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One

When I was very small I loved wolves, she told me. I used to go to bed with one under my pillow, couldn't fall asleep without him. The wolf in Eve's Little Red Riding Hood book has a big bushy tail and a tweed jacket with a knife and fork in his top pocket. All the better to eat you with, Madam. We got a different version of the story out of the library recently, a beautifully illustrated one where nobody rescues Red Riding Hood at the end, she stays in the wolf's belly. Eve took it in her stride, but I was haunted.

Mammy was a werewolf, it only took one sip of drink to change her. The first mouthful of the first pint of Carling, all the evil came out dancing. Her face would change, but subtly; her eyes would brighten and her nose would lengthen. Everything about her became wilder and sharper and more alert. That was when the barman would need to watch himself.

It took some of them a while to realise it. Like the place she got thrown out of on Blarney Street for screaming that her glass was

dirty. The miracle was, she never ran out of bars, or taxi drivers, even as she ate up every one who crossed her. They'd reach their limit sometimes, call in reinforcements, rattled by her savagery. She'd sit in the front seat, us in the back in our school uniforms, parked up outside the garda station, a glass of bright green in her hand still, like we were at a cocktail party. Vodka and a dash of lime cordial. Even the guards didn't know what to do with her; a grandiose drunk baiting her taxi driver, refusing to pay him because he wasn't deferential enough, insulted her somehow, her children in the back seat, on a Tuesday. The Sergeant would just tell the driver to take us home, ask my father for some money.

She wrote me a card one year. It has a wolf on the front of it, lapping at a silver pool of water, a big moon behind him glowing. That overwrought, romanticised kind of animal portraiture you see on jigsaws, velour blankets and heavy metal t-shirts. She got it in a little hole-in-the-wall she went to on the Coal Quay, a tiny place in one of the old workers' cottages, full of crystals and candles and similar. My Fairy Shop, she called it.

'Look at the wolf,' she wrote in my card, repeating what the witchy owner told her. 'He's looking into the water, seeing everything in it. He's aware of his surroundings. He's alone, but he can see himself in the water. He keeps himself company. Wolves are strong, brave and clever.' She wrote all this out carefully on a lined sheet of copybook paper and signed it 'Your crazy Momma, Caroline'. There's a lipstick kiss near the signature but I don't remember if she did that or I did.

I carry the letter around with me, folded up six times into a square in my wallet, wrapped around a small photo of my mother. It's a passport photo, black and white. She is very beautiful – dark eyes in a pale oval face, long dark straight hair parted in the centre falling well past her shoulders, very '60s, early '70s. She's wearing some sort of woolly jumper – white,

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or pink maybe, with a high collar and a thin ribbon tied in a bow around the neckline. She's not smiling, but she looks completely relaxed, her brow unclouded. You can see her top teeth, her lips are parted, she's breathing easily. I could stare at this photo for hours, days maybe – as though by looking hard enough, I could somehow see in this perfect, silent teenager any trace of the woman who gave birth to me. See how she became the person she became later, the woman in the front seat of a Lee Cabs taxi outside the garda station, with a vodka and lime in her hand and a bellyful of fury. I stare and I stare, and she stares back, the oval-faced girl with the ribbon on her jumper, who looks a little bit like Sharon Tate, with her poker-straight hair and general air of innocent sexuality. 'This was my girlfriend from 1969–1971,' someone has written on the back in pencil, faded but legible. She'd have been 16 years old in 1969. She met my father when she was 14, she always told me. That is not my father's writing on the back of the photo. He may have been her first boyfriend, but he wasn't her only one. I used to look at that photo sometimes and think about asking her who wrote it. But I never had the nerve to. I don't even remember how I got it – I have a habit of taking things when I am home on holiday, just squirrelling them away, not even asking for permission.

When I was a teenager, I sometimes used to wait until she was in bed, getting ready to go to sleep, and I'd run into the room and flash her a picture from one of my film magazines. A two-page spread from *An American Werewolf in London*. The moment of hairy transformation – man becoming wolf, the snout bursting through his nostrils, teeth elongating.

'Ah stop Noelle, stop it, you'll go to hell for that! Don't come near me with that – it freaks me!' she'd shriek, horrified and delighted, hiding under the blanket. 'Go away with it! May God forgive you.'

In my memory she is often in my bedroom on those nights. That may be because I'm older by then, and I'd already left it. Some nights, I climb into the bed beside her, feel the heat of her bare legs wrapped around me. She had very little hair anywhere on her body, her legs were never stubbly. I lie with her in the mother-den beneath the covers.

'They just don't stop, you know? Like, I don't know, werewolves or something. They're all fucking crazy once they get the drink in them. Don't go to bed like normal people.' My dad on the phone, many years later, telling me about a night down in Kerry with my mother and her brothers and sister. I was like that too, obviously. The worst thing was not knowing how it would go on any given night. Would it be two drinks, then home, blameless? Or home two days later, minus a handbag, having spat at a stranger? I had no reliable indicator. It was the same for Carol. Two pints some days, and Daddy picking us up outside the funeral home, no drama. Other days, parked outside the guards six hours later.

I never noticed at the time, what the moon was doing, but even now, many years since my last drink, at certain times of the month, I can feel the imp within me, an antic demon behind my teeth, using my mouth to make trouble. I want to get barred from places, I want to scream the glass isn't clean enough. I want to break things. There's a little police station up by the SuperValu. Some nights I want to be driven into it.

Two

The doctor's name is Byrne. A consultant oncologist. She'll have appreciated his air of authority, the undeniable doctorliness of him, even as she plotted to outwit him.

'Your mother is a lovely woman.' Slight trace of a Dublin accent in his voice down the phone to me, the only sound in a quiet house after midnight, last Monday night in New Zealand. 'A lovely person, but she didn't want the treatment. And of course that is her right,' he adds quickly.

I almost feel sorry for him. He's come up against her with no warning. 'She's a lovely person, and an intensely private person, and she's spent the last two or three months not letting anybody in.'

It's a sort of relief hearing that, finally, and from a medical professional. Try living with her, I want to say. Try being her daughter. 'The progression of her cancer is significant. Her blood sugars are out of control now there's no food going in.'

With her diabetes, the underlying systems won't cope with this, ultimately.'

I write 'underlying' and 'ultimately' in the exercise book in front of me like a good journalist, marvelling in a detached kind of way – how often do you see two words beginning with u in the same sentence? No radiation – I can't say I blame her – and only two half-hearted goes at chemo. Can't blame her for that either, she wasn't more than six stone to begin with.

'What would you do if it was your mother?' The room is cold and the overhead light is in my eyes. I'm shivering.

'If it was me, I'd come home in the next day or two.' I almost laugh, it sounds so serious.

'How long do you think . . . ?'

'Within the next week I'd say, possibly two. I'd be getting on a plane right now, if it was my mother.'

But it isn't his mother. And now it's Thursday night, ten days later, and Sarah and I and Dr Byrne are all leaning awkwardly against a wall-mounted whiteboard in an empty corridor of an overheated women's ward in the Mercy. That's what everyone calls it here, not even hospital, just the Mercy.

He'd said a week, maybe two. But that was nearly ten days ago and now I'm here for a funeral, and she's still not dead, and I have my own daughter to go home to.

'So, in terms of time . . . ?' Awkward, trying to word it.

'Yes, well, in this sort of situation . . . where she's not eating, or drinking anything, you'd almost want to be able to put people out of their misery.' I feel Sarah stiffen beside me. He's looking at her the whole time, full-on eye contact, even though I'm the one asking the questions. His skin is smooth and rosy, more like a boy than a man. No white coat, but a fine wool suit, the mobile in his pocket buzzing constantly. 'Not that that's what should ever happen,' he adds hurriedly. 'Another few days, I think, if that

even.’ Is it my bright red coat, the red lipstick, that’s making him not look at me? I always want to stand out when I’m back home, and then I’m ashamed when I do. ‘She’s not really open to hospice, is she? It’s just, it would be a much better environment for her, at this stage.’

‘She wants to go home, she thinks she’s going home.’ Sarah is nervous, but being firm with him, defending Mammy. I look down at her shoes, flimsy slip-ons, and feel a surge of irritation. They’re paper thin, way too cold for this weather. She’s always hated wearing shoes – Eve’s the same, I’ve noticed recently. I am waiting for the person to materialise who knows how to handle all of this, knows all the right things to ask, but it’s just the two of us here, nobody else is coming. I belt my coat tighter, even though I’m sweating.

‘I’m so sorry, I know this is a very difficult time for all of ye.’ Still a cliché, but at least it sounds sincere in the Dublin accent. She’ll be enjoying that he’s from there, she always made it sound glamorous being born in Drimnagh. Like it was Paris. ‘I’ll see about getting her her own room. The wards are so full . . . it’s hard to manage.’ He spreads his hands out in front of us, clean pink palms facing upwards in a gesture of helplessness. ‘That’s what we spend most of our time doing here, really, moving people.’

We murmur our thanks, wanting to be good, and grateful, conscious that Mammy is, once again, fucking someone’s shit up. His suit is not the grey I took it for, but a soft, heathery purple. The light, fine wool glows against his cheeks and finally, I am as comforted by him as he wishes me to be, by the cleanness of him, his decent efficiency.

Earlier, I followed Sarah down the corridor of the hospital. Yellow walls, yellow floors, yellow fluorescent lights above us. It was stiflingly hot inside, after the freezing slap of the February

night when we got out of the airport. The hospital smell is something fleshy covered up with disinfectant. Boiled food and the iron tang of blood beneath it. She's in a bed by the door, curled up like a small child in a fluffy pink dressing gown, one twig arm hooked up to clear tubes that snake along the bed beside her. My first thought: this is death. My second thought: she looks like Samuel Beckett. Her nose, always prominent, is massive, now that her cheeks have fallen in around it. I go up to the head of the cot, although I am frightened by the sight of her.

'Hello, tiny one.'

I talk to her like you would to a newborn, a helpless creature. She opens her eyes and they fill with tears. I don't know if it's the sight of me or just general misery. We sit her up and Sarah gives her what looks like a giant cotton bud. She dips it in a beaker of orange juice and moistens her mouth. Her top teeth are gone; the plate fell out after the chemo, my sister tells me later. I'm shocked at the unravelling of her; it's like being in a car that's suddenly travelling at 150. She doesn't say much to me.

She's agitated now; twitching the bedcovers, trying to neaten the stuff on top of her locker. Sarah fusses around the bed, tidying up tissues, topping up water. After two solid weeks of caretaking, this is her territory. John Paul and Robert come every night, she says, but you can tell she's in charge of everything. I sit in the chair by the bed, try to pull my addled self into the present. The Irish night is black against the window at the end of the room, beneath the television. There's a programme on with a studio audience, people in spangled dancing outfits. My brain is back in Dubai, where I left it. I take off my coat and wad it around myself, making a little nest to sink into.

'Where did you come from?' She's lying on her side, one hazel eye fixed on me keenly. She still has all her senses, whatever they're giving her.

‘London.’

‘You’re very late in.’

‘I had to wait for a connection.’

‘Sarah will take you home now.’ I’ve been here all of ten minutes. ‘Go on, let ye. I want to go to sleep.’

We leave her, a tiny S shape under a velour blanket.

The next day, for want of anything better to do, I go to the funeral home. The director is a big man with an expensive black wool coat and a full head of suspiciously dark hair combed back off his forehead. He nods when I tell him my mother’s name. ‘We’ve looked after a number of the family here,’ he says, like they’re Kennedys. Another Cork-is-the-centre-of-the-universe person. I have a sudden memory of Mammy making me kiss a waxen Granda Bob in the room across from where we are sitting, the room with all the coffins in it. No memory of Nana being in there, which is for the best, really.

The director lays a blank sheet of paper on the desk and touches the top of it delicately. His nails are spotless, and slightly too long. I think of Count Dracula, putting contracts in front of Jonathan Harker.

‘First thing now: the Notice.’ Apparently, a death notice has to go in the local paper before anything else can happen. This being Cork, nobody wants to miss anything.

‘So we are thinking . . . a few days . . . ?’ He steeples his fingers together and trails off delicately. His tie is navy, with snow-white polka dots, bright but proper.

‘Days, the doctor said last night, definitely.’

‘OK. Today is Friday, tomorrow is Saturday, obviously, we do nothing Sunday. And the following Tuesday is out also, I can tell you that right now. There’ll be no funerals in the diocese next

Tuesday, the clergy is meeting above with the Bishop.’ He says this like I should be pleased for them. I’m trying to do the mental arithmetic, working back from my flight home in ten days’ time. Rosary, removal, a day for the funeral.

The ideal scenario, I gather, is for Mammy to die some evening before the 8pm deadline of the local paper. That would allow the Rosary to be said the following evening. ‘There is no extra charge to have the Rosary on one day, and the removal the next morning,’ he tells me magnanimously. How many will come to the funeral, I wonder. Old friends from The Chimes, Chapel Hill, her nursing days? I’ve seen the little loudspeakers outside the funeral home, tucked under the awning. They pump the Hail Marys out to those gathered on the footpath at big removals. I’d have thought Mammy’s disposition would have precluded big numbers, but you never know. Sarah maintains she was kind to people.

A red light flashes on the phone in front of us. The funeral director picks it up, listens. Puts it down, picks it up again, jabs a button. ‘Denis, the lady from Redemption Road, is she in there?’ Listens. Puts it down, picks it up again, the voice low and solemn: ‘Yes, Mum is actually with us now. We’ll see you after three today for the viewing.’ He hangs up and looks back at me. ‘Drop in her clothes at some stage. Doesn’t matter if they’re too big, we’ll sort that out. Clothes only, no shoes, she won’t need them.’ Well, obviously, I stifle a giggle.

‘Lipstick as well, if she wears it.’ Rimmel, Heather Shimmer. I see her now, in the snugs of the pubs, in the back of all the taxis, pushing her lips out, making an O shape. Quick swipe, no mirror. Frosted purple, it made her look mildly hypothermic. She never strayed from it.

‘Address?’

‘Mine? Er, no, sorry it’s –’

‘We NEVER put the house number in the paper,’ he shouts at me suddenly. ‘Only the *locality*.’ Sarah explains later it’s so people don’t rob you while you’re out at the funeral.

The death notice will cost 350 Euro and there’s a free repeat after six months, so people can say some sort of prayer for her. I nod, pretending this makes sense to me. She bought her own grave a long time ago, out on a wooded hillside near Blarney. All I need to do is sign, and Cork Corporation will open it. He slides a form in front of me. I stare down at it for a moment, imagining the men with shovels standing ready for my mother. I look around for someone to tell me it’s OK to do this, but there’s no one to give permission. I sign my name, accept a charge of 80 Euro.

‘Now the service’ – he opens his hands and sweeps them across the desk, conjuring an altar. A big ugly Apple Watch beeps discreetly on one hairy wrist – Irish people are mad for them, he’s probably counting steps like my sister. ‘The church have clamped down hugely on non-hymns,’ he says severely, ‘but you may get away with something at the processional.’

‘Er, no, traditional is fine.’ Mammy has a horror of pop songs in churches, thinks it’s common. She loves a good funeral, reciting longingly all the highlights from every one she goes to. ‘They did The Lonesome Boatman on the clarinet, and the Montfort Choir were on the altar . . .’ On enquiry, it seems everyone she wanted to sing at hers is dead already.

As the undertaker is walking me out, my head spinning with details of musical interludes and floral arrangements, I see my cousin’s wife sitting by the door talking to the receptionist. There’s a moment of mutual shock – what the fuck is she doing here? – and then Mammy’s voice again, on the phone one Sunday not that long ago. ‘Brennie’s after picking out her coffin below in the funeral home. She does the hair for the corpses, so she gets a free one.’

‘Oh my God, has it come to this already?’ Brennie’s eyes are wide with horror.

‘I’m just getting ready, for when it comes to it.’ I stammer, my face flaming. By dinnertime, this will be all over the Northside. Mammy will die if my father’s family finds out she is dying. Die of fury. Of pure rage at the thought of them knowing her business. I hear Byrne’s soft voice in my head. ‘An intensely private person.’ Sarah will kill me.

When I get back to my sister’s there’s a jug of water on top of the toilet, for flushing, presumably. My dad is a plumber. There’s a proverb about this, doctors’ kids going barefoot or something? My brother and his wife are over from London, we’re all staying in my sister’s tiny inner-city cottage. This morning the water heater was pluming smoke out into the back garden. I text my dad about the toilet and scrub the shower, weirdly soothed by the fake lemon smell of the Cif and the scald of water on my knuckles. Sarah texts from the hospital: No change. I can come over this evening if I want to. I’ll go to West Cork in a couple of days, I decide, if there’s nothing happening. I’ve only just got here and already the itch to get out is all over my skin. I’m jetlagged to fuck, I just want to sleep and walk up a hill.

Three

I am looking up at the kitchen clock high on the wall on the right-hand corner. It is a flat gold circle with spiky black numerals on every quarter: 3, 6, 9, 12. The hands are in between the 9 and the 12, so I know it's late. I have only learnt how to tell time recently. There's a priest sitting at the kitchen table, his back half-turned to me. I can see his face in profile, he looks as bewildered as I am to be in our kitchen not far off midnight. I'm sitting behind him and off to the right slightly, my back against the counter that runs parallel to our big window, separating the dining area from the rest of the kitchen. I'm sitting on a brown carpet, and the floor around me is sparkling with smashed pieces of a Carling Black Label bottle. They seem to be everywhere, maybe it's more than one bottle. I'm only aware of the priest and myself in the kitchen, but my mother or my father must have been around too, one of them must have called him. Our house is so new I can smell it; later on it'll smell like

dog, and hot fat from the chip pan, and the Christmas trees she leaves up until February every year, but for now there's only the fresh smell of the wood and paint my father used to make the counter, and the clean synthetic smell of the plastic webbing at the carpet's edges.

We moved into Hollymount when I was a baby. My dad, and two of my mother's brothers, and assorted friends, all tradesmen, worked together on two houses at the top of the Northside, where the city meets the country. A Housing Corporation scheme sold land cheap, or loaned young families the money to build houses. Ours were two of the first to go up: one for my mother and her family, the other for one of her brothers. 'We built privately,' Mammy would hiss at taxi drivers, breath sweet with drink as they drove us up from Shandon Street. She makes them take the Blarney Road wherever possible, avoiding the Corporation estates in Hollyhill, with their speed bumps on the road to foil the joyriders. But the priest must have come from Hollyhill Parish, it's the closest to us. I don't remember him saying anything, just both of us sitting in the kitchen. Me, watching the long shards of dark glass glittering in the thick new carpet; him saying nothing either; you could even hear the clock ticking regularly, which was scary. The priest shifts slightly in his chair, turning his back on me fully. He is looking at the back wall of the kitchen, where two African serving spoons hang over the table. They are made of dark wood, with handles in the shape of a lion and a zebra. Auntie Cay brought them back from a safari. The chairs are gleaming silver, the table has a cloth with flowers on it for our birthday parties. Mammy never fails to give us one – she must have done twenty years of parties between us. Everything is new and nice in that house, throughout my childhood, until it isn't.

The priest must have gone in the end, and someone makes me go to bed, but I don't remember. He has reddish hair, parted

down the middle, longer than you'd think it would be, and thick black glasses, of the sort that are now quite fashionable. He wears his black dress, and his white collar. I don't know who summoned him. Maybe my dad rang him? It's not like him, but he might have been at the end of his tether already. I can't be sure I didn't dream it. A lot of my childhood memories are like this, flashes that go off in my head sometimes, that come back to me with a force that knocks the breath out of my chest, sends me looking for a pen, or texting my brother, or my sister. Do you remember the priest, the taxi driver, the rabbit? Sometimes they do, and sometimes they remember something else entirely. Nobody remembers the priest but me, but that makes sense – I was very young, maybe 4, and I am the eldest. My brother and sister, would have been babies, if they'd been born even. That's the only priest I remember being in our house, except for one who came to stay once. He was a distant cousin I think, back from the missions. He was very holy and very skinny. Mammy caught me looking at him through the keyhole of the guest room door, 'Noelle, you'll go to hell, stop it.' He was getting changed after a shower, but all I got was a flash of thin flanks and bony shoulders. She was never as fond of priests as you'd think a devout Catholic would be. She pretends to be asleep when one comes to see her in the Mercy. 'Let him go 'way out of that, don't be annoying me,' she hisses to my sister in a whisper.

The priest stands out, because not many people came to our house, that I remember. Apart from cousins. One of my father's sisters had five daughters who lived not far away. The oldest ones must have been useful babysitters. There's photos of Mammy marching one of them, aged about 14, and her friend up and down the front room, making them stand on the marble

fireplace, hands on their hips, posing. A Miss World pageant, she told them. ‘Shoulders back, big SMILE. Come on, ye want to win it, don’t ye?’ It must have been the swimsuit section, they’re only wearing t-shirts and knickers. It was summer, my cousin’s fair hair is bleached white in places, her legs beneath her red t-shirt are long and golden.

The only dinner party Mammy had, someone died before it started. One of my grandmother’s sisters’ husbands, I think it was. She had five sisters, my great aunts – I don’t remember any of them. Mammy was making a steamed pudding, a recipe she venerated, passed down from her mother and reaching back through generations. I remember it as a kind of stew-horror, grey coloured, topped with suet dumplings. The lid on the pressure cooker was long lost (I used it to give the dog his dinner) so Mammy used an old tin lid, weighted down with a half a brick from the garden. The pot on the stove looked like something from a witch’s kitchen, the stew hissing and seething beneath the masonry. The house was full of the smell of cooked meat and warm dripping when the first of the old people arrived, weeping. My grandmother Han was brought into the front room, where she lit innumerable cigarettes and directed the serving of sherry and madeira cake to sorrowing relatives. I watched prawn cocktails congealing in little cut glasses on the kitchen table, my mother had already put out the starters. She had a horror of mayonnaise that she passed on to me – I remember the prawns swimming in it.

Han comes to babysit me sometimes. If my parents are going out at night together, she’s ferried up to Hollymount by my father from her house by the cathedral. We had a dog by the time I was a year old, a glossy Irish setter called Sam who Mammy said was depressive. Late at night, she’ll crouch down in front of him, where he lies in a gleaming red heap at the foot of the

stairs, staring at him intently. ‘Yeah, you’re very low, boy, I know you are. God help us, I’ll say a prayer for you.’ Han is also a big fan of Sam’s, she comes with a bag of Maltesers and a bottle of Schweppes lemonade in her handbag, both of which will be mixed together in a big bowl as soon as my parents are gone. She says Sam and I can share it. Han never lasts long in Hollymount, she insists my father come home and drive her back down the hill after a few hours. ‘Tis the altitude John, I’m not able for it.’

I can’t remember when we start fighting properly. Figuring out how to get her removed from bars, I think, has a lot to do with it. Pubs are boring. Carmel glares as I fling my crisps on the floor, narrowing her kohl-rimmed eyes at me. ‘She knows exactly what she’s doing.’ Eventually the barman starts saying no as soon as he sees them coming with the buggy. I am the least compliant of my siblings. They can sit my sister on a high stool and she’ll polish the darts trophies. Mammy bribes me as best she can, packets of crisps, glasses of raspberry. She hates paying for Coke, she says – it’s the unfairness of the mark-up more than anything. She’ll give us money for the occasional slot machine or computer game, though, if the bar is an early adopter of technology. More often than not, the only thing in there to play with is a jukebox. Learning how to read the rows and rows of songs, bands, singers that grew more familiar into the 1980s. Sweet Caroline, Uptown Girl, Islands in the Stream. Neat writing first, replaced with thin slips of typed paper: 20 pence a song, six for a pound. She gets a pile of coins, sends me over the other side of the room, grabbing a few more minutes with Carmel and Philly. She must resent me furiously. But my father is out working, doing his plumbing jobs, there’s no one else to mind me, not during the day, where would she say she was going?

The wallpaper in *The Chimes* is dark wine-coloured, with a bamboo print on it. They lift me up onto one of the banquettes and I pick away at the edges of the bamboo shoots until there are bald patches. The lounge smells of old pints and fresh cigarettes, the savoury stink of cheese-and-onion Taytos. Carmel and Philly are there, before us, or after us, the long white necks of their plastic bags of messages twining with Mammy's on the spongy carpet, spilling open their contents: sliced pans, boxes of marrowfat peas, bottles of diluted orange. The pints stand on Beamish barmats before them in a sparkling huddle. That's where they get Philly's son to do his party pieces, poems he learns at school, mainly. Philly is tiny, with one turned eye, fiercely loquacious. 'Ciúnas, le bhur dtóil!' she shouts. She sometimes switches to Irish for special occasions. And the lounge falls silent. One year, Philly organises turkeys for everyone in *The Chimes* and then goes missing, so nobody has a Christmas dinner. She answers the phone at somewhere called the Cork Gay and Lesbian Helpline. Mammy always says 'She's very good in her own way'.

One day I come out of school and Mammy and Carmel are waiting in the back of a taxi. 'Get in 'til you see what we got you,' says Mammy. I sit in the front, like an adult. The car smells of drink and Estée Lauder – White Linen, or Aliage. Wherever they've been, they've been there all morning. Carmel has her long arms around a cardboard box that is shaking violently, trying to keep hold of whatever is inside it.

'You'll have to mind him, give him curly green cabbage.' Mammy taps the side of the box. It lifts a few centimetres up into the air, sides bulging. Carmel throws herself forward over it, Medusa curls flying, the ash from her fag all over the seat in front of her. I reach for the seat belt. It's way too long for me.

‘Up past the Crucifixion, please.’ Mammy sounds haughty. His knuckles are white on the steering wheel. They’d have kept him outside The Chimes a good half hour. There’s loud scabbling from the back, the witchy sound of long nails scraping. The statues blur past: dying Christ, his weeping mother.

‘Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Come on, girl!’ Mammy blesses herself, insists I do the same. The driver thumps his chest three times with a vengeance.

Passing the asylum, the box flies open. A savage kick, a flash of fur, thrilling and alien. Carmel tries to jam the flap back down. ‘For fuck’s sake, hold onto him!’

Mammy is high, triumphant. Children’s Allowance day, maybe. I am deeply excited about whatever is in the box, even though it’s Carmel holding it. Her son catches pigeons when we’re outside The Chimes, just throws his jacket over them. I don’t know what happens to them afterwards. She’s trying to keep the box steady. Whatever’s inside is trying to tunnel through the bottom.

Outside Hollymount, Mammy makes the driver wait for his money, counting out coppers. Her bag is all over the back seat, Silvermints and tissues, Granda’s Mass card; she refuses to gather it up in any kind of hurry. She wants to provoke him, there’s a perceived lack of deference in all of these encounters that infuriates her. She doesn’t have a key but the side gate is open. Released from its box, the rabbit is enormous. Grey and mangy with massive hind legs, it quivers all over.

‘A buck,’ says Mammy approvingly. Crazed from the journey, it runs straight at the garden wall and finds a too-small hole to jam itself into. When I try to pull it out, it makes a thin wailing noise like a baby.

‘Don’t go into her, boy, she’d fucking eat you.’ The next-door neighbour. Mammy hates her. One of her boys called her an alkie

once when she took his ball off him. She puts Daddy's big metal toolbox under the window ledge and stands up on it.

Carmel stays by the washing line, smoking. Her black clip-on earrings have streams of crystals that reach down to her shoulders. 'You'd want to mind that rabbit your mother got you.' I turn my back on her.

'Christ's sake, help me Carmel, I don't want to knock the Busy Lizzie.' My mother is pushing against the glass like a cat, her fingers working the catch on the window. Last time, she cut her hand open. Blood all over her good blue dress, must have been a wedding they were at, or a christening. Carmel braces her leg and she pulls herself up and into the kitchen.

The rabbit is trying to dig its way under the fuchsia by the back wall, white cotton tail in the air, hind legs pumping furiously. There's room in the hutch after the guinea pigs got eaten but I'll have to catch it. I imagine Daddy coming in from work, Carmel sitting in the kitchen, the bottle with the blue label on the table in front of them. The next time I see the rabbit, he's on the main road, we left the side gate open. Mammy breaks ice cubes out of their tray. 'He'll come back, he's only exploring.'