

Her Mother's Daughter

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ALICE FITZGERALD



prologue

JOSEPHINE

18TH OCTOBER 1997

With each step I feel lighter, like the years of wading through quicksand are being washed away. It's as though I'm treading water and at last the surface is below my chest. I can breathe again.

It starts raining, and me with no umbrella. For some reason this makes me smile. Then I remember why. I don't run to the station or even increase my pace. Instead, I let the raindrops fall onto my face, trickle down my cheeks and seep into my collar.

Oh, Michael, remember when we danced in the rain on our way to Buckingham Palace?

It's funny, remembering who you were, knowing who you have become. You can never quite imagine how things will pan out, no matter how hard you try. Siobhan and me playing the game when we were little: Who do you want to be when you grow up? Where will you be when you're twenty-five? Thinking twenty-five was old. Thinking that home was the whole world.

The trees shiver in the rain and I realize just how many there are; one every few metres on both sides of the road. They

must be a hundred years old or more. I couldn't tell you how many times I've gone up and down this road over the years, and I don't think I ever noticed them.

A gust of wind blows and a shower of leaves breaks off and swings its way to the ground. They're wet and soft when I tread on them, not crisp like the ones Thomas loves. He'll be out tomorrow in search of the crunchy ones, running and jumping on them with both feet. And Clare will be after him, playing Hopscotch on the flagstones, just like all the other days.

CLARE

7th JULY 1997

This year we're going to visit Mummy's family for the first time EVER. When I ask why we've never been before but we see Daddy's family every year, she tells me to be quiet, like a good girl. But I've heard her call them a shower of cunts, and that must be something bad because the look on her face when she said it was a dark one. She was all white and her lips were thin. I wonder what cunts are. I imagine them falling out of the sky like rain.

I scratch my head and rub my eyes. Then I climb down the ladder, which takes me fourteen seconds. I go over to my calendar, hanging on the wall by the window and the chest of drawers with My Little Pony stickers on it, and put a big fat X across Saturday, which means now there are only eleven days left till our holiday.

Mummy comes in, bright and breezy like lemon squeezy. That's a song we sing when we're all happy.

'Morning, darlings.' She smiles, comes and holds my face in her hands and kisses me on the forehead. Then she goes over to our bunk beds and does the same to Thomas.

‘Morning, Mummy!’ I skip over to the curtains and pull them back, then tie the ropes with dangly bits around the ends, so it looks like a theatre, the way she likes.

‘Shall we go and have some breakfast?’ Mummy asks. She comes to look out the window and rubs my hair, twirling my ponytail around in her hand to make it curly like a pig’s tail.

It’s a Nutella-on-toast day. I can tell because Mummy is speaking in her nice, soft voice, which means everything is okay and she loves us. When things are not okay, her voice is low and rumble like thunder and her eyes are dark like clouds and she doesn’t ask if we’ll have breakfast, she says, Wash your faces and get downstairs.

We put on our dressing gowns with Mickey Mouse ears on the hoods and tie the belts tight around our waists, so they keep the cold out, and we put our slippers on. Mummy has her nice green silky dressing gown on today. It’s got a brown stain on the front from the other night, when she was drinking her strong apple juice and she spilled it. I know this because she tiptoed into our room and woke me up to ask me if I’d like some hot chocolate. When I said yes, she helped me down the ladder. Downstairs, I tried not to listen while I drank my hot chocolate, because she was saying things that weren’t nice. When she finally let me go to bed, I got into Thomas’s bunk and snuggled up close, to keep the bad dreams away.

I run down the stairs two at a time, closely followed by Thomas, then Mummy.

Daddy works on Saturdays, so it’s just the three of us. That’s fine now, but sometimes I wish he was here to tickle us and make us laugh, or put his arms around Mummy and make her smile.

I sit down at the kitchen table and Thomas climbs onto the chair next to me. He has all these little golden hairs that Mummy calls baby hairs, and they're sticking out everywhere and make me laugh.

'What's for breakfast?' I ask, even though I'm pretty sure.

Mummy is filling the kettle for her coffee. 'How about Nutella on toast?'

'Yeah!' me and Thomas shout. If we're really lucky we'll get to put it on ourselves and I can scoop loads on, so it's dripping off the edges.

'Shall I put the bread on?' I ask.

Mummy pushes the button on the kettle and gathers her hair into a ponytail and ties it up so it's out of her face, the way she likes when she's around the house.

She likes us to help and for me to be a good girl and Thomas to be a good little boy. Only you have to be careful because once I washed the dishes and she dipped her finger in the water and said it was cold and hit me around the back of the legs with a tea towel. I haven't washed the dishes since.

I take the bread out of the breadbin, then slot four slices into the toaster. I get the Nutella out of the cupboard and two knives out of the drawer by the sink, and put them on the table.

'Don't just sit there, do something,' I tell Thomas. 'Lazy good-for-nothing.'

He sticks his bottom lip out.

'Clare, don't you speak to your brother like that,' Mummy snaps.

'Sorry, Mummy,' I say. My bottom lip goes loose and I try to hold it still. 'I was only telling him to help.'

'Well, that's no way to do it.'

Thomas goes over to Mummy and puts his arms around her leg, while she stands in the middle of the kitchen twirling his hair round her fingers. She says he has the eyes and hair of a little cherub.

I sit at the table, looking at them and feeling a bit jealous. I don't say to Mummy that it's how she tells us to help.

The bread pops and I jump.

Mummy taps Thomas on the back. 'Get the plates out, like a good boy. Now, we're going to have a fun day out. There'll be no tantrums from either of ye.'

I smile and shake my head. 'No, Mummy.'

Thomas stands up straight and tall, like one of his plastic soldier men. 'No, Mummy.'

'Can I get a nice dress?' I ask. Today we're going shopping because Mummy needs clothes to look beautiful, for going home to see her family. She wants to look her beautifullest and skinniest. She always looks beautiful, but she wants to look even more so than normal for her family. She's been on a diet for ever and ever, and I've heard her say to Auntie Maura (Auntie Maura isn't really our aunty, but she is Mummy's best friend) that she doesn't want them talking about her behind her back. I wonder why they would do that, because they're going to be so excited to see her that they'll only want to talk to her face.

'If you behave,' she says.

'What about me?' Thomas pipes up.

'You can get a dress, too,' jokes Mummy, which makes him put a grumpy face on. 'Only joking,' she says, tickling his sides. 'We'll get you your own outfit.'

Thomas smiles, all happy with himself, as he carries over the plates with toast on. When he gets to the table he sticks his

tongue out at me and I look to see if Mummy's watching. She's busy pouring the boiling water into her coffee mug, so I stick mine out at him.

'Cunt,' I whisper. As soon as I've said it, I realize it was too dangerous. I whip my head round, squinting my eyes just in case, but Mummy's getting milk out of the fridge.

After breakfast, it's bath time. Me and Thomas have a bath together every Saturday morning because we're small, so we can't waste all that water twice, even though Thomas wees in it every time.

Mummy pours in the bubble bath. I decide to take advantage of her good mood. 'Can't I have one by myself, just today?' I say in my sweetie-pie voice.

'If you're not careful, I'll wee in it, too,' she says.

I fold my arms across my chest in a huff-puff. Then my head itches, so I scratch it.

'You ought to see how we washed when I was a little girl,' she says in her grumbling thunder voice. 'Then you wouldn't complain.' She swirls her hand around in the water and brings up a handful of foam. 'Six of us bathed in the same water, and when it was your time to go last, there was more piss than water.'

The tears sting my eyes on their way out and my chest heaves.

'Oh, stop your whingeing,' she says through curled lips.

'Mummy, I need to go to the toilet,' says Thomas. He has taken off his dressing gown and his pyjamas with aeroplanes on and is naked beside me, cupping his winkie with both hands and jumping up and down.

'In the bath.' Mummy holds her hand out for Thomas.

Thomas looks at me, then at her.

‘In. Now!’ She puts her hands under his armpits and lifts him over the edge.

Thomas sits in the bath and looks sheepish, like when he does a poops and doesn’t own up to it.

‘Come on,’ Mummy says to me. ‘In you get.’ Her face is white and she looks dead serious.

I untie my dressing gown and take off my pyjamas with gold stars on, holding my tears in, so Mummy doesn’t give me a belt across the back of the legs as I climb in.

Usually the water is so hot that I don’t sit down at first. I dangle in the air, holding on to the edge with my hands and feet and nudging myself in until my bum feels the heat. But now I just get in. It’s no time for donkey games and silly buggers.

I sit in the hot suds, my fingers turning into pink prunes while Mummy washes Thomas’s hair. I hate prune-fingers. They’re like old-lady fingers. Not that I know what old-lady fingers look like; I’ve never seen any up close. Daddy’s mummy died before I was born, and I’m only going to meet Mummy’s mummy for the first time ever this summer. I will make sure I look at her fingers when she’s playing with my hair and rubbing my face. I hope I don’t forget.

When Mummy has had her bath and dried her hair into big red waves and put make-up on, so she’s shiny and new, all that’s left is to paint her nails. She chooses a red one from the fridge, and sits down in the armchair with a fresh coffee beside her. She shakes the little bottle of paint.

‘Can we watch, Mummy?’

She nods as she rolls the bottle between her hands.

‘What does that do?’ She likes it when I ask questions like this, and I want to get out of her bad books.

‘Warms it up, so it’s easier to paint.’ She unscrews the top and paints her thumbnail in three strokes, one in the middle and another on either side. It smells a bit like when Daddy painted the walls in the sitting room and Mummy said the fumes could knock out a horse.

‘Will you paint my nails?’

She looks at me, then takes one of my hands in hers to inspect my nails. ‘Go on, then.’ She smiles.

The paint is cold as Mummy dabs the brush on each one of my nails. When she has finished, I hold them out to look at; they’re all shiny and new, like Mummy’s.

‘And me!’ Typical. Thomas always copies me.

Mummy laughs. ‘Boys don’t paint their nails, silly!’

‘Why not?’ Thomas asks, frowning and pouting his lips the way he does when he’s getting angry.

‘Because painting nails is only for girls,’ I tell him in my I’m-older-than-you-I-know-more voice.

‘But why?’

‘Because we like to make ourselves beautiful.’ I wave my hands around to dry my nails while Mummy finishes painting hers. Then, when she has finished, she blows on them. I blow on mine, too.

Thomas is bored, so he turns on the TV and sneaks out to the kitchen to eat a biscuit from the jar without asking. I know because he has a crumb on his lip when he comes back, and I heard the sound of the jar being opened and closed. He must have climbed up on a chair to get to the jar; he’s lucky he didn’t fall and chip his tooth. He’s already chipped one, from when he was climbing on the tree in the garden, but it’s just

the corner, so you couldn't tell it was chipped if you weren't there to see him cry.

'I'm going to the loo,' I say, bouncing off the sofa. In the kitchen, I lift the lid of the biscuit jar off in one clean movement, take two biscuits and, ever so slowly, put it back on. It makes the teeny-weeniest sound. I eat the biscuits in the toilet while I wee.

For the seventeenth time, Mummy turns to one side and looks over her shoulder at her bum. I've been counting. Me and Thomas are in the changing room, watching her in the mirror.

'You look gorgeous,' I say, because that's what Daddy says when she comes downstairs all dolled up, and it makes her eyes shine.

'Thank you, darling.' She turns the other way, looks over the other shoulder, smooths the flowery material down over her hips. Everyone at school always says she is more beautiful than their mummies. That makes me smile inside.

'Can we go now?' says Thomas. He is like Daddy. He hates shopping.

'Soon.' Mummy takes the dress off and gives it to me to put on the hanger while she tries on another one.

I watch her fingers pop the buttons into the gaps. 'What are Granny's hands like?' I ask.

'What?' She jumps, like I've crept up on her and shouted Boo!

'What are Granny's hands like?'

She shakes her head. 'Just a woman's hands, Clare. What a strange question.'

'I just wondered if they're like yours and mine and Thomas's.' I get Thomas's hand and put it flat against mine.

His is smaller, so the tops of my fingers have nothing against them. We clap them together.

'I shouldn't think so,' she says. She ties the belt around her waist and looks at herself in the mirror.

This one's pink and flowing and has a big white collar.

'It can't be too much, or too little,' she says.

I watch her in the mirror, because I don't know what too much or too little is.

'Why aren't Granny's hands like ours?' I ask.

She bites her fingernail and some red comes off on her lips.

'Oh, damn it!'

'It's okay,' I tell her in my soothing voice.

She looks at me and then shakes her head and laughs.

'What's funny?' I ask.

'Nothing,' she says.

She's laughing on the outside, but she's sad on the inside.

When she's decided on hers, Mummy chooses a dress for me. It's all frilly and I think of saying I don't like it, but she might pinch me hard under the arm and I wouldn't be able to hold back the tears and everyone would turn around and look at me and I'd have a big purple mark for days.

Thomas gets a navy-blue T-shirt with white stripes and a pair of blue trousers.

I wish I could get a T-shirt and trousers instead of a frilly dress. But, Mummy says, there is a price to pay for beauty.

Because we've been good we can go to the coffee shop. We're so lucky because we're going to have pizza tonight AS WELL. That's two treats in one day. Every weekend we have a Family Night Out, when we go to one of Mummy and Daddy's favourite

restaurants and they have wine, and me and Thomas can have whatever we want until we can't eat any more.

I get lemonade and Thomas gets orange juice. Mummy gets a hot chocolate with skimmed milk, which is hot chocolate with watery milk so it won't make her fat. Me and Thomas are allowed to share a chocolate-chip muffin between us, even though Mummy says we shouldn't.

I suck my lemonade through the straw and swing my legs under the table. It's sweet and cold and I keep sucking until I have to stop, even though I don't want to, just so I can come up for air. I take a deep breath and go back for more. Thomas does the same and we kick each other under the table and smile through our straws.

Mummy breaks a big piece off the top of the muffin with all the chocolate chips in it. There's so much that she can't close her mouth and I can see the chocolate-sponge smudge all over her teeth. I grip my lips tight because she said it was for us, and then took the best part, like she always does. I secretly hope she gets fat. She deserves to.

'I'm doing you a favour, Clare,' she says, looking at me. 'You need to start eating a bit less.'

I stop swinging my legs.

She taps her hips and shakes her head. 'A moment on the lips, a lifetime on the hips.' She takes a sip of her hot chocolate. 'And stop scratching your head.'

'Sorry.' I tuck my hands under my legs.

I break the rest of the muffin in two and give the big piece to Thomas, because he's a growing boy and it doesn't matter if he has a big piece. I'm a girl, so I have to look after my hips. I take the small bit for myself.

I put it in my mouth. It doesn't taste that good, now that

I know a moment on the lips is a lifetime on the hips. I chew thirty-four times because I remember Mummy telling me that's a good trick, and by the time I swallow it's turned to mush on my tongue.

When we're ready to go, I stand up and look down at my hips and my legs. I'm sure they've got bigger.



JOSEPHINE

18TH JUNE 1980

The tea towel is coarse against my skin. I am drying my hands with it, looking at all the small black balls of burn, when Sean comes in, runs over to me and wraps his arms around my waist.

‘Don’t go, Josephine,’ he says into my chest.

I hold him tight and get the stench of his hair. ‘Your hair stinks,’ I tell him, and we laugh, even though it hurts my throat.

I break away. I want to get out as quick as I can, go running in my nightdress through the door and not come back.

Sean looks up at me with big brown eyes and I hate myself for leaving him.

‘You’ll be good, now, won’t you?’ I straighten his tie.

He nods.

‘You’ll work hard, and you’ll go to college. And as soon as I send you money you’ll come to visit?’ I’m desperate for him to come; to know that he will. It was me who raised him, after all. I remember the day he was born and a shiver runs all the way down my spine.

‘I will, Josephine.’ He throws his arms around me and squeezes tight.

We stay like that for a few seconds until I break away for the last time. I wipe my eyes. 'Off with you now, or you'll be late for school,' I tell him.

'When will you be back?' he asks.

I shrug. 'I don't know, but remember you can always count on your big sister, wherever I am.'

'I will,' he says. He shrugs, too, and I remember when he was small and we were together day in, day out, and he'd copy everything I did. Those were happy times.

'You little blighter, you.' I put my hand to my mouth and blow him a kiss.

He slaps his cheek and shrieks, 'Got it!' and, with that, he runs off to school.

The curtains are still drawn in my room, but there is enough light to get dressed. The bed is bare; I already stripped it and washed the sheets. The wardrobe stands empty, with its dark knots curling through the rotting wood. I won't miss this room, where I have slept all my life. With the towel still around me and my back to the door, I get dressed as quickly as I can in case someone comes in. I pull my knickers up and place the triangles of my bra on my breasts and fasten it on my back. I take my good yellow dress with flowers and pull it quickly over my damp skin.

There's not a sound in the house. They'll all be about their daily chores. I wonder if anyone will come back to see me off. I scrub my hair with the towel and remember last night, and the songs Daddy and Uncle Patrick were singing. I was sure to stay well away from the pair of them, like I always do when there's drink flying. There was whiskey and gin and cigars. A real party. Granny and Bernadette came up to the house

and a few girls from my secretarial class, which Daddy and Patrick loved. The boys, too. By the end, Daddy was singing rebel songs and the men were all crying with the melancholy that comes with the songs, and the drink. I stayed with the girls, and we had a drink and a bit of craic. Mammy pulled me close to her and whispered in my ear: 'Off to open your legs for England, are you?' I nearly died. I looked at her and she was smiling away, so I wasn't sure if I'd misheard. 'What?' I said back, but someone had already called her away.

It's daylight when I step through the hole in the hedge to go over to Bernadette's, careful not to catch my dress on the branches. The dewy grass wets my ankles and the light-brown leather of my good shoes quickly turns dark around the toes. In the distance, I can see the long stems dance like thousands of little fairies. I would have loved to be a dancer, or an actress. Maybe in another life. Or maybe in London I'll be spotted on the street and turned into a film star. I knock on Bernadette's back door. Her mother opens it.

'Howareya, Josephine?' she says.

'Grand now, Mrs Tolbs,' I say. 'I've come to say goodbye to Bernadette.'

'Bernadette's not in, love,' she says, 'she's gone to the shop.'

'To Chase's?' I ask, because then I can go and meet her on the way back.

'No, she's gone into town.'

I know then she's lying. Heat pricks at my eyes like a burning poker and I stand and look at her, not knowing what to do. Bernadette is like a sister to me. We're even closer than me and my own sister.

I turn to go down the path and there's a creak on the stairs.

‘Mam,’ calls Bernadette from the hall.

Mrs Tolbs, as I call her, nudges her head to the side, as if to say, ‘Go on up with you’, and I run through to the hallway and look up at Bernadette, who is sitting on a step and holding onto the bars of the banister. She looks like she’s seven again.

‘Weren’t you going to say goodbye?’ My voice sounds forlorn, like I’ve already lost her.

She shakes her head, then comes down the stairs and hugs me.

‘Come with me,’ I whisper, but I know she won’t.

‘Josephine, I don’t know what I’m going to do without you.’ She holds my hands tight in hers.

‘You’ll be grand, you’ll see,’ I tell her.

For a moment I think maybe her father will die and she’ll be able to join me after all, but then I realize that once he dies, she will be needed at home more than ever. God forgive me for wishing her father dead. Her father who is a lovely man and who has done everything for her, and who drove us to college every morning.

How funny that, after all these years of wishing I was her, with her nice home and her nice parents and her weekends and evenings all to herself, with no one to cook for and no one to look after and no washing up to do, now I am the one getting away and she is jealous of me.

‘You’ll look after my sister, won’t you?’

‘Of course I will,’ she says, laughing.

‘I mean it, Bernadette.’ I tug at her hands with mine, clammy now. ‘You’ll keep an eye on Siobhan for me, won’t you?’

‘I will, don’t worry,’ says Bernadette, and she pats my hands.

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‘Sorry for fibbing, love,’ Mrs Tolbs says when I’m leaving, ‘but Bernadette was so upset.’

‘That’s all right,’ I tell her. I can see she’s relieved it’s me going and not Bernadette. I’m relieved, too. ‘I’ll always be grateful for everything, Mrs Tolbs,’ I say, giving Bernadette’s hand a squeeze. It was Mrs Tolbs who talked to Mammy and Daddy about me going to morning college to get my secretarial cert. She said they were driving Bernadette, so it would be the same to them to drive me too, and that they’d make lunch for me as well. Mammy slapped me around the face that night and said how dare I take our business outside of the house, but I didn’t do anything. It was all Bernadette.

I turn left at the fork to Granny’s. She hears me coming and lifts the nets and waves. By the time she is holding me at the back door, the howls that come from me sound tortured.

When I’ve calmed down, she smiles. Her pink crinkled eyes go small, like always. ‘My little Josephine,’ she says.

I start again. The snot runs from my nose and she is blurry through the tears. ‘Shhh,’ she soothes.

She is the one who has paid for my ticket, given me the money, convinced Mammy and Daddy to let me go.

‘I’ve made you sandwiches, and I’ve got you a Saint Christopher to watch over you,’ she says.

I turn around and she puts it round my neck. It’s a small gold pendant on a fine gold chain.

‘I won’t take it off,’ I say, rubbing it between my finger and my thumb. ‘I’ll keep it with me for ever.’

It’s hard to remember today is a good day when it hurts this much. I only allow myself to look back at Granny when I’ve

reached the end of the path, and she is so small in the window that I can only catch the movement of her wave.

I cup my hands around my mouth and take a deep breath in and then I shout as loud as I can, 'I love you, Granny!' I stand just a moment longer to wave her goodbye, and head off home.

In the back yard there is no noise, but for the faint, rhythmic swishing of Mammy dipping washing into the basin and pulling it out.

'Mammy,' I call. The echo of my voice bounces off the cold, grey cement and the white pebble-dash walls of the house. I walk around the back and she comes into view.

'Jesus,' she says, putting her hand to her chest. 'You nearly gave me a heart attack. Fine parting gift that would've been.'

'Sorry.' I smile sheepishly.

'Are you going?'

'Yes, I think so.'

'Well, Brendan's waiting for you. You'd better hurry on – he hasn't got all day. Some of us have jobs to keep.'

'I'll say goodbye now then, will I?'

A car speeds by on the road. I nod my head instinctively. Hello, how are you? I say in my head, even though I can't see them. Will it be like this in London, I wonder, everyone knowing everyone and saying hello as you go by?

'May as well,' says Mammy. She lets go of the trousers, and they are swallowed up by the soapy water.

I imagine they are a baby drowning. I think of saying things to her, things I have imagined saying for a long time, things I have never dared say to anyone. For a moment I even consider

asking what she said last night. I go to kiss her, but she puts her hands up.

‘I won’t get you wet,’ she says. Her front is soaking, as if her breasts are leaking milk, like in the days after she had given birth to Sean. ‘Your daddy has left you some pounds in the kitchen.’

‘Is he here?’ The blood whooshes around my body.

‘No, he had to work early.’

I keep my face like a mask, hard and plastic.

‘Well, that’s it, isn’t it?’ she says. ‘You rear your children and then they up and leave.’

I flush with guilt, and with all the words left unsaid, and tell her I will send money soon.

She nods, plunging her hands into the basin of water and dunking the trousers.

‘Will you miss me?’ The words are out before I can catch them. Then, after a moment of silence, ‘Ignore me,’ and I laugh like an eejit.

She wrings the trousers and hangs them on the line, her curly grey hairs twinkling in the early-morning light. For anyone looking on, it would all seem so idyllic.

The excitement sets in on the boat. This is real; it’s really happening, I think, rubbing my pendant between my finger and my thumb. I find a seat over by the window and ask a lady to look after my suitcase while I go out onto the deck. The wind is cold and wet and salty and I hold tight onto the rail, which isn’t as high as I thought it would be. I could just throw myself right off, if I wanted to. I look down, where the sea is murky, slapping against the belly of the boat and coming up in froth and bubbles. Far away, the ripples are blue-green

and shiny white under the grey cloudy sky. I try to see where the sea meets the sky, but it's no use. There's just a haze of blue-green-grey-black-green-blue.

I breathe the salty sea air in deep, the screams of the seagulls and the shrieks of the children. I watch the people lined up on the deck wave to the port, as the ferry heaves itself into the sea. A loud horn vibrates through the air, through the deck's floor and through my body, sending the gulls to fly in wild circles.

My tears taste of seaweed. They are not tears of sadness, but tears of joy. Of hope. Of everything waiting for me on the other side. I hold onto the rail to keep steady. When I dare, I release one hand and wave to the crowds. I get carried away and start blowing kisses – sure no one knows that none of my own people are among them. I blow a string of kisses, giddy now, as I say goodbye to Ireland.

When I can't hold it any longer I go looking for the toilet. The boat sways violently and people are lying like starfish all over the floor, so I tiptoe around their splayed limbs. Near the toilet, I pretend to itch my nose against the stench.

In the cubicle I am careful not to touch the seat or wet my good yellow dress, but the boat shudders and, as I grab the sides of the cubicle, the dress slips from my hands.

Someone groans next door and there's the gush of liquid. 'Jesus,' she says through a blocked nose, and I imagine her wiping her mouth with the back of her hand.

I clutch my dress back up and get out as quick as I can. 'Are you okay in there?' I ask.

'Yes, thanks,' she says.

'Have you been in there long?' I ask. I'm dying for a

distraction. In the mirror, I can see that I'm red and puffy-faced after the sharp wind. My brown eyes are still watery and my lips are dry.

'First time?' she says.

It takes me a few seconds and then it dawns on me that she means to England. 'Yes – yourself?'

'Me, too. Where you headed?'

'London.'

'No way!' she says. 'Me, too!'

'Get away with you! Whereabouts?'

'Shepherd's Bush.'

'Same as myself! It's a small world, isn't it? What's your name?'

'Maura. Yours?'

'Josephine.' I check my dress; it's clean. I wait a minute for her to come out, but she tells me she's not going anywhere until we pull into the port, so I wish her good luck and tell her I'll look out for her in Shepherd's Bush.

Back in my seat, I regret not fixing a spot to meet so we could find the coach together from Liverpool to London, or telling her the name of the house I'm going to. We could have been friends.

After the coach journey and two buses, I arrive at the address Mrs Tolbs wrote down for me on a piece of paper, where a friend of hers stayed and where she's reserved me a room. It's past midnight on a Thursday. The streets are dark and empty, apart from rows of foreign-looking houses, and again I find myself wishing I wasn't alone and that me and Maura might have come together. I stand at the door and check the number again. I bless myself and ring the doorbell and start counting.

When I reach thirty and no one has come, I shake my head. The voice in my head starts: You fool, you fucking fool. Good for nothing. You really never were good for anything. Your mother was right. She was right all along. It was Granny who was mistaken – believing in you, thinking you were worth something. More fool her. You're done for now. Wait till you go back with your tail between your legs. How they'll laugh!

My breath comes short and sharp and I'm struggling to keep the tears back, when there's a creak of floorboards inside. A moment later the front door opens and a man looks at me, his eyes half-closed and a frown on his face.

I swallow the tears back into my chest. 'Hello. Sorry to bother you so late. I understand you have a room reserved for me? My name is Josephine.'

He nods and beckons me in. 'You have passport?'

I nod.

'Money?'

I nod.

He looks me up and down. 'I show you room, we sort paper in morning.' His accent is not English, his skin is brown and he has a wispy beard. His face is kinder than my father's.

Inside is lit with dull yellow bulbs. A small reception desk sits by the stairs, and we stop there for the man to pick up a key. I follow him up and along the landing to the end, where he stops, unlocks a door and turns to me. 'Rules are,' he says, 'no boys, no parties, always pay up front.' He points out the bathroom, three doors away, and turns on the light in the room.

I nod, then look past him. The walls are yellow from smoke, almost brown around the cornices, but for a square in the middle of the far wall where, I suppose, a picture used

to hang. There's a single bed in one corner, a small cabinet beside it and a chair by the window. A narrow, light-coloured wardrobe stands along another wall beside a small square mirror. Round, blackened circles dot the carpet in front of the window. There are other bare patches, too, in the middle of the floor. Moths. I will have to make sure I keep my suitcase closed or they will have my best clothes.

'Great, lovely.' I release a long breath I have been holding in; I mean it.

We bid each other goodnight and he leaves.

I carry my suitcase inside and close and lock the door behind me. Once I've turned the key, I try the handle and the door shakes in its frame. I smile. I've never been able to lock myself in before.

The mattress is softer than mine at home and I sink right down into it. I rub my hand over the bed, and then I go over to the window to let in some air. I pull the grey net curtain to one side and cup my hands around my eyes, but all I can see is black. I unlatch the window and pull the lower pane upwards. It sticks and I have to make sure I pull it up evenly with each hand. The cold night air whooshes in. It smells different here; the sweet grass smell from back home is gone. The air feels dry on my face. Back on the bed, I sit and cross my legs and get the box of cigarettes that one of the girls gave me last night. There's a lighter inside. I light the cigarette and breathe in, coughing as the end turns orange. I exhale, watching the smoke shoot from my nostrils and circle in grey wisps in front of my face. I do this until the full moon of the filter is yellow and there is a curling worm of ash, and then realize I have no ashtray. I run to the window and reach outside, stubbing

it on the brickwork next to the windowsill, light-headed and giddy.

I close the window and look through the small holes of the net. A fly's vision is something like that – one of the lads told me once. I remember how they would catch a fly and pull its wings off one at a time and leave it on the ground to die. The cigarette leaves me with the jitters and I rub the tips of my nails against each other, looking for jagged edges. I rub my chin and scratch a spot until it stings. A moth flies up in front of me and I try to clap my hands around it, but it gets away.

I have a horrible taste in my mouth and am awfully thirsty. I imagine washing the nets around the back of the house and the water turning a dark yellow-grey.

So here I am. I smile. I need only think about myself from now on. Only wash my own dresses, my own underwear and the few garments I own. I take out another cigarette. What the heck – it's time to live life. I don't even smoke, I laugh to myself. But what else have I got to do? I breathe in deep, and after a few drags I'm tipsy with the nicotine and I can't stop smiling. I could scream but I dare not make a sound. Scream with sheer delight, that is.

I undress, careful on my unsteady legs, and leave my dress over the back of the chair. I put on my nightdress and get into bed. The fluorescent tube overhead has dead flies in it, but the light switch is by the door and tiredness is heavy on me. I close my eyes and drift off to sleep.

Later, I wake to the dead flies and the buzz of the light. I go and switch it off, treading carefully back to bed in the darkness.

I lie curled up like a baby and think of home. I think of me and Bernadette in the churchyard with a bottle of rum

taken from the cabinet, and I think of Daddy's whiskey-breath singing sad songs, and I think of Siobhan, who didn't come to see me off. They run through my head, distant memories, far away now.