

Lori O'Dea

Shame

THE CHURCH IS A BASILICA, a domed almost-cathedral in a neighborhood of flat and hilly streets with Center Street as its scoliotic spine. The side streets that poke off its curves start out with tall townhouse apartments, where the turnover of tenants is high. These give way to three-family houses three stories high, which are flat-roofed and shingled in dull asbestos or pastel aluminum. At the end, are the single-family houses, still close together, but with small front yards that bloom now, green, with pride.

After the christening, the children trip down the red-carpeted center aisle, out of the cool, scented air and onto the tiers of granite steps that deliver the church to the sidewalk. Four children scatter like seeds flung across the granite. They are two and two and two years apart as if they had sprouted and sprung up at two-year intervals from between the grooves of the steps.

A girl with skinny legs pulls up her white knee socks. Weak spring sun fades her goose pimples. Her white sandals, new at Easter, crack around the buckles. The head of the boy next to her pops out on a thin neck from the collar of a goldenrod dress shirt, worn with a white tie. The younger, chunkier boy squats at a seam in the steps and herds ants with a dried strand of grass. He is round and strong with legs curling out of his brown and white plaid shorts. Tawny curls loop around his great head. A fourth one sits in the sun with her legs stretched out, the pink church bulletin rolled like a telescope—she watches her brother watch ants—then a megaphone. “Go in peace,” she mouths into it. She looks ready for a tennis match, in a blue sleeveless dress with thin white stripes and white ankle socks with blue cloth sneakers.

One of the great doors opens, breaking the spell of the steps. A solid young man in a peach-colored suit stands as a doorstep.

His black hair slickly parts his big, round head—the ant-watcher’s head enlarged. The adults emerge.

The children watch the adults pose for photographs with a white lace bundle that they pass—always gingerly, elbows up—from arm to arm. A small, black camera passes also, from eye to eye. It makes a kaleidoscope of the men, the women, the white bundle and the priest; they shift into variegated patterns, though the children see that the white cocoon always bobs to the center and the priest never holds it. His garments flow.

“Kathleen, Joseph,” the tall man with black sideburns demands the older children’s attention. The camera hides in his hand. “Ye kids walk home.” He pauses as if to say something else, but adds nothing.

“Edward, c’mon.” He is a roly-poly getting up and the four of them gather in a band. The most important instruction they receive whenever they head out to school, to the pool, to the skating rink is “Stick together.”

They do not stop on the corner at Garcia’s Superette for Mike-n-Ikes or Blow Pops as they usually would. Their street is first after the church. It wends from Center Street, the commercial face of the neighborhood, into its inner workings.

Steep steps mount to the entryways of the townhouse apartments. At this time of day, no one is out on the steps. Joseph is in the lead, then Kathleen, then Norah. Edward lags behind. They pass the schoolyard on the left, the school for special children. They don’t know anyone who goes there. Kids come in on a van.

“Dog!” Joseph calls. They start across the street. The chained attack dog hurls himself at the fence, which bulges and rattles its metal links. Marching past the three-family houses, they slow down in front of the one that always slows them down.

“Look at that!”

“So stupid!”

“I can’t believe they would do that!”

The tenants had pulled up the rickety hedges that typically stood in the three-foot wide space between these houses and their chain link fences. They had poured white plaster over the dirt, leaving several circles of soil, from which spring yellow plastic

roses. The kids never run out of energy for commenting on it. The illogic mesmerizes them.

“Disgusting.” Kathleen points at a pile of yellow rice and peas that someone has dumped out for stray dogs to eat.

“Why would you feed stray dogs?” Joseph says. “They’ll only come back for more.”

“But if you leave food out for them, maybe they won’t tear the garbage bags,” Norah says.

“Hefty, hefty, hefty!” Joseph chants the trash bag jingle.

“Wimpy, wimpy, wimpy!” Edward completes it. The two boys snort.

The street is quiet. On weekends, it takes a while for a rhythm to pick up. They cross back to the right side and approach the first one-family house, a shadowy brown one. Pebbled concrete stairs jag up from the sidewalk to the front porch. A boy Kathleen’s age, the house’s only child, sits on the top step. He is always there. Kathleen, who has taken the lead, does not look at him as they pass. “Hair problem!” she calls back. The boy’s beige hair fuzzes high around his head.

“Eye problem!” he counters. Kathleen is already past. The red wings that spread across her cheeks raise enough warmth to fog, like a moist breath, the lenses of her purple-framed glasses.

“Hair problem!” the other three shout in unison as they scurry past the steps.

The Field is on the right. It should be called the Hill, Norah thinks. It is an empty lot, the length of three or maybe four houses, an incline of black dirt and weeds. There had been a big fire before they moved to the neighborhood. They’d heard about it. The fire had ravaged the houses set into the hill, burned them to the ground. Now the hill is weeds. The scent of wet, black dirt floats on the sidewalk at its base. Set at the top corner, high on the hill, is a lumpy boulder, tempting to climb on, but thickly protected at its base by stinging thatches of nettles. The boulder always beckons Norah. She has cravings to climb it, to stand atop it and act out scenes. From that height, she could rebuke the Devil, with his red-brown leathery hide, his yellow fangs, his spade-pointed tail. But going up or down risks an angry patch of sting.

“Look how clean it is starting here,” Joseph says, pointing to the line in the sidewalk that marks the end of the Field. They live four houses down. “Dad made me sweep all the way to here. Sidewalk and gutter.” That chore had been the night before. They had all come to the dinner table with dirt on their hands. Except Kathleen. She had been watching the baby, in the bassinet in the living room, and listening to records. Norah had tended the front yard with Edward, picking bits of leaves and litter from the perimeter of their fence, sweeping the walk, the porch, and the entire side patio.

Norah thinks their house is the nicest on the street. It is set back from the sidewalk and is taller, narrower. She likes their low, silver fence and the gate with rounded corners, which they always close behind them, coming or going. A concrete walk parts the yard into a strip of flowerbed and a square of lawn. Grooves divide the walk into rectangles just like a sidewalk.

It is early still for the lawn. Delicate blades of green have sprouted evenly across the square, but have not filled in lushly enough to cover the wet black loam. This is their father’s project: to grow a thick, healthy, green lawn.

In one year at the house, he has transformed the small front yard, which had seemed insignificant, a postage stamp. He has stood after dinner on the high front porch and looked over the fraction of a fraction of an acre. At the kitchen table, while they cleared dishes, swept and washed up, he would draw his plans on white napkins. Ballpoint pen rolled firmly over the textured paper. Amiably, he would summon one of them to his chair at the head of the table. An unlucky one, they thought. “This will be a bed, here,” he would say, and first they thought he meant to sleep on because they had moved from an apartment and didn’t know the potential of a yard. They hadn’t known then what he could do.

He had a clever eye, and on the drive home from work he might spot something useful. After dinner, Joseph, Norah and Edward would ride with him to a dark, quiet street in a nice neighborhood, where a load of cobblestones might sit on the edge of a property. One stone filled both hands so they loaded the

back of the station wagon cobble by cobble until the powerful Buick sagged.

On a weekend drive, they had found a tall, coppery stone in the shape of a ship's prow. It had taken the four of them to loosen it from the earth, roll it onto a mover's quilt and haul it up into the car. The natural obelisk now stands as the centerpiece of the flowerbed. Norah doesn't particularly like it. It is pointy and has so many edges; she imagines someone falling on it and getting hurt.

Daffodils huddle, yellow faces together, like children in the schoolyard. Tulips daydream, one after the other, along the side bed. The children know, because he has told them, that this is the beginning of the growth. The spindly Rocky Mountain crab apple tree is blooming with waxy pink and white petals. They will not be able to eat them, but the apples will come in the fall, small hard babies.

They feel proud of the yard today. The plans were all his—blue ink on napkins, stowed in the kitchen drawer with his mail—but much of the work has been theirs, his three laborers: Joseph, Norah, and Edward. Kathleen isn't hardy, so he left her alone. Her work has come finally, they see, with the new baby. On school nights, they had gone to bed with arms long and tired, overstretched by cold, soil-dusted stones. His hands were as hard as the stone and they would smack a cheek red for setting a cobblestone down wrong along the margin of the flowerbed. They went to sleep without doing their homework, brushing their teeth or washing their hands. He didn't tell them to, and their mother didn't check on them as much that spring.

Cars line the narrow street, parked tightly against the curbs. The green station wagon is in its usual spot in front of the house. A sky blue Beetle is bumper-to-bumper behind it. Joseph taps the white ragtop. Kathleen peers into the front seat. "They have a tape deck," she says. Her convex lenses tap against the car window.

"Hey—" They stiffen, quick and rigid, at the shout. "Hey, Bostonians, get *offa* my *cah*!" They relax again when they see Uncle Jack, in Bermuda shorts, grinning from the porch. He is

from Connecticut and not Irish and likes to make fun of their Boston accents.

While they had been walking home from church, the christening party had arrived, driving the quick circuit of one-way streets.

“There’s me boy, Joey,” Donny Cooley calls from the gate. “Will you fellas go on now and help the lads unload the van?” Donny wears a red and gold accordion strapped to his chest. He is older than their father, with a black and gray fisherman’s beard. “Hello girls,” he says. “Aren’t ye both lovely.” Donny escorts them up the walk, and then stops and rocks back onto his heels, peering into their faces. Norah peers back. She can’t see his mouth because it is hidden in his beard, but his eyes smile at her. She holds his eyes until a tremor runs through her like a chill, sending her head and shoulders into an exaggerated shiver.

“What’s the matter, bee sting ya?” Donny asks.

“She’s a goof,” Kathleen explains.

“Well, goof or no, I’m expecting a song from the both of ye later.” Kathleen beams. Norah inhales and holds the breath in her chest. Her eyes drop. Kathleen clomps up the stairs, knees turning in awkwardly, pointy elbows jabbing back at the air. Down the walk, the gate stands open and the teenage Cooley boys—Peter and Simon—lead Joseph, Edward, and redheaded Cullen Shaunessey up the sidewalk, bearing a guitar case and pieces of a sparkly drum set. Edward has a tambourine. Norah hops up the steps. Twelve steps rise to the porch from the front yard, but only four steps sink down to the side patio. Norah had helped arrange tables and chairs on the patio, where most of the party would be. She can see adult heads out there, so darts past, through the dark screen door.

She thought that the dark screen door would mean quiet. Maybe in the house it would be like any day. But the dark is just a trick of the screen. Sun shines into the hallway, colored by the stained glass window above the telephone table.

“Norah, sweetheart!” Aunt Peggy’s ebullient high pitch is like a hard pink candy made only in Ireland. Her crinkled eyes look happy, but make Norah feel worried.

“Look at you! A natural beauty! Look at your curls!” Aunt Peggy smooths Norah’s hair, which Norah had brushed that morning herself. “You must be headed to the country club.” Aunt Peggy fingers the hem of Norah’s dress. “What kind of lifestyle are you living here in Boston?” The dress hasn’t always been Norah’s. It has a white cloth nametag sewn inside the collar: Sally Maxwell. Norah holds her hands behind her back. Aunt Peggy comes in close for a kiss on the lips. They both pucker tightly so their lips feel hard to Norah when they meet.

The kitchen is a commotion, with women at the fridge, the stove, the sink, the counter and the table. Uncle Freddy, now down to the white shirt and the peach vest with its satin back, is taking glass tumblers from the hutch. They are the good glasses, and he seems able to carry one between each finger. He has taken the big bottles from the living room cabinet and set up a bar on the kitchen counter. Norah sees new glass bottles of Tom Collins, tonic water and ginger ale, but she doesn’t see any grape soda. Tonic water, she knows, is no good for drinking.

The kitchen table, where they eat dinner every night in their proper places, has been pushed against the wall and covered with a bright yellow tablecloth. Norah’s and Edward’s chairs are gone to the living room. Where will the new baby sit, Norah wonders, when she gets big enough? They already fill the table. How long will it take? She is so little now. She eats only a bottle and spits up most of it onto soft baby washcloths that their mother and Kathleen hang over their shoulders. Norah isn’t allowed to pick up the baby yet, but she has reached into the bassinet and wrapped her hands around the baby’s belly. It felt little and big at the same time. Thinking of the baby, Norah feels a brilliant rush. She is home now. For so long she was in their mother’s stomach. Then, for a week, she was at the hospital—St. Eve’s, where Norah herself, all of them, had been born. In so many ways, they are all the same, Norah thinks. All born in America, all with blue eyes. The baby’s eyes are so dark they look navy blue or even black, but they will change color, their mother said. They will get lighter like everyone else’s. Right now, the baby can’t even see really. When Norah peered over the side of the bassinet, the

baby's eyes were open and she perked up, but it was as if she were hearing Norah, not seeing her. She just looked out, as if she were looking at everything all at once. But when Norah talked to her, the baby would listen carefully and then twist her tiny torso in its soft white undershirt. Norah liked that. She likes how the baby has her own special clothes and washcloths and blankets. And she eats her own food, right now just formula, but soon she'll eat more, their mother said, baby food and cereal. When Norah was a baby, she liked Vienna sausages and fish sticks. Maybe the new baby will like them too.

One after the other, the women set platters of food on the table, each taking a moment to rearrange things so that her platter is given the best advantage. Rolled slices of ham, turkey and American cheese are ready to be made into sandwiches on small rolls that overflow two baskets. Loaves, thinks Norah, tiny loaves. The plate of deviled eggs shimmers, with yolks whipped high and sprinkled with rich paprika. Big bowls of potato salad and green salad wait with their hinged tongs ready and a dish of pickles between them. Arrayed on a wooden cutting board are two kinds of Irish bread: raisin, the kind they all like; and soda, the kind only Kathleen and their mother like. A fresh stick of butter softens. Roast beef, in its pan, is still half-covered with tinfoil. An uproar on the far side of the kitchen interrupts Norah's inventory.

"Peggy, what did you make!"

"You've outdone us all, haven't ya!"

Aunt Peggy has loaded their broadest platter, the crackled blue and white one, with a pyramid of sugar-dusted chocolate balls.

"Jesus, what are they?"

"They're rum balls, for Christ's sake. They'll put a little life into the party!"

Aunt Peggy sets the platter at the front of the table and says over her shoulder to Norah's mother, "These are not for the children. And don't let Joe have any, or there'll be none left for the rest of us." She can make fun of Dad, Norah thinks, because she's his sister.

"Isn't it a great spread," Ann Fey says to them all. Her cardigan droops from gaunt shoulders and her lips pinch so tightly that

Norah cannot imagine food getting in. Ann and her sister Oona had come over recently from Galway.

“I’m wonderin’, when’re you intendin’ to set out the spuds, Colette?” Huskier, younger Oona jokes to Norah’s mother. They always make jokes about potatoes, which Norah doesn’t think are funny because she doesn’t like potatoes.

“We’re holdin’ them back ‘til your weddin’,” Ann snaps.

“There’s time enough for that, now, isn’t there.”

“ ‘Tis, I suppose.”

“There’s plenty of potato salad!” Aunt Peggy waves her hand over the bowl as if she doesn’t know that they are joking.

Norah waits for her mother to add something, but she stands quietly, her hands resting at the top of her orangey-red skirt, where her creamy blouse tucks in. She is dressed up, but to Norah she looks the same as always. Just her hair is a little longer and has new silver pieces where she brushes it back behind her ears. Norah thinks her mother looks the same all the time, even when she is dressed up like this, in a skirt that goes to the floor. She looks best when they go to the beach and she wears white shorts and a striped shirt and Dr. Scholl’s sandals. She has a small, flat chest. Small like me, Norah thinks, looking at Oona Fey, whose chest rustles under her blouse like heavy white doves. Norah thinks her mother looks a little fed up.

“Norah, go on now, don’t stand around here,” her mother says in a low tone. Norah disappears around the corner and up the wooden flight to the second floor. She examines the bottle-lamp on the landing. Grand Marnier, the label says. She pictures a pirate in a velvet hat sailing the wild seas. I read that every day, she thinks. The bathroom door is closed. She hears a flush and in a moment the door opens. Evelyn Egan, in a pale pink dress, emerges. Norah does not like her. At Great Aunt Delia’s wake, Evelyn Egan had pointed out a stain on the jacket of Norah’s secondhand pantsuit. “You spilt something, love.” But Norah hadn’t spilled anything. The stain had come on the jacket and her mother had said it was okay to wear. And better than a dress to Norah.

“Does your mum have a comb, love?” Evelyn asks.

“Yes, on her bureau,” Norah answers, casting her eyes toward her parents’ bedroom. Evelyn walks in to the center of the carpet then turns to the lower, broader of the matching bureaus and picks up the comb from the mirrored tray. She starts lightly teasing her red hair, which is spun high like cotton candy. Norah backs up against the bed to keep an eye on Evelyn. She watches her back and her raised arm and also her face in the mirror.

“You know, I was almost your mum,” Evelyn says into the mirror.

Norah doesn’t quite understand this. She is afraid that Evelyn, right then, might fly into the mirror and turn into her mother or a bat.

“You don’t know what to make of that, do you,” Evelyn continues. Norah knows that her tennis dress has no stains on it, so she stands quietly, watching Evelyn touch lightly at her orange corona.

“Long before your mum came along, your dad was a sweetheart of mine. He wanted to marry me, and I would have been your mum.”

Norah says nothing.

“He was a fine fellow, your dad, the life of the party. And now he’s a regular working man. Good job your mum did, reeling him in. Our crowd thought he was going to be a film star or a singer, before he got tripped up with drink.”

Norah wants to move. She feels choked by the rose petal scent emanating from Evelyn’s dress. The comb clicks down on the tray. “He’s a new man now. A fine new daddy.”

A pack of boys, like mountain goats, clambers up the stairs and around through the other bedrooms. At the landing, Norah can hear the muffled beat of their hooves as they mount the attic stairs to the boys’ room.

She waits until Evelyn is down the stairs and out the front door before she returns to the kitchen. The women have cleared out. Her father and Uncle Freddy are mixing drinks. She watches her father’s hands, which he had rubbed completely clean the night before with special cream from his workbench. He tosses three ice cubes into a tumbler, and then fills it with clear liquor almost

to the top. He splashes in just enough orange juice to diffuse its color through the drink.

“You can be my waitress, Norah,” he says. “Take this screwdriver to Mina Shaunessey. And tell Willy Shaunessey that the beer is out there in the cooler. And ask Father Ryan what he’d like.” Norah takes the cold glass with the cocktail napkin in both hands. She pops the clasp of the screen door with her shoulder. Edging into the disorder of adults talking and smoking, she grips the glass and measures her footfalls across the patio. At the far end, the Cooleys are setting up the band. Mina Shaunessey is at the picnic table with Norah’s mother and the Fey sisters. Light plumes of smoke flow from their cigarettes. Norah sets the drink before Mina.

“Thanks, love.”

Norah watches her mother exhale smoke through her nose and mouth in two streams and a cloud. She decides it is silly to tell her mother that Evelyn Egan used her comb. She goes over to where Willy Shaunessey sits with Duff Cronin and Duff’s girlfriend Anita.

“Willy,” she says.

His grizzled clown hair turns and he faces her with bright eyes and ruddy cheeks. “What’s that? Kathleen, is it?”

“No, Norah,” she says. Even her mother calls her Kathleen sometimes, though they aren’t alike at all; but her mother sometimes calls her Joseph or Edward. Sometimes her mother runs through the whole list of names before she gets to Norah’s.

“Yes, yes, Norah, so it is, so it is. If you’re goin’ ta ask me to dance, lass, I’ll say we better wait ‘til the band is on!”

Duff and Anita laugh.

“My father said to tell you that the beer is in the cooler.”

“So he did, so he did. Isn’t he a fine man, your father? And finer he’d be if you’d tighten a few extra screws in his head.”

“Do you want me to get you a can of beer?”

“No that’s all right, love. There’s time yet for beer.”

Norah sees Duff’s round muscles stretch his blue sports shirt. Anita, who is American, has white-blond hair that is high, wild and beautiful like a movie star’s.

Norah hears Aunt Peggy's laugh. "I have to ask Father Ryan what he wants," she says.

"Oh, that'll be a mystery! Now there's a fella needs a drink," Willy cracks, unleashing a second round of laughter from Duff and Anita.

Norah doesn't know why Aunt Peggy is stretched out on her mother's lawn chair when there are plenty of chairs set up for everyone to sit on. She must have pulled it out from alongside the porch. It doesn't look right, a lawn chair crooked among the upright chairs and tin tray tables they had arranged so that people could talk, set down their food and drinks, and still have room to dance when the Cooleys started to play.

Father Ryan sits talking with Aunt Peggy. He wears trim black pants and a short-sleeved black shirt with his white collar stiff at the neck. His face is smooth and tanned, and his long hair slicks back to his shoulders. On Sundays, at nine o'clock, he says the children's mass and on Saturdays he is an umpire for Joseph's little league, which will be Norah's too next year. He sits now with his legs wide open, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees and his chin in his hands. He looks crouched, almost the way he does when he is umping behind home plate in his black chest pad and caged facemask. Norah likes to stand behind home plate too, behind the chain link fence, to watch the pitches coming in. Joseph's benched teammates always taunt the opponent at bat: "Batter, batter, batter!" First, Norah had expected the boys to get in trouble and she had waited for Father Ryan to scold them. He hadn't; and soon she understood that teasing was part of the game.

At a pause in her aunt's pulsing divulgements, Norah interrupts. "Father Ryan," she says, "my father asked me to ask you what you want to drink."

"Didn't he ask you to ask me too?" Aunt Peggy opens her eyes wide and stares brightly.

"No."

"Isn't that just like Joe," Aunt Peggy says to Father Ryan, "forgetting his own family. Norah, tell your father that his sister, who has been so good to him all these years, would like a vodka

and tonic with lime and with plenty of rocks.”

“Did you get all that, Norah?” Father Ryan smiles, as if he agrees that Aunt Peggy is acting funny. “And I’ll just have a beer, please.”

“There’s beer in the cooler.” That is something she can take care of right away. She pulls open the green cooler lid and takes a can from the ice.

“Thank you, Norah.” Father Ryan places the beer, unopened, on the patio near his feet. This is not how Norah had imagined it. She wants them to put away the lawn chair and sit upright, with Father Ryan’s beer on the tray table.

Her father mixes Aunt Peggy’s drink in a tall, slender glass. He fills it with ice, and then halfway with liquor and to the top with tonic, and then he perches a lime wedge on the rim. He stabs a clear green swizzle stick down through the ice. Norah thinks the drink looks perfect and the clink and fizz it makes as she carries it out makes her thirsty for a glass of ginger ale.

She makes a wide circle around the lawn chair and, unnoticed, sets the drink with its napkin on the tray table. Over the high chair back, she can see Aunt Peggy’s white but freckled legs stretched out. Norah is up the steps again before Aunt Peggy catches her. “Now that’s first-class service! Thank you, sweetie!”

“You’re welcome,” Norah answers, with a meager smile. She always says please and thank you and you’re welcome. When she wants to leave the dinner table, she says, “Please may I be excused?” She doesn’t know where she learned her manners; she’s always had them. Kathleen and Joseph have them too; Edward forgets sometimes. She’s heard their parent’s friends and even strangers comment “What good manners!” or “So polite!” That’s how they are: good looking, polite and able to sing Irish ballads and rebel songs at a party. Norah hates having to sing at her father’s command. Her throat gets lumpy and her face gets rubbery hot. Kathleen likes it though, and Joseph has no fear at all of warbling through the verses of “The Wild Colonial Boy.”

Norah thinks she might be able to get some ginger ale and take it up to her room, but from the front hall she can hear her father and Uncle Freddy talking in the kitchen.

“Sure, you know I’m good for it, Joe,” Uncle Freddy says. “I wouldn’t ask except that I need it right away.” His reedy voice sounds higher and faster than usual. Norah can’t hear what her father says, but when she leans into the doorway, she sees his fingers tugging his brown wallet from the back pocket of his slacks.

“This’ll have to do, Freddy. It’s all I can spare right now.”

“Aw thanks, Joe. I’m good for it. I’ll have it back before you have a chance to spend it.”

“Don’t worry about what I’m goin’ to spend, Freddy, because you have no idea what all this costs.” Her father gestures not to the food or the drinks, but to the kitchen itself. He had installed the swirled orange countertops and the golden-flecked linoleum. Her mother had worked late one Friday night, before her stomach had gotten so big, hanging the leafy wallpaper. Joseph was her helper, unrolling the long strips while she brushed on paste. Their father was out at his A.A. anniversary, so they got to stay up late. In the living room, Norah played Monopoly until Kathleen owned the board. Edward drew dinosaur scenes at the coffee table. The “Happy Days” album spun through its songs until they heard the station wagon pull up. Norah had never seen her mother hang wallpaper before, but somehow she knew how to make all the leaves and vines match up perfectly at the seams.

“Hey, Nori-rraaah,” Freddy drags out her name, “Peg need another drink so soon?”

“No.” She hesitates. “Dad, can I please have some ginger ale?”

“Everybody wants something,” her father says to Freddy. “You see, there’s no end to it.”

“What,” he says to Norah, “is it your coffee break already?” She knows he’s not really mad.

“No, not *coffee*,” she says quietly, “ginger ale.”

He smiles then. “Coming right up. One ginger ale for the lady!” He flips over a tall glass like Aunt Peggy got, fills it with ice and pours ginger ale from its green bottle. “You’re sure I can’t get you anything stronger?” he asks.

“No, thank you,” she says.

He drops a red swizzle stick into the glass. “Cherry?”

“Yes, please.”

The red maraschino cherry plops into the drink; its stem lolls over the rim. Norah tries to stop her mouth from smiling. He hands her the drink with a small napkin. “That’ll put hair on your chest!”

“I don’t want hair on my chest,” Norah says.

“Well, enjoy your break then. It may be the last one you get.”

Up the stairs, with the glass at her chin, she catches the effervescence on her tongue.

“And don’t leave that glass in your room!”

That’s the kind of thing she gets in trouble for. She leaves cups in her room and sometimes plates. “Why?” he will ask her between smacks. He thrusts his tongue between his teeth and she thinks he might bite it off.

“You’re supposed to be a smart girl—”

“—How many times do you have to be told?”

Even though she is pretty smart and gets mostly good report cards, she doesn’t know why she leaves dishes in her room. She forgets about them after the snack is done and only remembers when he storms through their bedrooms looking for messes.

Today her room is clean. The bedspread is pulled up tightly over the pillow. Her workbooks are neat on the white desk and nothing is on the bedside table except *Catcher with a Glass Arm*, from the library, and the *Children’s Illustrated Bible*. The *Illustrated Bible* belongs to all the kids. Sometimes they get presents to share: a toboggan, Twister, the *Sound of Music* album. None of the other kids is interested in the *Illustrated Bible*, so Norah keeps it in her room. She is planning to read the whole thing, but doesn’t go in order and often reads the same stories over.

She sits on the shag carpet with the book and sips her ginger ale. “The Prodigal Son” is one of her favorite stories. The boy in the purple robe leaves his father’s beautiful farm with a sack of gold in his hand. After not too long, he wastes all his money and has to roll around in mud with pigs—in a pigsty. When he goes back home, he is dirty and poor and looks ashamed. Norah had thought his father wouldn’t recognize him at first and then would be mad at him, but his father runs to hug him. They have

a big feast, but the other brother is jealous because he was good all along and didn't run away or waste his money, but he doesn't get a feast or anything. Norah likes the story because it is the opposite of how it should be. The bad one is treated like he's good and that makes him seem good to everyone. The good one is treated like he's bad and that makes him seem bad. The story makes perfect sense to Norah. She told her mother about "The Prodigal Son" the first time she read it and her mother already knew the story.

The ceiling vibrates with one thud and then another. It is a good thing their father is downstairs, Norah thinks, because it sounds like those boys are jumping from the big desk in the middle of the attic onto the floor or, even worse, their beds. They like to fly off the desk and belly flop onto the mattresses. They shouldn't be doing that when anyone is home, she thinks. That's for when their parents are gone out. Again, she hears the thuds. They must be taking turns diving, she thinks, and this time they got Cullen Shaunessey to do it too. The frosted glass light fixture in the middle of her ceiling doesn't tremble, but she thinks it might if they dive again. The next tremendous thump echoes in a crash. Norah closes the Bible and rushes down the hall. The attic staircase is dark. They don't have the bulb on, and the narrow window at the top catches only a slant of light. "You guys," she calls, in a loud whisper, taking the stairs two-by-two. At the top, she pulls the string to turn on the bulb. Half a dozen chocolate rum balls smudge a paper plate on the floor.

It looks as if a schoolhouse exploded in their bedroom. The red cardboard bricks they build forts with are strewn everywhere. Cullen and Edward are face down, panting and laughing, on Edward's broken-down bed. Joseph strains his wiry arms to lift the end of the mattress, which has separated from the footboard and collapsed into the bed frame. "Shove off," he hisses. "I mean it. Shove off." His nostrils flare.

"I don't feel good," Cullen says. He rolls off the bed and squats on the floor.

Edward raises his head. "I'm gonna throw up," he says. He heaves and sure enough vomits brown paste onto the green bedspread.

Joseph clutches Edward's ankles. "Get up! You've gotta help fix this."

Cullen stands bent; his red hair hangs like a fringe. "I don't feel good." Norah shoves the garbage can under his nose as he falls and retches.

"You're all gonna get killed," she says. They need to straighten this up fast. "Edward, move over to Joseph's bed."

"Don't throw up on my bed!"

With the boys up, the mattress is easy to lift and Norah holds it while Joseph fits the metal bed frame back into the slots on the footboard. Edward retches.

"Not on my bed! Use the can," Joseph says.

Norah straightens the bedspread. "I'm not cleaning that," she says.

"Nobody asked you to."

"Well, you're gonna get killed for being so stupid."

"It's not my fault," Joseph says.

"You're older. They're just little."

"It was those Munchkins," he says, pointing to the plate. "They're gross, but these pigs ate like six each."

"They're not even Munchkins," Norah says, "and they're not supposed to be for the kids. I heard Aunt Peggy say."

"Shut up, Norah."

"Forget it. I'm going. You better not act so stupid or Dad will kill you. It's the christening!" Cullen and Edward are groaning like they're in a movie. She turns down the stairs.

The living room is quiet except for the occasional flip of Kathleen's *Seventeen* magazine. She is only thirteen, but has been reading this magazine for over a year. She doesn't notice Norah leaning in the doorway. The coil of the big, black headphones stretches across the living room from the stereo cabinet to where Kathleen lounges in the swivel armchair. The baby is asleep in the bassinet, but Norah cannot see her or hear her make any sound. The sheer white curtains billow and deflate as if they are alive and breathing in a deep slumber.

Out on the porch, Uncle Jack sits on the top step with Evelyn Egan. "Hey there, Billy Jean King, you're just in time for the show."

Donny Cooley's finger taps loud, dry pops on the microphone. The adults are listening. Peter Cooley stands to his father's left, with his hair brushed into immense brown waves and his guitar slung low. Simon slouches behind the drum set with his plastic-tipped sticks ready to go. Donny gives the accordion a squeeze. "Jaysus, what a crowd ye are to behold," he says. The adults laugh. Norah's father is up in the front with Willy Shaunessey and Duff Cronin.

"The lads and I are honored to be your entertainment today. I know I speak for us all when I say—Joe and Colette, you've come a long way from the old country and it's a beautiful family you're making here in America!"

"Cheers!" Willy Shaunessey lifts his beer can and glasses rise around the patio. "Cheers," they all say. Glasses clink. Norah sees her father bow his head and then look over to her mother, but her mother is reaching for her cigarette case and does not see him.

"Perhaps, before we get started, the good Father Ryan will give us a prayer," Donny says.

"Ah, do, Father," says Mina Shaunessey. Aunt Peggy gives the priest a push on his shoulder.

Behind the microphone, Father Ryan stares straight over them, as if tracking a fly ball to center field. "Friends and neighbors," he says, "many a man has squandered the Lord's blessings, but blessed is he who finds his way back to his Father's grace. The gospel says, 'Let us have a feast to celebrate this day. For this son of mine was dead and has come back to life; he was lost and is found.' We ask you to bless this family, Lord, and the new life you have given them." The patio is silent. Norah watches her father stare down into his coffee cup. "Amen," the priest says.

"Amen," they respond gravely.

"Shame, isn't it," Evelyn Egan whispers to Uncle Jack.

Father Ryan steps over the black microphone cord. With a nod from Donny, Simon clacks his sticks four times. They lead with a song that is not Irish, but they all know it and soon are singing along. *Good morning, America, how are you?* The guitar and accordion rise and blend, stirred into eddies by the drumbeats in the air. On the back of Norah's neck, the hair prickles.

“Norah,” says Uncle Jack, “why don’t you get Kathleen for a song?”

Norah turns the volume knob all the way down, which makes Kathleen sit up and focus her eyes beyond the magazine page. On a normal day, Kathleen can be a tempest. Norah would expect a kick, jab or knock with a hairbrush for interfering with her sister’s music. But since the baby arrived, Kathleen has been serene. Everyone is quiet around the baby. None of the other kids is allowed to pick her up. Not yet, Norah thinks. Soon the baby will grow bigger and the soft spot on her head will get harder. Norah has watched how her mother and sister and even her father hold the baby, and she knows she will be able to do it herself, to cradle the baby in one arm and wrap the other arm around her to support her neck and head. Norah never thought of her own neck as strong or of her head as heavy, but the baby’s neck is not strong enough yet to hold up its head.

“What?” Kathleen asks with an abiding ounce of patience.

“Uncle Jack wants you to go out and sing,” Norah tells her. Kathleen pushes aside the headphones and magazine.

“Stay here and watch her, okay.” Kathleen takes out her barrette, smoothes her hair and refastens the barrette. She gives her skirt a twist to center the seam. “You don’t have to do anything. Just stay here and let her sleep.” Kathleen delivers a penetrating, owly stare. “You get it?”

“Yes,” says Norah.

She stretches out on the couch the way her mother does to rest her eyes, which means to sleep. Norah doesn’t like when her mother rests her eyes; she likes her to be awake so that they can talk. Norah has not gotten a chance yet to tell her mother about the Share Out. Every Friday, someone in her class has to share out and Norah had been hoping to get an A on hers, since she had gotten a C in Penmanship. Miss Gwenn is from New York. Norah knows that New York is a city and a state, but imagines that New York is a kingdom. She would ride there on a long train of horses with red-embroidered saddles, golden coins clinking in the leather saddlebags. On Friday morning, the cafeteria floor was

strewn with translucent red bingo chips, but Norah did not squat down with the other tomboys to waddle under the tables for them like Russian dancers. Instead, she worried about her uniform. She had only one tartan plaid jumper and the wooly patch pocket on the chest was sealed up with a blob of bubblegum that Norah had concealed there from Miss Gwenn the day before.

When it was Norah's time to share out, she had stood forward.

My mother was having a baby and then my baby sister was born. She was sick when she was born. Her stomach wasn't done growing so she had to stay in the hospital for one week until she could eat on her own. Then she came home.

But instead of talking about the baby, Norah showed the class how to do neck rolls. "After a long day at work, you can take a shower and wash all the dirt off your hands and after you brush your hair you can do this exercise." She flopped her head forward and let it roll around clockwise. "Then you can go in the other direction," she said and rolled her head counterclockwise. Most of the kids tried it.

"Thank you, Norah," Miss Gwenn said. Her eyes motioned Norah back to her seat. Norah did not watch Miss Gwenn make a little mark in her grade book. She did not want to see if it looked pointy like an A or round like a C.

She has not told anyone about the baby—her teacher, her class or even the tomboys who run with her in the schoolyard. Norah hears a peep. The house is quiet, but she can hear the slow pace of the band on the Irish love song Kathleen likes to sing. Norah looks into the bassinet. "Grace," she whispers, "little baby Grace." Grace looks up at Norah, and her legs and arms crank rhythmic kicks and jabs as if she is in a quiet struggle to get somewhere or accomplish something.

"Where are you going, Grace? What are you trying to do?" Norah wraps her hands under her sister's back and head and lifts her. She leans forward, as she has seen her mother do, until Grace is against her chest. Then Norah stands and presses Grace to her. She doesn't feel heavy at all. She's like a bunny, Norah thinks, in her little white suit. Grace's mouth is wet against Norah's dress. Her black hair is silky in Norah's palm. Norah

carries her to the couch. She thinks that Kathleen can keep singing and that she will stay holding Grace until the party ends, but now she doesn't want to think about the party ending. "First you weren't here," she whispers to Grace, "and then you were born, and now you're *alive*."

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