very disappointed.

‘No, she’s not long gone at all . . . She was only up the town.’

Benny licked the spoon thoughtfully. It’s nicer raw,’ she said.

‘You always thought that.’ Patsy looked at her fondly.

‘When I’m eighteen and can do what I like, I’ll eat all my cakes uncooked,’ Benny pronounced.

‘No you won’t, when you’re eighteen you’ll be so busy getting thin you won’t eat cakes at all.’

‘I’ll always want cakes.’

‘You say that now. Wait till you want some fellow to fancy you.’

‘Do you want a fellow to fancy you?’

‘Of course I do, what else is there?’

‘What fellow? I don’t want you to go, anyway.’

‘I won’t get a fellow, I’m from nowhere, a decent fellow wouldn’t be able to talk about me and where I came from. I have no background, no life before, you see.’

‘But you had a *great* life,’ Benny cried. ‘You’d make them all interested in you.’

There was no time to discuss it further. Benny’s mother was back in the kitchen, her coat off and down to business with the icing sugar.

‘Were you in Dublin at all today, Mother?’

‘No, child, I had enough to do getting things ready for the party.’

‘It’s just I was wondering . . .’

‘Parties don’t run themselves, you know.’ The words sounded sharp but the tone was kindly. Benny knew her mother was looking forward to it all too.

‘And will Father be home for the cake bit?’

‘Yes, he will. We’ve asked the people for half past three, they’ll all be here by four, so we needn’t sit down to the tea until half past five, and we wouldn’t have got to the cake until your father has the business closed, and is back here.’

Benny’s father ran Hogan’s Outfitters, the big menswear shop in the middle of Knockglen. The shop was often at its busiest on a Saturday, when the farmers came in, or the men who had a half day themselves were marched in by wives to have themselves fitted out by Mr Hogan, or Mike the old assistant, the tailor who had been there since time immemorial. Since the days when young Mr Hogan had bought the business.

Benny was glad that her father would be there for the cake, because that was when she might be given her present. Father had said it was going to be a wonderful surprise. Benny *knew* that they must have got her the velvet dress with the lacy collar and the pumps to go with it. She had wanted it since last Christmas when they went to the pantomime in Dublin and she had seen the girls on the stage dancing in pink velvet dresses like this.

They had heard that they sold them in Clery’s, and that was only a few minutes from where the bus stopped when it went to Dublin.

Benny was large and square, but she wouldn't look like that in the pink velvet dress. She would be just like the fairy dancers they had seen on the stage, and her feet wouldn't look big and flat in those shoes because they had lovely pointy toes, and little pom-poms on them.

The invitations to the party had been sent out ten days ago. There would be seven girls from school, farmers' daughters mainly from outside Knockglen. And Maire Carroll, whose mother and father owned the grocery. The Kennedys from the chemist were all boys so they wouldn't be there, and Dr Johnson's children were all too young so they couldn't come either. Peggy Pine who ran the smart clothes shop said that she might have her young niece staying with her. Benny said she didn't want anyone they didn't know, and it was with some relief that they heard the niece Clodagh didn't want to go amongst strangers either.

Her mother had insisted she invite Eve Malone and that was bad enough. Eve was the girl who lived in the convent and knew all the nuns' secrets. Some people at school said look how Mother Francis never gives out to Eve, she's the real pet; others said the nuns had to keep her for charity and didn't like her as much as they liked the other girls whose families all contributed something to the upkeep of St Mary's.

Eve was small and dark. She looked like a pixie sometimes, her eyes darting here and there, forever watchful. Benny neither liked Eve nor disliked her. She envied her being so fleet and lithe and able to climb walls. She knew

that Eve had her own room in the convent, behind the curtain where no other girl was allowed to step. The girls said it was the room with the round window that faced down the town and that Eve could sit at the window and watch everyone and where they went and who they were with. She never went on holidays anywhere, she stayed with the nuns all the time. Sometimes Mother Francis and Miss Pine from the dress shop would take her on an outing to Dublin, but she had never stayed away a night.

Once, when they had gone on a nature walk, Eve had pointed to a small cottage and said that it was her house. It stood in a group of small houses, each separate and surrounded by a little stone wall. They looked down into the big disused quarry. When she was older she would live in it all on her own and there would be no milk allowed in the door, and no clothes hangers. She would put all her things on the floor because it was hers to do what she liked with.

Some of them were half afraid of Eve, so nobody denied the story, but nobody really believed it either. Eve was so strange, she could make up tales and then, when everyone had got interested, she would say, 'Fooled you'.

Benny didn't really want her to come to the party, but for once Mother had been insistent.

'That child has no home. She must come to this one when there's a celebration.'

'She *has* a home, Mother, she's got the run of the whole convent.'

'That's not the same. She's to come here, Benny, that's my last word.'

Eve had written a very neat correct letter saying that she accepted the invitation with pleasure.

‘They taught her to write nicely,’ Benny’s father had said approvingly.

‘They’re determined to make a lady out of her,’ Mother had said. No one would explain why it seemed so important.

‘When it’s her birthday she only gets holy pictures and holy water fonts,’ Benny reported. ‘That’s all the nuns have, you see.’

‘God, that would turn a few of them over in their graves up there under the yew trees,’ Benny’s father had said, but again there was no explanation of why.

‘Poor Eve, what a start for her,’ Benny’s mother sighed.

‘I wonder was she born on a Wednesday like Patsy?’ Benny was struck by something.

‘Why would that matter?’

‘She’d be miserable. Wednesday’s child is full of woe,’ Benny parroted.

‘Nonsense.’ Her father was dismissive.

‘What day was I born on?’

‘A Monday, Monday September 18th, 1939,’ her mother said. ‘At six o’clock in the evening.’

Her parents exchanged glances, looks that seemed to remember a long wait for a first and, as it turned out, an only child.

‘Monday’s child is fair of face,’ Benny said, grimacing.

‘Well, that’s true certainly!’ her mother said.

‘You couldn’t have a fairer face than Mary Bernadette

Hogan, spinster of this parish, almost ten years of age,' said her father.

'It's not really fair, I mean I don't have fair hair.' Benny struggled to fit in with the saying accurately.

'You have the most beautiful hair I have ever seen.' Her mother stroked Benny's long chestnut locks.

'Do I really look nice?' she asked.

They reassured her that she looked beautiful, and she knew they had bought the dress for her. She had been worried for a bit but now she was certain.

At school next day, even the girls who hadn't been asked to the party wished her a happy birthday.

'What are you getting?'

'I don't know, it's a surprise.'

'Is it a dress?'

'Yes, I think so.'

'Ah, go on, tell us.'

'I don't know yet, really. I won't have it till the party.'

'Was it got in Dublin?'

'I think so.'

Eve spoke suddenly. 'It might have been got here, there's lots of things in Miss Pine's.'

'I don't think so.' Benny tossed her head.

Eve shrugged. 'Okay.'

The others had gone away.

Benny turned on Eve. 'Why did you say it was got in Miss Pine's? You don't know, you don't know anything.'

'I said okay.'

'Have *you* got a frock?'

‘Yes, Mother Francis got one at Miss Pine’s. I don’t think it’s new. I think someone gave it back because there was something wrong with it.’

Eve wasn’t apologetic. Her eyes flashed, she was ready with the explanation before anyone else could make the accusation.

‘You don’t know that.’

‘No, but I think it. Mother Francis wouldn’t have the money to buy me a new frock.’

Benny looked at her with admiration. She softened in her own attack.

‘Well, I don’t know either. I think they got me this lovely velvet one. But they mightn’t.’

‘They got you something new anyway.’

‘Yes, but I’d really look great in this,’ Benny said. ‘It would make anyone look great.’

‘Don’t think about it too much,’ Eve warned.

‘Maybe you’re right.’

‘It’s nice of you to ask me. I didn’t think you liked me,’ Eve said.

‘Oh, I do.’ Poor Benny was flustered.

‘Good. Just as long as you weren’t told to, or anything.’

‘No! Heavens no!’ Benny was far too vehement.

Eve looked at her with a measured glance. ‘Right,’ she said. ‘See you this afternoon.’

They went to school on Saturday mornings, and at 12.30 when the bell went they all poured out of the school gates. All except Eve, who went to the convent kitchen.

‘We’ll have to feed you up with a good meal before you go,’ said Sister Margaret.

‘We wouldn’t want them to think that a girl from St Mary’s would eat all before her when she went out to tea,’ said Sister Jerome. They didn’t want to spell it out too much for Eve, but it was a big event, the child they had brought up being invited out to a party. The whole community was delighted for her.

As Benny had walked down the town, Mr Kennedy called her into the chemist.

‘A little bird told me it was your birthday,’ he said.

‘I’m ten,’ Benny said.

‘I know. I remember when you were born. It was in the Emergency. Your Mam and Dad were so pleased. They didn’t mind at all that you weren’t a boy.’

‘Did they want a boy do you think?’

‘Everyone with a business wants a boy. But I don’t know, I’ve three of them, and I don’t think one of them will ever run this place for me.’ He sighed heavily.

‘Well, I suppose I’d better be . . .’

‘No, no. I brought you in to give you a present. Here’s a pack of barley sugar all for you.’

‘Oh, Mr Kennedy . . .’ Benny was overwhelmed.

‘Not at all. You’re a grand girl. I always say to myself, there’s that little barrel Benny Hogan coming along.’

A bit of the sunlight went out of the barley sugar. Moodily Benny tore the corner off the packet and began to eat a sweet.

Dessie Burns, whose hardware shop was next door to Kennedy's, gave her a shout of approval.

'That's it, Benny, like myself, always head in the nosebag. How are you in yourself these days?'

'I'm ten today, Mr Burns.'

'Jaysus isn't that great, if you were six years older I'd take you into Shea's and put you up on my knee and buy you a gin and it.'

'Thank you, Mr Burns.' She looked at him fearfully.

'What's your father doing over there? Don't tell me he's after hiring new staff. Half the country taking the emigrant ship and Eddie Hogan decides to expand.'

Dessie Burns had small piggy eyes. He looked across the street towards Hogan's Gentleman's Outfitters with huge unconcealed interest. Her father was shaking hands with a man – or a boy, it was hard to see. He looked about seventeen, Benny thought, thin and pale. He had a suitcase in his hand. He was looking up at the sign over the door.

'I don't know anything about it, Mr Burns,' she said.

'Good girl, keep your mind out of business, let me tell you it's a heart scald. If I were a woman I wouldn't have the slightest interest in it either. I'd just get myself a fine eejit of a man to keep me in barley sugar all day.'

Benny went on down the street, past the empty shop which people said that a real Italian from Italy was going to open up. She passed the cobbler's shop where Paccy Moore and his sister Bee waved out to her. Paccy had a twisted leg. He didn't go to Mass, but it was said that the

priests came down to him once a month and heard his confession and gave him Holy Communion. Benny had heard that they had sent to Dublin and maybe even Rome for him to have a dispensation, and it wasn't a question of his being a sinner or outside the Church or anything. And then she was home to Lisbeg. The new dog which was half collie, half sheepdog, sat sleepily on the step loving the September sunshine.

Through the window she could see the table set for the party. Patsy had cleaned the brasses specially, and Mother had tidied up the front garden. Benny swallowed the barley sugar rather than be accused of eating sweets in the public view, and let herself in the back.

'Not a word out of that dog to let me know you were coming,' her mother said crossly.

'He shouldn't bark at me, I'm family,' Benny defended him.

'The day Shep barks for anything except his own amusement there'll be white blackbirds. Tell me did you have a nice day at school, did they make a fuss of you?'

'They did, Mother.'

'That's good. Well they won't know you when they see you this afternoon.'

Benny's heart soared. 'Will I be getting dressed, like in anything new, before the party?'

'I think so. I think we'll have you looking like the bee's knees before they come in.'

'Will I put it on now?'

'Why not?' Benny's mother seemed excited about seeing

the new outfit herself. 'I'll just lay it out for you above. Come up and give yourself a bit of a wash and we'll put it on.'

Benny stood patiently in the big bathroom while the back of her neck was washed. It wouldn't be long now.

Then she was led into her bedroom.

'Close your eyes,' said Mother.

When Benny opened them she saw on the bed a thick navy skirt, a Fair Isle jumper in navy and red. A big sturdy pair of navy shoes lay in their box and chunky white socks folded nice and neatly beside them. Peeping out of tissue paper was a small red shoulder bag.

'It's an entire outfit,' cried Mother. 'Dressed from head to foot by Peggy Pine . . .'

Mother stood back to see the effect of the gift.

Benny was wordless. No velvet dress, no lovely soft crushed velvet that you could stroke, with its beautiful lacy trim. Only horrible harsh rough things like horse hair. Nothing in a misty pink, but instead good plain sensible colours. And the shoes! Where were the pumps with the pointed toes?

Benny bit her lip and willed the tears back into her eyes.

'Well, what do you think?' Her mother was beaming proudly. 'Your father said you must have the handbag and the shoes as well, it would make it a real outfit. He said that going into double figures must be marked.'

'It's lovely,' Benny muttered.

'Isn't the jumper perfect? I'd been asking Peggy to get something like that for ages. I said I didn't want anything

shoddy . . . something strong that would stand up to a bit of rough and tumble.'

'It's gorgeous,' Benny said.

'Feel it,' her mother urged.

She didn't want to. Not while she still had the velvet feel in her mind.

'I'll put it on myself, Mother, then I'll come and show you,' she said.

She was holding on by a thread.

Fortunately, Annabel Hogan needed to go and supervise the shaking of hundreds and thousands on the trifle. She was just heading off downstairs when the telephone rang. 'That'll be your father.' She sounded pleased and her step was quicker on the stair.

Through her sobs which she choked into the pillow, Benny heard snatches of the conversation.

'She loved it, Eddie, you know I think it was almost too much for her, she couldn't seem to take it all in, *so* many things, a bag and shoes, and socks, on top of everything. A child of that age isn't used to getting all that much at once. No, not yet, she's putting it on. It'll look fine on her . . .'

Slowly Benny got off her bed and went over to the mirror on the wardrobe to see if her face looked as red and tearstained as she feared. She saw the chunky figure of a child in vest and knickers, neck red from scrubbing, eyes red from weeping. She was not a person that anyone would ever dream of putting in a pink velvet dress and little pumps with pointed toes. For no reason at all she

remembered Eve Malone. She remembered her small earnest face warning her not to think about the dress from Dublin too much.

Perhaps Eve knew all the time, maybe she had been in the shop when Mother was buying all this . . . all this horrible stuff. How awful that Eve knew before she did. And yet Eve had never had anything new, she knew that whatever dress *she* got for today would be a reject. She remembered the way Eve had said ‘They got you something new anyway’. She would never let them guess how disappointed she was. Never.

The rest of the day wasn’t very clear to Benny because of the heavy cloud of disappointment that seemed to hang over the whole proceedings. For her anyway. She remembered making the right sounds and moving like a puppet as the party began. Maire Carroll arrived wearing a proper party dress. It had an underskirt that rustled. It had come from America in a parcel.

There were games with a prize for everyone. Benny’s mother had bought cones of sweets in Birdie Mac’s shop, each one wrapped in different-coloured paper. They were all getting noisy but the cake had to be delayed until Mr Hogan returned from the shop.

They heard the angelus ringing. The deep sound of the bells rolled through Knockglen twice a day, at noon and at six in the evening, great timekeepers as much as reminders to pray. But there was no sign of Benny’s father.

‘I hope he wasn’t delayed rameishing on with some

customer today of all days,' Benny heard her mother say to Patsy.

'Not at all, Mam. He must be on his way. Shep got up and gave himself a good stretch. It's always a sign that the master is heading home to us.'

And indeed he was. Half a minute later Benny's father came in full of anxiety.

'I haven't missed it, we're not too late?'

He was patted down and given a cup of tea and a sausage roll to bolster him up while the children were gathered and the room darkened in anticipation.

Benny tried not to feel the rough wool of the jumper at her neck. She tried to smile a real smile at her father, who had run down the town to be here for the big moment.

'Do you like your outfit . . . your first entire outfit?' he called over to her.

'It's lovely, Father, lovely. Do you see I'm wearing it all.'

The other children in Knockglen used to giggle at Benny for saying 'Father'. They used to call their fathers Daddy or Da. But by now they were used to it. It was part of the way things were. Benny was the only one they knew without brothers and sisters, most of them had to share a Mam and a Dad with five or six others. An only child was a rare occurrence. In fact they didn't know any, except for Benny. And Eve Malone of course. But that was different. She had no family at all.

Eve was standing near Benny as the cake came in.

'Imagine that's all for you,' she whispered in awe.

Eve wore a dress that was several sizes too big for her. Sister Imelda, the only nun in the convent who was good with the needle, had been in her sick bed so a very poor job had been done on taking up the hem. The rest of it hung around her like a curtain.

The only thing in its favour was that it was red and obviously new. There was no way that it could be admired or praised, but Eve Malone seemed to have risen above this. Something about the way she stood in the large unwieldy garment gave Benny courage. At least her horrible outfit fitted her, and though it was far from being a party dress, let alone the dress of her dreams, it was reasonable, unlike Eve's. She put her shoulders back and smiled suddenly at the smaller girl.

'I'll give you some of the cake to take back if there's any left over,' she said.

'Thanks. Mother Francis loves a slice of cake,' Eve said.

Then it was there, the blurry light of the candles and the singing Happy Birthday and the big whoosh . . . and the clapping, and when the curtains were open again Benny saw the thin young man that her father had been shaking hands with. He was far too old for the party. They must have brought him back to tea with the grown-ups who would come later. He was very thin and pale, and he had a cold hard stare in his eyes.

'Who was he?' Eve asked Benny on Monday.

'He's the new assistant come to work with my father in the shop.'

‘He’s awful, isn’t he?’

They were friends now, sitting on a schoolyard wall together at break.

‘Yes, he is. There’s something wrong with his eyes, I think.’

‘What’s his name?’ Eve asked.

‘Sean. Sean Walsh. He’s going to live in the shop.’

‘Ugh!’ said Eve. ‘Will he go to your house for meals?’

‘No, that’s the great thing. He won’t. Mother asked him to come to Sunday lunch and he made some awful speech about not assuming, or something.’

‘Presuming.’

‘Yes, well whatever it is he’s not going to do it and it seems to mean coming to meals. He’ll fend for himself he said.’

‘Good.’ Eve approved of that.

Benny spoke hesitantly. ‘Mother said . . .’

‘Yes?’

‘If you’d like to come any time . . . that would be . . . it would be all right.’

Benny spoke gruffly as if fearing the invitation would be spurned.

‘Oh, I’d like that,’ Eve said.

‘Like to tea on an ordinary day, or maybe midday dinner on a Saturday or Sunday.’

‘I’d love Sunday. It’s a bit quiet here on Sundays, a lot of praying, you see.’

‘Right, I’ll tell her.’ Benny’s brow had cleared.

‘Oh, there is one thing though . . .’

‘What is it?’ Benny didn’t like the intense look on Eve’s face.

‘I won’t be able to ask you back. Where they eat and I eat, it’s beyond the curtain, you see.’

‘That doesn’t matter at all.’ Benny was relieved that this was the only obstacle.

‘Of course, when I’m grown up and have my own place, you know, my cottage, I could ask you there,’ Eve said earnestly.

‘Is it really your cottage?’

‘I told everyone.’ Eve was belligerent.

‘I thought it might only be a pretend cottage,’ Benny said apologetically.

‘How could it be pretend? It’s mine. I was born there. It belonged to my mother and my father. They’re both dead, it’s mine.’

‘Why can’t you go there now?’

‘I don’t know. They think I’m too young to live on my own.’

‘Well, of course you’re too young to live on your own,’ Benny said. ‘But to visit?’

‘Mother Francis said it was sort of serious, my own place, my inheritance she calls it. She says I shouldn’t be treating it as a doll’s house, a playing place when I’m young.’

They thought about it for a while.

‘Maybe she’s right,’ Benny said grudgingly.

‘She could be.’

‘Have you looked in the windows?’

‘Yes.’

‘Nobody’s gone and messed it all up on you?’

‘No, nobody goes there at all.’

‘Why’s that? It’s got a lovely view down over the quarry.’

‘They’re afraid to go there. People died there.’

‘People die everywhere.’ Benny shrugged.

This pleased Eve. ‘That’s true. I hadn’t thought of that.’

‘So who died in the cottage?’

‘My mother. And then a bit later my father.’

‘Oh.’

Benny didn’t know what to say. This was the first time Eve had ever talked about her life. Usually she flashed back with a Mind Your Own Business, if anyone asked her a question.

‘But they’re not in the cottage, they’re in Heaven now,’ Benny said eventually.

‘Yes, of course.’

There seemed to be another impasse.

‘I’d love to go and look through the window with you some time,’ Benny offered.

Eve was about to reply when Maire Carroll came by.

‘That was a nice party, Benny,’ she said.

‘Thanks.’

‘I didn’t know it was meant to be fancy dress though.’

‘What do you mean?’ Benny asked.

‘Well, Eve was in fancy dress, weren’t you, Eve? I mean that big red thing, that wasn’t meant to be ordinary clothes, was it?’

Eve's face tightened into that hard look that she used to have before. Benny hated to see the expression come back.

'I thought it was quite funny myself,' Maire said with a little laugh. 'We all did when we were coming home.'

Benny looked around the schoolyard. Mother Francis was looking the other way.

With all her strength Benny Hogan launched herself off the wall down on Maire Carroll. The girl fell over, winded.

'Are you all right, Maire?' Benny asked in a falsely sympathetic tone.

Mother Francis came running, her habit streaming behind her.

'What happened, child?' She was struggling to get Maire's breath back, and raise her to her feet.

'Benny pushed me . . .' Maire gasped.

'Mother, I'm sorry, I'm so clumsy, I was just getting off the wall.'

'All right, all right, no bones broken. Get her a stool.' Mother Francis dealt with the panting Maire.

'She did it purposely.'

'Shush, shush, Maire. Here's a little stool for you, sit down now.'

Maire was crying. 'Mother, she just jumped down from the wall on me like a ton of bricks . . . I was only saying . . .'

'Maire was telling me how much she liked the party, Mother. I'm so sorry,' Benny said.

‘Yes, well Benny, try to be more careful. Don’t throw yourself around so much. Now, Maire, enough of this whining. It’s not a bit nice. Benny has said she was sorry. You know it was an accident. Come along now and be a big girl.’

‘I’d never want to be as big a girl as Benny Hogan. No one would.’

Mother Francis was cross now. ‘That’s quite enough, Maire Carroll. Quite enough. Take that stool and go inside to the cloakroom and sit there until you’re called by me to come away from it.’

Mother Francis swept away. And as they all knew she would, she rang the bell for the end of break.

Eve looked at Benny. For a moment she said nothing, she just swallowed as if there were a lump in her throat.

Benny was equally at a loss, she just shrugged and spread out her hands helplessly.

Suddenly Eve grasped her hand. ‘Some day, when I’m big and strong, I’ll knock someone down for you,’ she said. ‘I mean it, I really will.’

‘Tell me about Eve’s mother and father,’ Benny asked that night.

‘Ah, that’s all long ago now,’ her father said.

‘But I don’t know it. I wasn’t there.’

‘No point in raking over all that.’

‘She’s my friend. I want to know about her.’

‘She used not to be your friend. I had to plead with you to let her come to the party,’ Mother said.

‘No, that’s not the way it was.’ Benny couldn’t believe now that this was so.

‘I’m glad that child’s coming here to dinner on Sunday,’ Eddie Hogan said. ‘I wish we could persuade that young skinnymalinks above in the shop to come too, but he’s determined not to trespass, as he calls it.’

Benny was pleased to hear that.

‘Is he working out well, Eddie?’

‘The best you ever saw, love. We’ll be blessed with him, I tell you. He’s so eager to learn he almost quivers like Shep there, he repeats everything over and over again, as if he’s learning it off by heart.’

‘Does Mike like him?’ Benny’s mother wanted to know.

‘Ah, you know Mike, he likes nobody.’

‘What does he object to?’

‘The way Sean keeps the books. God, it’s simple to understand, a child could do it, but old Mike has to put up a resistance to everything. Mike says he knows everyone’s measurements, and what they paid and what they owed. He thinks it’s like a kind of insult to his powers to write things down.’

‘Couldn’t you keep the books, Mother?’ Benny suggested suddenly.

‘No, no, I’d not be able to.’

‘But if it’s as simple as Father says . . .’

‘She’d well be able to but your mother has to be here, this is our home, she runs it for you and me, Benny.’

‘Patsy could run it. Then you wouldn’t have to pay Sean.’

‘Nonsense, Benny,’ her father said.

But she wasn’t to be stopped. ‘Why not? Mike would like Mother being in there. Mike loves Mother, and it would be something for Mother to do all day.’

They both laughed.

‘Isn’t it great to be a child?’ said her father.

‘To think that the day isn’t full already,’ agreed her mother.

Benny knew very well that her mother’s day was far from full. She thought that it might be nice for Mother to be involved in the shop, but obviously they weren’t going to listen to her.

‘How did Eve’s parents die?’ she asked.

‘It’s not a thing to be talking about.’

‘Why? Were they murdered?’

‘Of course not.’ Her mother sounded impatient.

‘Why then . . . ?’

‘Lord, why, why, why,’ her father sighed.

‘At school they’re always telling us to ask why. Mother Francis says that if you have a questioning mind you get to know all the answers.’ Benny was triumphant.

‘Her mother died giving birth, when Eve was being born. And then a bit later, her poor father, may the Lord have mercy on him, went out one evening with his wits scattered and fell over the cliff into the quarry.’

‘Wasn’t that desperate!’ Benny’s eyes were round with horror.

‘So, it’s a sad story, all over long ago, nearly ten years ago. We don’t start bringing it all up over and over.’

‘But there’s more to it, isn’t there . . . there’s a kind of secret.’

‘Not really.’ Her father’s eyes were honest. ‘Her mother was a very wealthy woman, and her father was a kind of handyman who helped out in the convent, and did a bit of work up at Westlands. That caused a bit of talk at the time.’

‘But it’s not a secret or a scandal or anything.’ Annabel Hogan’s face was set in warning lines. ‘They were married and everything in the Catholic Church.’

Benny could see the shutters coming down. She knew when to leave things.

Later she asked Patsy.

‘Don’t ask me things behind your parents’ back.’

‘I’m not. I asked them, and this is what they told me. I just wanted to know did you know any more. That’s all.’

‘It was before I came here, but I heard a bit from Bee Moore . . . Paccy’s sister, she works above in Westlands you see.’

‘What did you hear?’

‘That Eve’s father did a terrible act at the funeral, cursing and shouting . . .’

‘Up in the church, cursing and shouting . . . !’

‘Not *our* church, not the real church, in the Protestant church, but that was bad enough. You see Eve’s mother was from Westlands – from the big house beyond. She was one of the family and poor Jack, that was the father, he thought they’d all treated her badly . . .’

‘Go on.’

‘That’s all I know,’ Patsy said. ‘And don’t be asking that poor child and upsetting her. People with no parents don’t like endless questions.’

Benny took this as good advice not only about Eve, but about Patsy herself.

Mother Francis was delighted to see the new friendship developing, but far too old a hand in dealing with children to say so.

‘Going down to the Hogans again are you?’ she said, sounding slightly put out.

‘Do you mind?’ Eve asked.

‘No, I don’t mind. I can’t say that I mind.’ The nun tried hard to conceal her enthusiasm.

‘It’s not that I want to be away from here,’ Eve said earnestly.

Mother Francis felt an urge to take the child in her arms as she used to do when Eve was a baby given into their care by the accident of her birth.

‘No, no, of course, child. Strange though this place is, it is your home.’

‘It’s always been a lovely home.’

The nun’s eyes filled with tears. ‘Every convent should have a child. I don’t know how we’re going to arrange it,’ she said lightly.

‘I wasn’t a nuisance when I arrived?’

‘You were a blessing, you know that. It’s been the best ten years St Mary’s ever had . . . you being here.’

Mother Francis stood at a window and watched little

Eve go down the long avenue of the convent out to Sunday lunch on her own with the Hogans. She prayed that they would be kind to her, and that Benny wouldn't change and find a new friend.

She remembered the fights she had had to keep Eve in the first place, when so many other solutions were being offered. There was a cousin of the Westwards in England who would take the child, someone who would arrange Roman Catholic instruction once a week. The Healys who had come to start the hotel were reported to be having difficulty in starting a family. They would be happy to have Eve in their home, even after their own children came along, if they did. But Mother Francis had fought like a tiger for that small bundle that she had rescued from the cottage, on the day she was born. The child they had reared until some solution could be found. Nobody had seen that Jack Malone's solution would involve throwing himself over the quarry one dark night. After that there had been no one with better claim to Eve than the nuns who had reared her.

It was the first of many Sunday dinners in Lisbeg for Eve. She loved coming to the house. Every week she brought something which she arranged in a vase. Mother Francis had shown her how to go up the long windy path behind the convent and pick leaves and wild flowers. At the start she would rehearse arranging them with the nun so that she would do it well when she got to the Hogans, but as the weeks went by she grew in confidence. She could bring

armfuls of autumn colours and make a beautiful display on the hall table. It became a ritual. Patsy would have the vases ready to see what Eve would bring today.

‘Don’t you have a lovely house!’ she would say wistfully and Annabel Hogan would smile, pleased, and congratulate herself on having brought these two together.

‘How did you meet Mrs Hogan?’ she would ask Benny’s father. And ‘Did you always want to run a business?’ The kind of questions Benny never thought to ask but was always interested in the answers.

She had never known that her parents met at a tennis party in a county far away. She had never heard that Father had been apprenticed to another business in the town of Ballylee. Or that Mother had gone to Belgium for a year after she left school to teach English in a convent.

‘You make my parents say very interesting things,’ she said to Eve one afternoon as they sat in Benny’s bedroom, and Eve marvelled over being allowed to use an electric fire all for themselves.

‘Well, they’ve got great stories like olden times.’

‘Yes . . .’ Benny was doubtful.

‘You see, the nuns don’t have.’

‘They must have. Surely. They can’t have forgotten,’ Benny said.

‘But they’re not meant to think about the past, you know, and life before Entering, they really start from when they became Brides of Christ. They don’t have stories of olden days like your mother and father do.’

‘Would they like you to be a nun too?’ Benny asked.

‘No, Mother Francis said that they wouldn’t take me, even if I did want to be a nun, until I was over twenty-one.’

‘Why’s that?’

‘She says it’s the only life I know, and I might want to join just because of that. She says when I leave school I have to go out and get a job for at least three years before I even think of Entering.’

‘Wasn’t it lucky you met up with them?’ Benny said.

‘Yes. Yes, it was.’

‘I don’t mean lucky that your mother and father died, but if they had to wasn’t it great you didn’t go somewhere awful?’

‘Like in stories with wicked stepmothers,’ Eve agreed.

‘I wonder why they got you. Nuns usually don’t get children unless it’s an orphanage.’

‘My father worked for them. They sent him up to Westlands to earn some money because they couldn’t pay him much. That’s where he met my mother. They feel responsible, I think.’

Benny was dying to know more. But she remembered Patsy’s advice.

‘Well, it all turned out fine, they’re mad about you up there.’

‘Your parents are mad about you too.’

‘It’s a bit hard sometimes, like if you want to wander off.’

‘It is for me too,’ Eve said. ‘Not much wandering off above in the convent.’

‘It’ll be different when we’re older.’

‘It mightn’t be,’ Eve said sagely.

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean, we have to show them we’re terribly trustworthy or something, show them that if we *are* allowed to wander off, we’ll wander back in good time.’

‘How could we show them?’ Benny was eager.

‘I don’t know. Something simple at the start. Could you ask me to stay the night here, for one thing?’

‘Of course I could.’

‘Then I could show Mother Francis that I’d be back up in the convent in time for Mass in the chapel, and she’d get to know I was to be relied on.’

‘Mass on a weekday?’

‘Every day. At seven.’

‘No!’

‘It’s quite nice. The nuns sing beautifully, it’s nice and peaceful. Really I don’t mind it. Father Ross comes in specially and he gets a lovely breakfast in the parlour. He says the other priests envy him.’

‘I didn’t know that . . . every day.’

‘You won’t tell anyone will you?’

‘No. Is it a secret?’

‘Not a bit, it’s just that I *don’t* tell anything, you see, and the Community likes that, they feel I’m part of them. I didn’t have a friend before. There wasn’t anyone to tell.’

Benny smiled from ear to ear. ‘What night will you come? Wednesday night?’

*

‘I don’t know, Eve. You don’t have any smart pyjamas or anything to be going to stay with people. You don’t have a good sponge bag, things that people who go visiting need.’

‘My pyjamas are fine, Mother.’

‘You could iron them, certainly, and you have a dressing gown.’ She seemed to be faltering. ‘A sponge bag though?’

‘Could Sister Imelda make one for me? I’ll do extra clearing up for her.’

‘And what time will you come back?’

‘I’ll be at my prie-dieu in time for Mass, Mother.’

‘You won’t want to get up that early if you’re visiting people.’ Mother Francis’s face was soft.

‘That’s what I’d want, Mother.’

It was a great evening. They played rummy with Patsy in the kitchen for a long time because Mother and Father went across the road to Dr and Mrs Johnson’s house. It was a supper to celebrate the christening of their new baby.

Eve asked Patsy all about the orphanage, and Patsy told more details than she had ever told Benny. She explained how they used to steal food, and how hard it was when she came to the Hogans, her first job, to realise she didn’t have to take any stray biscuit or a fistful of sugar and put it into her apron.

In bed that night Benny said in wonder, ‘I don’t know why Patsy told us all that. Only the other day she was

saying to me that people with no parents didn't like being asked questions.'

'Ah, it's different with me,' Eve said. 'I'm in the same boat.'

'No you're not!' Benny was indignant. 'Patsy had nothing. She had to work in that awful place and get nits and steal and be beaten for wetting the bed. She had to leave there at fifteen and come here. It's not a bit like you.'

'No. We are the same, she has no family, I don't. She didn't have a home like you do.'

'Is that why you told her more than you told me?' Benny had been even more astounded at the questions Patsy felt free to ask. Did Eve hate the Westwards who were so rich for not taking her into the big house? Eve didn't, they couldn't, they were Protestants, she explained. Lots more, things Benny wouldn't have dared to ask.

'You don't ask things like that,' Eve said simply.

'I'd be afraid of upsetting you,' Benny said.

'You couldn't upset a friend,' Eve said.

Benny and Eve, who had lived all their lives in the same village, were each amazed at the things the other didn't know about Knockglen.

Benny didn't know that the three priests who lived in the presbytery had been given the game of Scrabble, which they played every night, and sometimes rang the convent to ask Mother Francis questions like how you spelt 'quixotic' because Father O'Brien was going to get a triple word score.

Eve hadn't known that Mr Burns in the hardware shop was inclined to take to the drink or that Dr Johnson had a very bad temper and was heard shouting about God never putting a mouth into the world that he didn't feed. Dr Johnson was of the view that there were a lot of mouths, especially in the families with thirteen children, that God had forgotten to feed.

Benny didn't know that Peggy Pine was an old friend of Mother Francis, that they had been girls years ago and that when she came to the convent she called Mother Francis Bunty.

Eve hadn't known that Birdie Mac who ran the sweet shop had a man from Ballylee who had been calling for fifteen years, but she wouldn't leave her old mother and the man from Ballylee wouldn't come to Knockglen.

It made the town far more interesting to both of them to have such insights. Particularly because they knew these were dark secrets not to be shared with anyone. They pooled their knowledge on how children were born, and hadn't any new enlightenments to offer. They both knew that they came out like kittens, they didn't know how they got in.

'It's got something to do with lying down one beside the other, when you're married,' Eve said.

'It couldn't happen if you weren't married. Suppose you fell down beside someone like Dessie Burns.' Benny was worried.

'No, you have to be married.' Eve knew that for certain. 'And how would it get in?' It was a mystery.

‘It could be your Little Mary,’ Benny said thoughtfully.

‘What’s your Little Mary?’

‘The bit in the middle of your tummy.’

‘Oh, your tummy button is what Mother Francis calls it.’

‘That must be it,’ Benny cried triumphantly. ‘If they all have different names for it, that must be the secret.’

They practised hard at being reliable. If either said she would be home at six o’clock then five minutes before the hour struck and the angelus rang she would be back in place. As Eve had anticipated, it did win them much more freedom. They didn’t allow their hysterical laughing fits to be seen in public.

They pressed their noses against the window of Healy’s Hotel. They didn’t like Mrs Healy. She was very superior. She walked as if she were a queen. She always seemed to look down on children.

Benny heard from Patsy that the Healys had been up to Dublin to look for a child to adopt but they hadn’t got one because Mr Healy had a weak chest.

‘Just as well,’ Eve had said unsympathetically. ‘They’d be terrible for anyone as a mother and father.’ She spoke in innocence of the fact that Knockglen had once thought that she herself might be the ideal child for them.

Mr Healy was much older than his wife. It was whispered, Patsy said, that he couldn’t cut the mustard. Eve and Benny spent long hours trying to work out what this could mean. Mustard came in a small tin and you mixed it with water. How did you cut it? Why should you cut it?

Mrs Healy looked a hundred but apparently she was twenty-seven. She had married at seventeen and was busy throwing all her efforts into the hotel since there were no children.

Together they explored places where they had never gone alone. To Flood's, the butchers, hoping they might see the animals being killed.

'We don't really want to see them being killed do we?' Benny asked fearfully.

'No, but we'd like to be there at the beginning so that we could if we want to, then run away,' Eve explained. Mr Flood wouldn't let them near his yard so the matter didn't arise.

They stood and watched the Italian from Italy come and start up his fish and chip shop.

'Weel you leetle girls come here every day and buy my feesh?' he asked hopefully of the two earnest children, one big, one small, who stood watching his every move.

'No, I don't think we'll be allowed,' Eve said sadly.

'Why is that?'

'It would be called throwing away good money,' Benny said.

'And talking to foreign men,' Eve explained to clinch matters.

'My seester is married to a Dublin man,' Mario explained.

'We'll let people know,' Eve said solemnly.

*

Sometimes they went to the harness maker. A very handsome man on a horse came one day to enquire about a bridle that should have been ready, but wasn't.

Dekko Moore was a cousin of Paccy Moore's in the shoe shop. He was very apologetic, and looked as if he might be taken away and hanged for the delay.

The man turned his horse swiftly. 'All right. Will you bring it up to the house tomorrow, instead?' he shouted.

'Indeed I will sir, thank you sir. I'm very sorry sir. Indeed sir.' Dekko Moore sounded like a villain who had been unmasked in a pantomime.

'Lord, who was that, I wonder?' Benny was amazed. Dekko was almost dead with relief at how lightly he had escaped.

'That was Mr Simon Westward,' Dekko said, mopping his brow.

'I thought it must be,' Eve said grimly.

Sometimes they went into Hogan's Gentleman's Outfitters. Father always made a huge fuss of them. So did old Mike, and anyone else who happened to be in the shop.

'Will you work here when you're old?' Eve had whispered.

'I don't think so. It'll have to be a boy, won't it?'

'I don't see why,' Eve had said.

'Well, measuring men, putting tape measures round their waists, and all.'

They giggled.

‘But you’re the boss’s daughter, you wouldn’t be doing that. You’d just be coming in shouting at people, like Mrs Healy does over in the hotel.’

‘Um.’ Benny was doubtful. ‘Wouldn’t I need to know what to shout about?’

‘You could learn. Otherwise Droopy Drawers will take over.’

That’s what they called Sean Walsh, who seemed to have become paler, thinner and harder of the eye since his arrival.

‘No, he won’t, surely?’

‘You could marry him.’

‘Ugh. Ugh. Ugh.’

‘And have lots of children by putting your belly button beside his.’

‘Oh, Eve, I’d hate that. I think I’ll be a nun.’

‘I think I will too. It would be much easier. You can go any day you like, lucky old thing. I have to wait until I’m twenty-one.’ Eve was disconsolate.

‘Maybe she’d let you enter with me, if she knew it was a true vocation.’ Benny was hopeful.

Her father had run out of the shop and now he was back with two lollipops. He handed them one each proudly.

‘We’re honoured to have you ladies in our humble premises,’ he said, so that everyone could hear him.

Soon everyone in Knockglen thought of them as a pair. The big stocky figure of Benny Hogan in her strong shoes

and tightly buttoned sensible coat, the waif-like Eve in the clothes that were always too long and streelish on her. Together they watched the setting up of the town's first fish and chip shop, they saw the decline of Mr Healy in the hotel and stood side by side on the day that he was taken to the sanatorium. Together they were unconquerable. There was never an ill-considered remark made about either of them.

When Birdie Mac in the sweet shop was unwise enough to say to Benny that those slabs of toffee were doing her no good at all, Eve's small face flashed in a fury.

'If you worry so much about things, Miss Mac, then why do you sell them at all?' she asked in tones that knew there could be no answer.

When Maire Carroll's mother said thoughtfully to Eve, 'Do you know I always ask myself why a sensible woman like Mother Francis would let you out on the street looking like Little Orphan Annie,' Benny's brow darkened.

'I'll tell Mother Francis you wanted to know,' Benny had said quickly. 'Mother Francis says we should have enquiring minds, that everyone should ask.'

Before Mrs Carroll could stop her Benny had galloped out of the shop and up the road towards the convent.

'Oh, Mam, you've done it now,' Maire Carroll moaned. 'Mother Francis will be down on us like a ton of bricks.'

And she was. The full fiery rage of the nun was something that Mrs Carroll had not expected and never wanted to know again.

None of these things upset either Eve or Benny in the slightest. It was easy to cope with Knockglen when you had a friend.

1957

There hadn't been many teddy boys in Knockglen, in fact no one could ever remember having seen one except on visits to Dublin where there were groups of them hanging round corners. Benny and Eve were in the window of Healy's Hotel practising having cups of coffee so that they would look well accustomed to it when they got to the Dublin coffee houses.

They saw him pass by, jaunty and confident in his drainpipe trousers, his long jacket with velvet cuffs and collar. His legs looked like spider legs and his shoes seemed enormous. He seemed oblivious of the stares of the whole town. Only when he saw the two girls actually standing up to peer at him past the curtains of Healy's window did he show any reaction. He gave them a huge grin and blew them a kiss.

Confused and annoyed they sat down hastily. It was one thing to look, another to call attention to themselves.

Making a show of yourself was high on the list of sins in Knockglen. Benny knew this very well. Anyone could have been looking out the window seeing them being cheap with the teddy boy. Her father maybe, with the tape around his neck, awful sleeveen Sean Walsh, who never said a word without thinking carefully of the possible effect it might have. He could have been looking. Or old Mike, who had called her father Mr Eddie for years, and saw no reason to change.

And indeed everyone in Knockglen knew Eve as well. It had long been the nuns' ambition that Eve Malone be thought of as a lady. She had even joined in the game herself. Eve didn't want it to get back to the convent that she was trick acting in Healy's Hotel and ogling teddy boys out of the window. While other girls with real mothers resisted all the attempts to gentrify themselves, Eve and Mother Francis studied books on etiquette and looked at magazines to see how nice people dressed, and to pick up any hints on behaviour.

'I don't want you to put on an artificial accent,' Mother Francis had warned, 'nor do I want you sticking out your little finger when you're drinking tea.'

'Who are we trying to impress?' Eve had asked once.

'No, look at it the other way. It's who you're trying not to let down. We were told we were mad and we couldn't rear you. It's a bit of human, non-saintly desire to be able to say "I told you so" to the begrudgers.'

Eve had understood that immediately. And there was always hope that the Westward family would see her one

day as an elegant lady and be sorry they hadn't kept in touch with the child who was after all their own flesh and blood.

Mrs Healy approached them. A widow now, formidable as she had always been, she managed to exude disapproval at fifty yards. She could not find any reason why Benny Hogan from the shop across the road and Eve Malone from the convent up the town should not sit and drink coffee in her bay window, but somehow she would have preferred to keep the space for wealthier and more important matrons of Knockglen.

She sailed towards the window. 'I'll adjust the curtains – they seem to have got all rucked up,' she said.

Eve and Benny exchanged glances. There was nothing wrong with the heavy net curtains of Healy's Hotel. They were as they always were: thick enough to conceal those within while giving a perfect view out.

'Well, isn't that a terrible poor ibex!' exclaimed Mrs Healy, having identified easily what the girls had been looking at.

'I suppose it's only his clothes really,' Eve said in a sanctimonious tone. 'Mother Francis always says it's a pity to judge people by the garments they wear.'

'Very admirable of her,' snapped Mrs Healy, 'but of course she makes sure that the garments of all you pupils are in order. Mother Francis is always the first to judge you girls by the uniforms you wear.'

'Not any more, Mrs Healy,' Benny said happily. 'I dyed my grey school skirt dark red.'

‘And I dyed mine black, and my grey jumper purple,’ Eve said.

‘Very colourful.’ Mrs Healy moved away like a ship under full sail.

‘She can’t bear us being grown up,’ Eve hissed. ‘She wants to tell us to sit up straight and not to put our fingers on the nice furniture.’

‘She knows we don’t feel grown up,’ Benny said gloomily. ‘And if awful Mrs Healy knows then everyone in Dublin will know.’

It was a problem. Mr Flood the butcher had looked at them very strangely as they walked up the street. His eyes seemed to burn through them in disapproval. If people like that could see their awkwardness, they were indeed in a bad way.

‘We should have a rehearsal – you know, go up for a couple of days ahead of everyone else so we won’t look like eejits.’ Eve was hopeful.

‘It’s hard enough to get up there when we have to. There’s no point in asking to go up there in order to waltz around a bit. Can you see them agreeing to that for me at home?’

‘We wouldn’t call it waltzing around,’ Eve said. ‘We’d call it something else.’

‘Like what?’

Eve thought hard. ‘In your case, getting books listed and timetables – there’s endless things you could say.’ Her voice sounded suddenly small and sad.

For the first time Benny realised properly that they were

going to live separate lives though in the same city. Best friends from the age of ten, now they would go down different roads.

Benny was going to be able to go to University College, Dublin, to study for a BA degree because her parents had saved to pay for her. There was no money in St Mary's Convent to send Eve Malone to university. Mother Francis had strained the convent's finances already to provide secondary education for the daughter of Jack Malone and Sarah Westward. Now she would be sent to a convent of the same order in Dublin where she would do a secretarial course. Her tuition fees would be waived in exchange for some light housework.

'I wish to God you were coming to college, too,' Benny said suddenly.

'I know. Don't say it like that, don't let your voice get drippy or I'll get upset.' Eve spoke sharply, but without harshness.

'Everyone keeps saying that it's great, we have each other, but I'd see more of you if you were still in Knockglen,' Benny complained. 'Your place is miles across the city, and I have to come home on the bus every night, so there'll be no meeting in the evenings.'

'I don't think there's much of the night life planned for me either,' Eve said doubtfully. 'A few miles of convent floor to polish, a few million sheets to hem. A couple of tons of potatoes to peel.'

'They won't make you do that!' Benny was horrified.

'Who knows what light housework means? One nun's

light could be another nun's penal servitude.'

'You'll need to know in advance, won't you?' Benny was distressed for her friend.

'I'm not in much of a position to negotiate,' Eve said.

'But they never asked you to do anything like that here.' Benny nodded her head up in the direction of the convent at the end of the town.

'But that's different. This is my home,' Eve said simply. 'I mean, this is where I live, where I'll always live.'

'You'll be able to get a flat and all when you get a job.' Benny sounded wistful. She didn't think she would ever see freedom.

'Oh yes, I'm sure I'll get a flat, but I'll come back to St Mary's, like other people come home from flats on holidays,' Eve said.

Eve was always so definite, Benny thought with admiration. So small and determined with her short dark hair and white elfin face. No one had ever dared to say that there was anything different or even unusual about Eve living in the convent, sharing her life with the Community. She was never asked about what life was like beyond the curtain where the nuns went, and she never told. The girls also knew that no tales would be told of their own doings. Eve Malone was nobody's spy.

Benny didn't know how she was going to manage without her. Eve had been there for as long as she remembered to help her fight her battles. To deal with the jibes of those who called her Big Ben. Eve had made short work of anyone who took advantage of Benny's gentle ways.

They had been a team for years: the tiny wiry Eve with her restless eyes never settling long on anything or anyone; the big handsome Benny, with her green eyes and chestnut-brown hair, tied back with a bow always, a big soft good-quality bow a bit like Benny herself.

If there had only been some way they could have gone in the doors of University College together and come home on the bus each night, or better still got a flat together, life would have been perfect. But Benny had not grown up expecting life to be totally perfect. Surely it was enough to have got as much as she had.

Annabel Hogan was wondering whether to change the main meal of the day to the evening. There were a lot of arguments for this and a lot against.

Eddie was used to his dinner in the middle of the day. He walked back from the shop and the plate of meat and potatoes was put in front of him with a regularity that would have pleased an army officer. As soon as Shep started his languid stroll out to meet the master at the turn of the road, Patsy began to heat the plates. Mr Hogan would wash his hands in the downstairs cloakroom and always profess pleasure at the lamb chops, the bacon and cabbage, or the plate of cod and parsley sauce on a Friday. Wouldn't it be a poor thing to have the man close his shop and walk back for a kind of half-hearted snack. Maybe it might even affect his work and he wouldn't be able to concentrate in the afternoon.

But then think of Benny coming back from Dublin after

a day in the university: wouldn't it be better if they saved the main meal for her return?

Neither husband nor daughter had been any help. They both said it didn't matter. As usual the burden of the whole house fell on herself and Patsy.

The meat tea was probably the answer. A big slice of ham, or grilled bacon, or a few sausages, and they could put a few extra on Benny's plate in case she felt the need of it. Annabel could hardly believe that she had a daughter about to go to university. Not that she wasn't old enough – she was well old enough to have seen a family through university. She had married late, at a time she had almost given up hope of finding a husband. She had given birth at a time when she thought miscarriages would be all she ever knew.

Annabel Hogan walked around her house: there was always some little thing to be done. Patsy was in the big, warm kitchen, the table covered with flour and crockery, but it would all be swept away and scrubbed by meal time.

Lisbeg was not a big house, but there was plenty to do in it. There were three bedrooms and a bathroom upstairs. The master bedroom looked out over one side of the front door and Benny's bedroom was on the other. At the back of the house, the dark spare room and the big, old-fashioned bathroom with its noisy pipes and its huge wood-surrounded bath.

Downstairs if you came in the front door (which people rarely did) you would find a large room on each side. They were hardly ever used. The Hogans lived in the back of the

house, in the big shabby breakfast room that opened off the kitchen. There was hardly ever a need to light a fire in the breakfast room because the great heat of the range came through. There was a big double door kept permanently open between the two rooms, and it was as comfortable a place as you could imagine.

They rarely had visitors, and if ever anyone was expected the front drawing room in its pale greens and pinks with damp spots over the wall could be aired and dusted. But in the main, the breakfast room was their home.

It had three big red plush armchairs, and the table against the wall had three dining chairs with plush seats as well. A huge radio stood on the big sideboard, and shelves of ornaments, and good china and old books were fixed precariously to the wall.

Now that young Eve had become such a regular guest in the household, a fourth chair had been found, a cane chair rescued from one of the sheds. Patsy had tied a nice red cushion to it.

Patsy herself slept in a small room beyond the kitchen. It was dark and had a tiny window. Patsy had always told Mrs Hogan that it was like being dead and going to Heaven to have a room of your own. She had always had to share with at least two other people until the day she came to Lisbeg.

When Patsy had walked up the short avenue and looked at the square house with its creeper and its shabby garden it seemed to her like a house on the front of a calendar.

Her small room looked out on the back yard, and she had a window box. Things didn't grow very well in it because it was in shadow and Patsy wasn't much of a gardener, but it was her own, and nobody ever touched it, any more than they ever went into her room.

Patsy was as excited as any of them about Benny going to university. Every year on her annual holidays, Patsy paid a dutiful visit of one half day to the orphanage which had reared her, and then she went to stay with a friend who had married in Dublin. She had asked her friend to take her to see where Benny would be a student. She had stood outside the huge pillars of University College, Dublin, and looked at it all with satisfaction. Now she would know where Benny went and studied; she would know the look of the place.

And indeed it was a big step for Benny, Annabel Hogan realised. No more safe trotting to and fro from the convent. It was life in the big city with several thousand other students from all kinds of places, with different ways and no one to force you to study like Mother Francis. It was not surprising that Benny had been as excited as a hen walking on hot coals all summer long, never able to keep still, always jumping up with some further excitement.

It was a relief to know that she was with Eve Malone for the morning, those two could talk until the cows came home. Annabel wished that there had been some way young Eve could have been sent to university too. It would have made things more fair somehow. But things rarely turned out nice and neatly in this life. Annabel had said as

much to Father Ross the last time he had come to tea, and Father Ross had looked at her sternly over his glasses, saying that if we all understood the way the Universe was run what would there be left for God to tell us on the Last Day.

To herself Annabel thought that it wouldn't interfere with the running of the Universe if enough money could be found somewhere for the university fees and accommodation for Eve Malone, the child who had no home except the big bleak convent with the heavy iron gates.

Mother Francis had asked God very often for a way to send Eve Malone to university but so far God had not seen fit to show her one. Mother Francis knew it must be part of his divine plan, but at times she wondered had she prayed hard enough, had she examined every possibility. She had certainly been up every road as far as the Order was concerned. She had written to the Mother General, she had put Eve's case as persuasively as she could. The girl's father, Jack Malone, had worked all his life for the convent as handyman and gardener.

Jack had married the daughter of the Westward family, as unlikely a match as was ever known in the country, but necessary since a child was on the way. There had been no problem in having Eve brought up as a Catholic, since the Westwards had never wanted to know about her at all, and didn't care what faith she was raised in just as long as they never had to hear her name.

Mother General's view was that enough had been done for the child already. To provide a university education for

her might mark her out as a favoured pupil. Would not others from needy backgrounds expect the same?

It had not stopped there. Mother Francis had taken the bus to their convent in Dublin and spoken to the very difficult Mother Clare who held sway there. With so many young nuns starting university education in the autumn and lodging in the Dublin convent was there not a chance that Eve might join them? The girl would be happy to do housework to earn her place among the students.

Mother Clare wouldn't even consider it. What an extraordinary suggestion, to put forward a girl – a charity child who was not a Sister, a novice, a postulant, nor anyone with the remotest intention of becoming a nun – and raise her up above the many Sisters in the Community who were all hoping and praying for a chance of higher education . . . what would they feel if a girl who had already been pampered, it seemed, by the convent in Knockglen, were put in to study, over their heads? It would be an outrage.

And perhaps it was outrageous of her, Mother Francis thought sometimes. It was just that she loved Eve as much as any mother could love a daughter. Mother Francis the celibate nun who had never thought she could know the joy of seeing a child grow up in her care had loved Eve in a way that might well have made her blind to the feelings and sensitivities of other people. Mother General and Mother Clare were indeed right, it would have been preferential treatment to have financed Eve's university education from the convent funds.

But when all was said and done, Mother Francis wished she could be sure that they would treat Eve well up in Mother Clare's convent. St Mary's had always been a home for Eve; the fear was that she might find the sister house in Dublin more like an institution, and worse still she might find her own role there not that of an honoured daughter, but more that of a maid.

When Benny and Eve came out of Healy's Hotel, they saw Sean Walsh watching them from the doorway of Hogan's across the street.

'If you keep talking to me he might think we haven't seen him,' Benny hissed out of the corner of her mouth.

'Not a chance. Look at him standing there with his thumbs in behind his braces, copying the way your father stands.'

Eve knew only too well Sean Walsh's expectations: he had a long-term career plan, to marry the daughter of the house, the heir to Hogan's Gentleman's Outfitters, and inherit the lot.

They had never been able to like Sean Walsh, not since the very first day he had turned up at Benny's tenth birthday party. He had never smiled. Not once in all those years had they seen a real smile on his face. There were a lot of grimaces, and a little dry bark sometimes, but never a laugh.

He didn't throw his head back like Peggy Pine did when she laughed, or giggle into his fist like Pacey Moore; he didn't make big gestures like Mario in the fish and chip

shop, or even get wheezing and coughing fits like Dessie Burns often did. Sean Walsh seemed watchful the whole time. Only when he saw others smiling and laughing did he give the little barks.

They could never get him to tell anything about the life he had lived before he came to Knockglen. He didn't tell long stories like Patsy did, or wistful tales like Dekko Moore about the time he made harnesses for the Lords of the Soil somewhere down in Meath. Sean Walsh would not be drawn.

'Oh, dear, you don't want to hear my stories,' he would say when Benny and Eve plagued him for some information.

The years had not improved him: he was still secretive and insincerely anxious to please. Even his appearance annoyed Benny, although she knew this was unreasonable. He wore a suit that had seen a lot of pressing, and was obviously carefully looked after. Benny and Eve used to tell each other in fits of laughter that he spent hours in his little room above the shop pressing all his ambitions into the suit with a damp cloth.

Benny didn't really believe Eve about Sean having ambitions to marry into the shop, but there was something deeply unsettled all right about the way he looked at her. She had so much wanted to be fancied, it seemed a cruel blow to think that if it ever happened it might only be by someone as awful as Sean Walsh.

'Good morning, ladies.' He made an exaggerated bow. There was an insult in his voice, a sneer that he hadn't

intended them to notice. Other people had called them 'ladies', even that very morning, and had done so without any offence. It was a way of acknowledging that they had left school and would shortly start a more grown-up life. When they had been in the chemist's buying shampoo, Mr Kennedy had asked what he could do for the two young ladies and they had been pleased. Paccy Moore had said they were two fine ladies when they had gone to have heels put on Benny's good shoes. But with Sean Walsh it was different.

'Hallo, Sean.' Benny's voice was lacklustre.

'Surveying the metropolis, I see,' he said loftily. He always spoke slightly disparagingly of Knockglen, even though the place he came from himself was smaller and even less like a metropolis. Benny felt a violent surge of annoyance.

'Well, you're a free agent,' she said suddenly. 'If you don't like Knockglen you could always go somewhere else.'

'Did I say I didn't like it?' His eyes were narrower than ever, almost slits. He had gauged this wrong, he must not allow her to report his having slighted the place. 'I was only making a pleasant remark comparing this place to the big city. Meaning that you'll have no time for us here at all soon.'

That had been the wrong thing too.

'I'll have little chance of forgetting all about Knockglen considering I'll be coming home every night,' said Benny glumly.

‘And we wouldn’t want to anyway,’ Eve said with her chin stuck out. Sean Walsh would never know how often she and Benny bemoaned their fate living in such a small town which had the worst characteristic any town could have: it was actually within striking distance of Dublin.

Sean hardly ever let his glance fall on Eve, for she held no interest for him. All his remarks were directed to Benny. ‘Your father is so proud of you, there’s hardly a customer that he hasn’t told about your great success.’

Benny hated his smile and his knowing ways. He must know how much she hated being told this, reminded about how she was the apple of their eye, and the centre of simple boastful conversation. And if he knew why did he tell her and annoy her still further? If he did have designs on her, and a plan to marry Mr Eddie Hogan’s daughter and thereby marry into the business, then why was he saying all the things that would irritate and upset her?

Perhaps he thought that her own wishes would hardly be considered in the matter. That the biddable daughter of the house would give in on this as she had on everything else.

Benny realised she must fight Sean Walsh. ‘Does he tell everyone I’m going to college?’ she asked, with a smile of pleasure on her face.

‘Only subject of conversation.’ Sean was smug to be the source of information but somehow disconcerted that Benny didn’t get embarrassed as he had thought she would.

Benny turned to Eve. ‘Aren’t I lucky?’

Eve understood. ‘Oh, spoiled rotten,’ she agreed.

They didn’t laugh until they were out of sight. They had to walk down the long straight street past Shea’s pub with its sour smell of drink coming out on to the street from behind its dark windows, past Birdie Mac’s sweet shop where they had spent so much time choosing from jars all their school life. Across the road to the butcher’s where they looked in the window to see back at the reflection of Hogan’s Outfitters and realise that Sean Walsh had gone back inside to the empire that would one day be his.

Only then could they let themselves go and laugh properly.

Mr Flood, of Flood’s Quality Meat Killed On The Premises, didn’t appreciate their laughter.

‘What’s so funny about a row of gigot chops?’ he asked the two laughing girls outside his window. It only made them laugh more.

‘Get on with you then, do your laughing somewhere else,’ he growled at them. ‘Stop making a mock and a jeer out of other people’s business.’

His face was severely troubled and he went out into the street to look up at the tree which overhung his house.

Mr Flood had been staring into that tree a lot lately, and worse still having conversations with someone he saw in its branches. The general thinking was that Mr Flood had seen some kind of vision, but was not ready yet to reveal it to the town. His words to the tree seemed to be respectful and thoughtful, and he addressed whatever he saw as Sister.

Benny and Eve watched fascinated, as he shook his head

sorrowfully and seemed to agree with something that had been said to him.

‘It’s the same the whole world over, Sister,’ he said, ‘but it’s sad it should come to Ireland as well.’

He listened respectfully to what he was hearing from the tree, and took his leave. Vision or no vision, there was work to be done in the shop.

The girls only stopped laughing by the time they had reached the convent gates. Benny turned to go back home as usual. She never presumed on her friendship with Eve by expecting to be let in to the inner sanctum. The convent in holidays was off limits.

‘No, come on in, come in just to see my room,’ Eve begged.

‘Mother Francis? Wouldn’t they think . . . ?’

‘It’s my home, they’ve always told me that. Anyway, you’re not a pupil any more.’

They went through a side door; there was a smell of baking, a warm kitchen smell through the corridors, then a smell of polish on the big stairway, and the wide dark hall hung with pictures of Mother Foundress and Our Lady, and lit only by the Sacred Heart lamp.

‘Isn’t it desperately quiet in the holidays?’

‘You should be here at night. Sometimes when I’ve come home from the pictures and I let myself in, it’s so quiet I’d nearly talk to the statues for company.’

They went up to the small room where Eve had lived for as long as she could remember. Benny looked around with interest.

‘Look at your wireless, right beside your bed!’ The brown bakelite electric radio, where, like every other girl in the country, Eve listened at night to Radio Luxembourg, was on her night table. In Benny’s house, where she was considered a very pampered only child, she had to borrow the kitchen radio and then perch it on a chair because there wasn’t any socket near enough to her bed to plug it in.

There was a neat candlewick bedspread and a funny nightdress case shaped like a rabbit.

‘Mother Francis gave me that when I was ten. Isn’t it awful?’

‘Better than holy pictures,’ Benny said.

Eve opened a drawer in which there were piles of holy pictures, each one bound up with a rubber band.

Benny looked at them, fascinated. ‘You never threw them away!’

‘Not here. I couldn’t.’

The small round window looked down over Knockglen, along the tree-lined drive of the convent through the big gates and down the broad main street of the town.

They could see Mr Flood fussing round the window of his shop as if he were still worried about what they could have found so amusing in its contents. They saw small children with noses pressed against the window of Birdie Mac’s, and men with caps pulled well down over their faces coming out of Shea’s pub.

They saw a black Morris Cowley pull up in front of Hogan’s and knew it was Dr Johnson. They saw two men

walking into Healy's Hotel, rubbing their hands. These would be commercial travellers, wanting to write up their order books in peace. They could see a man with a ladder up against the cinema putting up the new poster, and the small round figure of Peggy Pine coming out of her dress shop to stand and look admiringly at her window display. Peggy's idea of art was to put as much in the window as could possibly fit without falling over.

'You can see everything! Benny was amazed. 'It's like being God.'

'Not really, God can see round corners. I can't see your house; I can't see who's having chips in Mario's; I can't see over the hill to Westlands. Not that I'd want to, but I can't.'

Her voice was tight when she spoke of her mother's people in the big house. Benny knew from old that it was a thorny subject.

'I suppose they wouldn't . . .'

'They wouldn't.' Eve was firm.

They both knew what Benny was going to say: that there was no chance of the wealthy Westwards paying for a university education for Eve.

'Do you think Mother Francis might have approached them?'

'I'm sure she did, lots of times over the years, and she always got the door slammed in her face.'

'You can't be certain,' Benny said soothingly.

Eve looked out of the window down the town, standing as she must often have done over the years.

‘She did every single thing to help me that anyone could. She *must* have asked them, and they must have said no. She didn’t tell me because she didn’t want me to feel worse about them. As if I could.’

‘In a fairy story one of them would ride up to the avenue here on a white horse and say they’d been wanting you as part of their lives for years,’ Benny said.

‘And in a fairy story I’d tell him to get lost,’ Eve said, laughing.

‘No, I wouldn’t let you, you’d say thank you very much, the fees are this price, and I’d like a nice flat of my own with carpets going right up to the wall and no counting how much electric fire we use.’ Benny was gleeful.

‘Oh yes, and a dress allowance of course, so much a month put in Switzer’s and Brown Thomas for me.’

‘And a holiday abroad each year to make up for not seeing you much over the past while!’

‘And a huge contribution to the convent building fund for the new chapel to thank the nuns for doing the needful.’

Benny sighed. ‘I suppose things like that *could* happen.’

‘As you said, in a fairy story,’ Eve said. ‘And what would be the best happening for you?’

‘Two men to get out of a van down there in a minute’s time and tell my father that Sean Walsh is a criminal wanted for six murders in Dublin and that he has to be handcuffed and out of there this instant.’

‘It still leaves the business of you having to come home from Dublin on the bus every night,’ Eve said.