



denise sewell

the fall girl

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step out from the
shadows of the past
if you haven't
found your feet?

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addictive' *RTE Guide*



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The Fall Girl
by
Denise Sewell

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15 September 1999 (sometime in the middle of the night)

There are no excuses for what I've done.

My daughter's eighteenth birthday

It's 24 August 1999: almost midnight. I've just spoken to my father on the phone. He's very upset; I've let him down again.

'It'll be the shock,' Sergeant Hennessy says. 'Give him time, he'll come round.'

I have to spend the night in a cell at the Garda Station, but I don't care; a bed is a bed and at this stage my body feels shaky with exhaustion. As soon as the bangharda opens the door leading to the cells, a vile smell fills my nostrils and my stomach churns.

'I'm not going in there,' I whimper, taking a panicky step back. 'It smells of piss and shit.'

'I'm sorry,' she shrugs. 'There's nowhere else to put you. This is it, I'm afraid.'

Someone lets out a string of obscenities from behind a cell door.

'Are there *men* in there?'

'Just one man so far: the night is young. But, don't worry, you've a cell to yourself. Now, come on,' she tugs my elbow, 'you'll be grand.'

‘Can I stay in the interview room?’

‘No, Frances, you can’t. That room could be used several times before the night is out.’

‘You can put her in beside me,’ the gruff-tongued man shouts. ‘I’ll keep her company. Is she good-lookin?’

‘Shut up, Packie,’ she tells him.

But he doesn’t. ‘Are you good-lookin?’ he shouts a little louder.

We’re standing at a cell door now. The bangharda is turning the key. ‘Don’t mind him,’ she says, ‘he’s a regular guest in here.’

As she opens the door, the smell thickens and my stomach retches.

‘Toilet,’ I cry, putting my hand over my mouth.

‘OK, come on.’ She leads me back to the Ladies, where I vomit several times.

Afterwards, she gets me a cup of water and I stand with my back against the cubicle wall, sipping and sobbing.

‘It’s only for one night, Frances,’ she says.

‘Why? Where will I be tomorrow night?’

‘I don’t know, but it won’t be as dirty as this kip here, I can promise you that.’

‘I can’t go back in there. Can I not stay in the other room where I saw the doctor?’

She shakes her head.

‘Please let me.’

‘I can’t.’

‘If you take me back there, I’m going to throw up again.’

‘Then you’re going to have to do it inside the cell. You can’t keep coming out to the toilet all night.’

‘Is there no toilet in there?’

‘No, but there is an alternative. Come on,’ she sighs, taking

the empty plastic cup from my hand, 'let's go. The eyes are hanging out of your head; you need to sleep.' She opens the door. 'After you.'

'Oh no, oh Jesus!' I groan, dragging myself down the corridor a reluctant pace ahead of her.

'If it's any consolation,' she says, 'I find the stink revolting too, and I'm in and out of here several times a week.'

'So where's the alternative?' I ask as soon as I step inside the cell.

'There.' She's pointing to what looks like a shallow sink built into the floor.

'You're joking.'

'I'm not.'

'But –'

The man in the next cell lets out an unmerciful belch.

'I need a drink, youse shower of fuckin' bastards,' he roars. 'If youse don't get me one now, I'll kick this fuckin' door down.'

'Sorry, I have to go,' the bangharda says. 'Just try to get some sleep, will you?'

Before I have time to draw breath, she's out the door and turning the key in the lock.

I'm alone now, heart banging inside my ribcage like a mad animal. I look around me. The walls and floor are grimy. There's a dirty blanket flung across a thin, stained mattress. The toilet is a dip in the ground with a plughole that is clogged with all sorts of grot.

My God! What have I done?

A buzzer goes off and I yelp, staggering as I take a step back. Within a few seconds, I hear whistling and a key turn in the outer door. It's not the bangharda this time.

'What do you want now, Packie?'

‘A fuckin’ drink.’

‘Will water do you?’

‘Water me arse. I want a real drink.’

‘If you call me in here again to ask me for booze, I’m switching that buzzer off for the night, got it?’

‘You can’t do that; it’s against the law. I’ll report you.’

‘Report whatever the fuck you like. If you don’t stop wasting my time, the buzzer is going off, end of story.’

‘Excuse me, Guard, excuse me, Guard,’ I splutter, bolting towards the cell door and knocking frantically.

The hatch opens. ‘Yes?’ Two angry eyes are glaring at me.

‘Eh, eh . . .’ I swallow hard, fighting back the tears.

‘What? Spit it out, I haven’t got all night.’

‘I don’t want to stay in here,’ I sob. ‘Please.’

The man in the other cell starts shouting, ‘This little piggy went to market, oink oink. This little piggy stayed at home . . .’

‘That’s it, Packie,’ the Guard tells him, ‘your buzzer’s going off.’ He looks back at me. ‘What did you expect, the Hilton?’

‘. . . and this poor piggy got none,’ the man roars.

‘No, but –’

‘Look, it’s a cell you’re in, not a honeymoon suite, so get used to it, cos there’s nothing I or anyone else can do for you.’

‘Tom, Tom the piper’s son, stole a pig and away did run. Yah-fuckin’-hoo,’ the man howls.

‘Christ, such a night!’ the Guard groans, slamming the hatch shut.

As I back away from the door towards the bed, it begins to hit me – the depth of the trouble I’m in. I have committed a serious crime. It can’t be undone. I’m a prisoner. My father doesn’t want to know me. My life will never be the same again.

I lift the manky blanket and wrap it around my shoulders.

Surrendering to the dirt and the smell, I lie down on the mattress and curl up. My feet are swollen, my back aches. I'm still trembling.

Why did I listen to that woman in the jeweller's shop? Why do I always let other people's comments get to me? Why did I do it?

My head is swimming. When I shut my eyes, I see myself back in Dublin, chin up, all business. I'm happy, and why not? It's my daughter's eighteenth birthday – a milestone. I walk into a jeweller's shop in Henry Street and pick out a gold chain – a T-bar chain, eighteen inches. An inch for every year.

'Good choice,' the assistant says. 'Is it for yourself?'

'No,' I smile. 'It's for my daughter.'

'Lucky girl. How old?'

'Eighteen.'

'Same age as my own,' she says, fixing the chain in the velvet-lined gift box and holding it up for my approval.

I nod.

'I must say, I love gold myself, though you'd not see *my* young one wearing it. They're all into silver nowadays. Still, as far as I'm concerned . . .'

I run out the door and into the middle of the street, where I stop short. She calls out after me, 'Are you all right, missus?'

There are throngs of people walking in all directions. What's wrong with me? Why didn't *I* think of that? I should have known – silver, not gold. My cover's blown. I can't even fool myself any longer. She isn't eighteen. She hasn't grown up. I lost her. No! Stop! Don't think about it, not today. Don't go, Baby Fall. Be, for me. Get back in my head. Get back in my womb. And kick.

People brush past me, bump into me, tread on my toes. They've no manners. Can they not see me? Someone nearly

knocks me down. I try to walk away, but I can't find a passage: I'm surrounded. A mother with a pram crosses the street in front of me: 'Excuse me, excuse me.' Everyone makes way. Like a disciple, I follow her, just to get out of the maze, to breathe. She stops outside a boutique, puts her foot down on the brake of the pram and walks in the door, a bag slung over her shoulder, high heels, lipstick. She has her hungry eyes on the merchandise, on the price tags. Never mind the baby.

When I peep inside the pram, I clamp my hand over my mouth and gasp. Although she's bigger than my baby was, she still looks new.

The security guard is watching the shapely mother flicking through the rails. Tight jeans, tight bum.

I could have been anyone – a nutter, a killer, one of those child-traffickers, just waiting for the right opportunity. You can't be careful enough these days.

'She was lucky it was me and not one of them.' That's what I tell Sergeant Hennessy.

'I suppose it's one way of looking at it, but you still did wrong.'

'I never meant to hurt anyone. I'm sorry.'

'I can see that.'

'Can I go home now?'

'It's not that simple, I'm afraid.'

'Why not?'

'There are procedures.'

'Procedures?'

'In cases like this.'

'How do you mean?'

'You kidnapped a baby, Frances.'

'You're making me out to be some sort of criminal.'

'Technically, you are.'

Can you believe that? Me, Mousy Fall – a criminal. Put that in your celestial pipe, Mother, and smoke it.

19 September 1999 (afternoon)

Mousy Fall was my nickname at school. I hated it. I used to feel grateful if someone called me by my name, especially Lesley. I was always Frances to Lesley.

Introducing Mousy Fall

It's my first day at secondary school. I'm waiting for the school bus. My mother's poking her head in and out of the front door, keeping an eye on me. I'm pretending not to see her. The twins – Angelina and Attracta Reilly – say she's like one of those ornamental storks on a pendulum, long pointy hooter and all. Hurry up, bus.

My uniform skirt is hanging inches below my gabardine to half-way down my calves. I'm wearing white knee-high socks, no flesh exposed. I look hideous. There are only two other girls from the village attending the Mercy Convent, but they're in third year and are wearing blazers and knee-length skirts.

My schoolbag feels a ton weight. The straps are digging into the tops of my shoulders. I'm too warm. I'd love to throw my bag down on the ground where the other students have thrown theirs and undo the belt and buttons of my gabardine, but my mother is probably still watching me. Best to leave it the way it is.

With all the pushing and shoving to get on the bus, I stand

back and wait. I don't mind being last. What about it? Blessed are the meek and all that. I get the front seat. For they shall inherit the front seat. No one else wants it.

'Oi, look, Frances,' one of the boys shouts down the bus, 'your mother's waving at ya.'

Big laugh.

'Your man back there gave your mother the fingers,' Attracta tells me.

It's all right for the rest of them. They're used to it – the rowdiness, the slagging, the crude language.

Every time the bus stops to pick up more students, there's an uproar.

'Hurry up, Jones, ya huare ya.'

'Shut it, Four-eyes, or I'll bate the head off ya.'

And it isn't just the boys. When I hear someone strike a match, I turn and see Susan Scully, in the seat behind me, light a cigarette like a seasoned smoker.

'Want a drag, Mousy?' she says, sticking out her chin and blowing a thin line of smoke in my direction.

Mousy! Is she talking to me? She is!

'Here, Mousy Mousy, want a nibble of my cheese sandwich?'

'Where's your hole, Mousy?'

I don't react. If I ignore them, they'll get fed up and pick on someone else. But they don't.

By the time we arrive at the convent, I'm well and truly christened. Mousy Fall. It sticks. I think it's funny how my mother often turns out to be right about people, hard as I find her scornfulness to swallow.

I don't expect to see Lesley there. There was no sign of her at the enrolment months earlier, but it's her for sure. Apart from

her height, she hasn't changed much. But there's something different about her. I can't put my finger on it.

A couple of days later, our eyes meet in the corridor, she walking in one direction, me walking in the other. There's a group of girls with her. I'm on my own. I smile at her, hopeful of rekindling our friendship. She smiles back, nostalgically I think. A that-was-then-this-is-now look on her face. The moment passes. There's definitely something different about her. What? An air of tragedy? Eyes that have seen darkness? I'm drawn to her again, but I can't go where I'm not invited. I wouldn't dare. Besides, she has her new friends, lots of them. Smitten just like I was. Am.

It isn't long before Lesley is earning a reputation for herself, and not a great one at that. She doesn't turn up to all her classes. One day she doesn't show up at all and she's not ill. Sister Marie-Therese, the principal, has phoned her mother, who has confirmed that she's not at home sick. We're not in the same class, though, so I only hear rumours.

I find a friend of my own in the end or, should I say, a companion. Kathleen Mulcahy, or Kat, as she becomes known, in order to satisfy their mocking tongues – Kat and Mousy.

She comes to me, one oddball sniffing out another. I don't really like her. In fact, she drives me mad the way she chews her egg and onion sandwiches with her mouth gaping or slurps her tea, while she scoffs up her sleeve and nudges me sneakily, whispering about this one and that one. She's cowardly – an onlooker.

Three years our companionship lasts; three dreary years. During that time Lesley and I never speak beyond the odd greeting, usually if I bump into her on her own, which isn't very often. It's only a *howaya*, *Frances*, but it means a lot to

me. I appreciate it. She makes me feel normal, acceptable, un-mouselike.

25 September 1999 (evening)

I'll never forget the first time I met Lesley. She danced her way into my heart.

My best friend Lesley

It's 1971. I'm almost eight. I'm at my Irish dance class. My mother is sitting by my side on the bench at the back of the hall. It must be summer because the window is open behind me and I can feel the heat prickle the back of my neck. Miss Jackson, our teacher, is finishing up with the younger group and asks me to call in the other children from the car park. That's where they play while they're waiting their turn to dance. I'm not allowed to join them. My mother tells me to stay where I am and put on my pumps; she will call the others in.

As she's heading out the door, she stops suddenly and stands back, and a very tall, heavily built woman steps into the hall, with a striking, dark-haired girl of about my own age trailing behind her.

Taking hold of the girl's hand, the woman plods across the hall and plonks herself down beside me. She asks me my name. Her accent is strange. I can't see the girl; she's sitting on the far side of the woman.

'How old are you?' the woman then asks.

'Eight.'

‘There you are, our Lesley. This young girl’s the same age as yourself.’

The girl leans forward and stares into my face. She doesn’t smile. She doesn’t need to. She has the most beautiful face I’ve ever seen.

‘A new girl,’ Miss Jackson says.

‘Yes,’ the woman says, ‘though she’s been at the dancing back home in Manchester for a few years now.’

Miss Jackson asks the girl if she’ll do a reel. The girl nods. My mother’s sitting beside me again, giving the big woman the once-over. The girl stands in the centre of the hall, throws back her shoulders and puts her slender right leg forward, toes pointed. She’s wearing a short, red, pleated kilt, a white polo, white knee socks and well-worn, wrinkly pumps without laces. They remind me of ballet shoes.

Before she lowers the stylus on to the vinyl, Miss Jackson says, ‘Quiet, please.’

No further requests for silence are necessary. Lesley’s like a pixie in the wind, circling and twirling around the hall, barely skimming the floorboards. I’ve never seen anyone leap so high and land so softly. I can feel my skin tingling. Tapping my mother’s sleeve, I tell her, ‘I want to dance like that,’ but she ignores me, her cold eyes fixed firmly on Lesley, who has just finished her reel and is taking a well-rehearsed bow.

‘I think the music needs Lesley more than Lesley needs the music,’ Miss Jackson says.

My mother’s jaw is stiff, as her chin withdraws into the folds of her neck. I wonder what it is that Lesley has done to earn this instant disapproval.

An hour later I’m on the swing in Aunty Lily’s garden. I love that swing. She bought it especially for me, having no children

of her own. My mother and she are sitting out in deckchairs, drinking tea.

‘You should have seen her,’ my mother says about Lesley, ‘kicking her legs up higher than a French tart doing the cancan.’

I drag my soles along the grass and stop the swing. ‘What’s a French tart?’

‘Quit earwigging, you,’ my mother says.

Aunty Lily is bent over coughing, laughing and struggling for breath.

‘Take it easy there, Lily.’ My mother rubs her sister’s back. ‘Don’t you know you shouldn’t be getting yourself all worked up like that?’

‘Ah Jesus,’ Aunty Lily gasps, ‘if I can’t have a laugh now and again, what’s the point?’

A couple of weeks later, my mother drops me off at my dance class and says my father will collect me at midday. She’s going to spend the whole morning with Aunty Lily.

‘Go on outside and play with the others, child of grace,’ Miss Jackson says, ‘and don’t be sitting there all on your ownie-o.’

I can’t believe she’s letting me go out. She knows very well my mother wouldn’t approve. I keep looking back at her as I edge my way over to the door, half expecting her to change her mind. But she’s busy showing a young lad how to point his toes. When I open the door, I can hear the other children playing. I walk down the steps, unsure of what I’m going to do with myself when I get to the bottom.

Lesley has everyone lined up against the back wall. She’s skipping in front of them and singing:

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My sister Jane was far too young
to marry a man of a hundred and one . . .

I sidle over to the adjacent wall and sit on an empty beer keg from the pub next door. Lesley is the only one who notices me. She smiles, gesturing me over to her line. I can feel my face turning red as I walk across to join the others. Lesley has to pick someone from the row to have a go and chooses me.

‘I don’t know how to play the game,’ I tell her.

‘It doesn’t matter,’ she says, taking my hand. ‘Just follow my steps and I’ll do the singing.’

25 September 1999 (bedtime)

I’m not sure about all this reminiscing. Where is it going to get me? It might do more harm than good. Earlier on today, when I was thinking about the first time I met Lesley, I almost felt normal. But I’m not normal. Normal people don’t kidnap babies, do they?

Her eighteenth birthday

I stand beside the pram, facing the mannequins in the shop window. Inside I see the baby’s mother rummaging through the bargain rail. She doesn’t even look over her shoulder to check on her child. What the hell is wrong with her? Why is she being so irresponsible? How come she gets to be a mother and I don’t? I would never have left my baby unattended. It’s not fair. This shouldn’t be happening. Everything’s arseways. I could scream.

The security guard steps inside the shop and starts chatting with one of the assistants. The only eyes on the baby now are mine. It's a split-second decision – I stretch out my leg, release the brake with my foot and grab the handle.

'Excuse me,' I say, pushing the pram in front of me towards O'Connell Street.

A path opens up as pedestrians step out of my way. I don't feel crazy and I don't feel wrong. I just want to protect this child. *I want to be . . . should be her mother.*

I'm at the top of Henry Street in less than a minute. There's no hysteria; no screaming, delirious mother howling to the heavens, 'Where's my baby?'

Taking a left turn, I walk down to the traffic lights and around Parnell Square. When I see my car in the distance, I quicken my pace. The sooner we get away from the city, the better.

At the car, I try to remove the carrycot from the frame of the pram, but the blasted thing won't budge. I get down on my hunkers and start fumbling with the pram's undercarriage.

'Are you OK there, missus?' a man says. He has an inner-city accent, black loafers and white socks.

'Fine,' I snap, without looking up at him.

'Bleedin' hell, keep your fuckin' wig on, will ya?' he says, stomping on his cigarette butt. 'Oi was only askin'.'

When I finally manage to release the four clamps that secure the carrycot to the frame of the pram, I lift it off, put it into the back seat and fasten the seatbelt around it. The baby's eyes are flickering underneath her spongy eyelids. Aching to kiss her, I bend down to pick her up, but then think better of it: I don't want to waken her. Besides, there'll be plenty of time for kisses later. I take the baby bag from the carrier basket and put it on the passenger seat. Then I fold down the frame and shove it into the boot.

I turn the key in the ignition. Gerry Ryan is still on the radio, so I know it's not yet twelve o'clock. At the first red light I turn to check on the baby. All I can see is the back of her head – wisps of downy white hair – and I remember how my father once told me that when I was born my hair was as white as snow.

Several minutes later, I find myself on a roundabout. I drive around it three times wondering where to go, before taking the exit for the Naas dual carriageway: the farther away from Crosslea, the better. There's no way I can bring her home yet: maybe in a week or two. Then I could tell my father that she's mine. Women do it from time to time – disappear for a couple of weeks and arrive back home with their babies.

She begins to stir and moan.

'Ssh, little baby, ssh, ssh.'

When she quietens, I'm sure she's comforted by the sound of my voice and I'm chuffed.

On hearing the news come on, I bless myself and turn up the volume. I can't believe it's one o'clock. How did I manage to miss the twelve o'clock news? There is no mention of a missing baby in the headlines. It doesn't make sense. I can't understand it. Why aren't they looking for her? I should be relieved, and part of me is, but I'm angry too, because if it hadn't been me who had taken her, she could've ended up in the arms of some nutter; in danger, dead even. Thank God it was me, I think, my eyes filling up at the thought of what might have happened to her otherwise.

She begins to stir again. This time she makes little kissy sounds that tell me she's hungry. When she starts to cry, I sing to her:

Hush little baby don't say a word
Mama's gonna buy you a mockingbird . . .

It's getting hot inside the car. I roll down the window.

And if that mockingbird won't sing
Mama's gonna buy you a diamond ring . . .

A couple of miles outside Naas, I get stuck in a traffic jam. The baby is wailing now, stopping only to draw breath. Afraid that someone in the surrounding cars might hear her cry and become suspicious, I roll up the window again.

'Oh God, please help me.'

I can see a service station about a hundred yards away, but at the rate we're moving, it could take me another ten minutes to get there. I cannot wait. Indicating, I pull over on to the hard shoulder and drive up into the courtyard. My hands are trembling as I lift the baby out of the carrycot and hold her close to my chest. She nestles into me, urgently searching with her mouth. Her impatient lips try to latch on to my breast. She's moving back and forth on me, as if she's blowing on a mouth organ. I want to rip open my blouse and feel the softness of her head on my naked breast. If only I could quench her thirst.

A bottle, I think, puffing and panting to keep myself calm. I put my free hand into the baby bag, pulling out nappies, a bib, a bottle. The flipping thing is empty! I root around the inside of the bag again, this time finding a soother. When I put it in her mouth, she sucks furiously. I turn the baby bag upside down and shake out the rest of its contents on to the passenger seat, but there's no formula, just a packet of baby wipes and a baby-gro. As I lift the bag to throw it into the back

seat, I feel something rectangular and solid in the front pocket. Undoing the zip, I pull it out. Yes! Thank you, God. It's a carton of Cow and Gate milk.

'It's OK, baby,' I pant, wiping my brow. 'It's OK.'

She cries and kicks, banging her feet on the steering wheel. I try to open the carton of formula, but my nails are too short to make a slit: I have to use my teeth. Outside, people are getting in and out of cars, I can hear doors slamming, but I don't look out. The baby spits out the soother and throws back her head, flexing her limbs and squalling as if she's in terrible pain. She's frightening me now. Pushing back my seat, I lay her down on my knees. I need to fill her bottle quickly. As I loosen the top, I become aware of two children staring in the window. The baby jolts again, this time kicking my elbow. Milk spills over the side of the bottle and soaks my skirt. I don't care as long as I can manage to get enough into the bottle to satisfy her, to shut her up.

'OK, baby, here it comes,' I say, screwing on the top. 'Ssh ssh ssh.'

Holding her in the crook of my arm, I put the teat to her mouth.

There. There. There.

She's drinking now, fast and furious. I sense her relief in the sound of her breathing. Beads of sweat are trickling down the small of my back, making me itchy. I haven't time to scratch myself. I don't have a free hand either.

Looking down at her, I find it impossible not to feel moved by her big, blue, dependent eyes gazing back up at me and scanning my face.

I listen to the one-thirty news headlines. There's still no mention of a missing baby. It doesn't make sense. It must be two hours now since I found her. Unless, of course, she'd been

abandoned. It's not beyond the realms of possibility. I've heard of several cases of mothers abandoning their babies in Ireland. And this child's mother did look very young: too young. Perhaps she couldn't cope. She could be on her own, without a man, without support, without money. She could be depressed, on drugs; at the end of her tether. Who knows?

'Did your mother abandon you, sweetheart?' I look at her helpless face. 'Don't worry, I'll look after you.'

Maybe it's fate. I've never really believed in fate, not since . . . not for eighteen years. But why me? And why now? Today on her eighteenth birthday. Fate – it's the only explanation.

26 September 1999 (middle of the night)

Fate is only an explanation, a watery excuse. And, as I've said, there are no excuses for what I've done.

27 September 1999 (afternoon)

Fate reminds me of that song: 'Que sera sera'. My Aunty Lily used to sing it. I can still see her sitting in the armchair, singing and swaying, her eyes dancing in her head, her face flushed from brandy. Oblivious to her fate. Not a worry in the world that I could see.

'Come on, Frances, sing along with your Aunty Lily,' she'd say, taking me on her knee. 'You have a lovely sweet voice just like me.'

Aunty who?

We're having a visitor – my Aunty Lily. She's from London, no less. I can hardly wait. I look at the clock for the hundredth time since morning. Though I can't yet read the time, I can tell it's after two o'clock, but not yet three.

'A watched kettle never boils,' my mother says.

'I'm not watching the kettle,' I tell her. 'I'm watching the clock.'

'Here, make yourself useful.' She hands me a plate, a doily and a packet of assorted biscuits.

'What's she like?' I ask, as I arrange the biscuits around the plate – plain, fancy, plain, fancy, plain, fancy.

'You'll see for yourself,' she says with a sigh.

Tearing off wads of tinfoil, she covers the plate of sandwiches, the biscuits and the apple tart. Then she checks her watch.

'They should be leaving the airport about now,' she says, wringing her hands nervously. 'Run upstairs and get my beads from under my pillow. We'll say a decade of the rosary that your father and Aunty Lily will have a safe journey home.'

Prayers said, I kneel up on the armchair next to the window in the front room to watch out for them. The Reilly twins, who are in my class, are playing out on the street. I lean across the back of the armchair, knock on the windowpane and shout out to them that I'm waiting for my aunty who's coming over from London. When I realize that they can't hear me, I climb across the top of the armchair and on to the windowsill. As I reach up to open the top window, my mother comes in and scolds me for being so noisy. I don't think she quite understands how excited I'm feeling. Up until this day, apart, of

course, from my parents, I haven't met any of the few relatives I have. Both my grandmothers and my maternal grandfather are dead. My paternal grandfather lives in Australia with my father's sister, Auntie Philomena. I didn't even know Auntie Lily existed until last week. My mother never said she had a younger sister.

'Aunty who?' I asked her, when she'd told me about our visitor.

'Your Aunty Lily. From London.'

'I didn't know about her.'

My mother said of course I did, but that I must have forgotten, and that she's not surprised because I've a head like a sieve.

Everyone else at school has sisters, brothers, grandmothers, grandfathers, aunties, uncles, first cousins, second cousins, third cousins once removed. They're all part of big families, local families. They all have the usual surnames – Maguire, Reilly, Cusack, Kelly. No one ever asks – Which of the Falls would that be?

Through the net curtain, I see the car coming and I call out to my mother. She shoos me away from the window and reminds me once again to be on my best behaviour. The key turns in the front door.

'Stay where you are,' my mother says, patting her hair as she steps into the hall.

'Rita!' my aunty whoops. 'Ah Jesus, it's great to see you.'

'Hello, Lily,' my mother says. 'It's good to see you too. Eh . . . and who have we here?'

'That's my old man,' my aunty tells her.

'Your . . . pardon me?'

'My husband.'

'Good God!'

‘Rita, Xavier. Xavier, Rita.’

‘It’s very nice to meet you,’ the man says.

‘Holy Immaculate Mother, when did all this happen?’ my mother asks.

‘Arragh, I’ll tell you all about that later,’ my aunty says. ‘First things first. Where’s Frances?’

The door swings open and a lady, whom I can’t believe to be my mother’s sister, throws open her arms to me. I’m standing facing her, staring at her tangerine blouse, her brown bell-bottoms and her crocodile boots, not quite knowing what I’m supposed to do.

‘Hello,’ I say.

‘Come ’ere and give me a hug, love,’ she says, her arms still outstretched.

I try to catch my mother’s eye for her approval, but I can’t see her face; she’s standing behind my aunty’s husband, who has the cut of a grandfather about him. As I walk towards Aunty Lily, I see tears in her eyes. She bends down and squeezes me so tight my ribs hurt. For a moment, everyone is silent.

‘Sit down, why don’t ye,’ my father says, and I’m relieved to be released from my aunty’s embrace.

My mother shows her sister round the house. My father and my new uncle, Xavier, have a drink. I like the whiskey smell and the crystal glasses. Xavier tells my father about meeting Lily two years after his first wife had passed away. He has two daughters – Madeleine and Linda – in their late teens, working lassies, one a nurse, the other a telephonist.

‘Nice steady jobs,’ my father says. ‘I’m in the post office myself – a postman.’

‘A good, honest job,’ Xavier says.

‘Aye.’

‘The women have a lot of catching up to do.’

‘They have indeed. It’s been a while.’

‘Almost seven years, I take it.’

‘Aye, that’d be about right.’

‘I think Lily misses having family around her.’

‘I suppose she would,’ my father says, shifting in his seat like he’s sitting on something lumpy.

‘Twenty-five years I’ve been in London and I still don’t call it home.’

‘Do you not?’

‘No. Armagh is still home to me, and will be till the day I die.’

‘But your girls are settled in London, aren’t they?’

‘Oh aye; they were born and reared in it.’

‘Sure, they’re the most important family you have now. And Lily, of course.’

‘The girls will move on, get married and set up homes of their own. That’s the way it goes,’ Xavier says, pulling a pipe and a box of matches from his sports-jacket pocket.

Aunty Lily peeps in the door and tells her husband that she needs help to take the luggage up to their room.

‘Will you let the man finish his drink first?’ my father says.

But my uncle is already on his feet.

‘She keeps me on my toes, does this one,’ he says, putting down his pipe on the mantelpiece. There’s something about the way he says it that makes me think he could stay on his toes for ever.

While they’re upstairs, my mother slips back into the room and says in a loud whisper, ‘Has that girl lost leave of her senses altogether?’

‘As far as I can gather,’ my father says, ‘she’s just the same old Lily – full of surprises.’

‘I think I’d class marrying a white-haired publican as more of a shock than a surprise. And did you know he’s a widower and has two daughters in their late teens?’

‘Aye, so he was telling me.’

‘What in God’s name possessed her? Why couldn’t she have just waited? A fine-looking woman like her – she could’ve had her pick of husbands if she’d played her cards right.’

‘They seem right happy to me.’

‘Yeah, but for how long? That man will be collecting the pension before Lily hits thirty.’ She lifts back the fire screen and pokes the coals. ‘And she’ll be spoon-feeding him before she hits forty. If my poor mother could see her now, she’d turn in her grave, God rest her.’ She hangs the poker back on its hook and blesses herself.

‘Will you not be worrying about Lily, Rita? She’ll be grand.’

‘Living in the upstairs of a public house! I can’t see them getting a rosary said of an evening in that kind of seedy atmosphere, can you?’

As if in response to my mother’s remarks, we hear an outburst of laughter from upstairs.

‘See,’ my father says. ‘Happy as the day is long.’

I don’t think my father realizes that it’s not her sister’s happiness my mother is worried about: it’s her soul. If she’s not getting a rosary in every day, she could find herself on what my mother calls the slippery slope.

When Lily and Xavier come downstairs, my mother goes quiet, but I know she’s thinking and worrying, and wondering what she can do, if anything.

‘I’ll make the tea,’ she says at the first lull in conversation.

‘I’ll have coffee, Rita, if it’s not too much trouble,’ Auntie Lily says. ‘You just can’t get the same kick out of a cuppa tea.’

‘Oh you can’t, can’t you?’ my mother mutters on her way out the door, signalling for me to follow her.

‘Here,’ she sighs, handing me a pound note in the kitchen. ‘Run up to Scully’s for a jar of coffee. Madam must have her kicks, God help us!’

After we’ve eaten, Auntie Lily tells me to follow her and leads me upstairs to her room.

‘For you, love,’ she says, handing me a black-haired doll in a yellow dress.

‘Listen,’ she says, pulling a string on the doll’s back.

My name is Rosie, it squeaks.

‘You do it,’ Auntie Lily says.

I pull the string. *Will you play with me?*

‘You’ll be looking forward to having your friends round to show her off, won’t you?’ she says.

‘I don’t have any friends.’

‘Of course you do,’ my mother titters, coming into the room. ‘Though living in Crosslea, she’s hardly spoiled for choice.’

For the first time since she’s arrived, Auntie Lily isn’t smiling.

At seven o’clock, my mother announces that it’s time for the rosary and offers a set of beads to her sister.

‘Ye go on ahead,’ my aunty says, dragging on her cigarette. ‘Xavier and I say ours together in bed at night. Isn’t that right, darling?’

‘Oh God, aye,’ he says and either sneezes or sniggers, I’m not sure which.

‘How long do you intend staying?’ my mother asks her sister over breakfast the following morning. My father and Xavier aren’t up yet.

‘Just the week. Why? Are you getting tired of us already?’

‘No, no, it’s not that. I was just wondering.’

‘Sure, I have to spend a few days with my long-lost niece,’ she says, ruffling my hair. ‘You wouldn’t begrudge me that, would you?’

My mother lifts the teapot. ‘I’d better fill the kettle again,’ she says. ‘It’s nearly empty.’

‘Who do you think she looks like, Rita?’

‘I really don’t know.’

‘I think she’s the down stamp of Mammy.’

‘Good morning, ladies,’ my father says, coming into the kitchen.

My mother looks up at the clock. ‘About time.’

‘She’s as bossy as ever, I see,’ Aunty Lily says, pulling out a chair for my father.

My mother’s cheeks flush.

‘I was just saying to Rita, Joe, I think Frances is the image of our mother. Would you agree?’

‘You needn’t be asking him,’ my mother says. ‘When it comes to family resemblances, he wouldn’t have a notion who’s like whom. Would you, Joe?’

‘Nah,’ my father says, looking at the floor and scratching his head, ‘Rita’s right. You’re asking the wrong man.’

‘Take it from me, love,’ Aunty Lily smiles at me, ‘you’re the picture of your grandmother. *Bee-autiful* she was. Everyone thought so. Didn’t they, Rita?’

‘They did.’

‘I’m supposed to be like her too.’

‘That’s the first I heard of it,’ my mother says, placing a clean cup and saucer in front of my father.

‘Oh yeah,’ Lily says, pulling a cigarette from her packet, ‘people were always telling me that.’

When the visitors take the bus into town on the Monday afternoon to go shopping, my mother sprays air-freshener all over the house and tells my father that she's counting the hours. I'm not quite able to count the hours, but I am counting the days. I'm going to miss them. In fact, I'm already missing them and they've only gone into Castleown for a few hours. What I notice most is that I can hear the clocks tick again and somehow that makes me feel lonely.

The night before they leave, my mother invites her friend Nancy, the district nurse, and Nancy's brother, Father Vincent, the parish priest in Castleown, to join us for the evening. They're all from the same town in County Cork. When Father Vincent asks about London, Aunty Lily talks about the underground trains, Buckingham Palace, Piccadilly, Hyde Park, Chinese restaurants and its huge department stores.

'Some day I'll take you to London, love,' she says, winking at me. 'You'll absolutely love it.'

'With all its attractions,' Xavier says, and takes two quick puffs of his pipe, 'it can't hold a candle to Ireland.'

'I'd say not,' Father Vincent says.

'To be quite frank with you, Father, London's going to the dogs.'

'Is that right?'

'Och aye. Between the hippies and the junkies and the nigg . . . the blacks, you don't know who you're going to run into when you step outside your front door.'

'Are there a lot of blacks?' Father Vincent asks.

'They're coming in their shiploads.'

'From where?'

'Africa, Jamaica, Timbuktu, I don't know. Sure they all look the same to me. And I'll tell you something else -'

‘What’s that?’

‘I’d sooner have an English Protestant for a next-door neighbour than one of them fellas. And coming from a deep-rooted republican family, that’s saying something.’

My father unscrews the top of the whiskey bottle and refills the glasses. My mother pours more tea for Nancy and herself.

‘Are you sure,’ she says to Lily, ‘you’ll not have a cup of coffee instead?’

‘Thanks, but no thanks. I’m on my holidays. I’ll enjoy my wee drink, if it’s all the same to you.’

Aunty Lily’s legs are crossed: the upper one is swinging. She forgets she has a cigarette resting in the ashtray and lights another.

‘I don’t mind the blacks,’ she says, and everyone looks at her as if she’s lost her marbles. ‘Well, I don’t. There’s a black woman working in the laundromat up our street and I’m telling ye straight, a nicer woman you wouldn’t meet.’

‘Well, isn’t that something,’ Nancy says. ‘And would ye have a chat, you and this black lady?’

‘We would surely. We have a bit of a natter every time I’m in doing my laundry. She’s a great oul character.’

‘And where does this woman hail from?’ Father Vincent asks.

‘Jamaica.’

‘Is she a Catholic?’ Nancy asks.

‘I couldn’t tell you what religion she is; I’ve never bothered to ask her. Sure, what difference does it make to me who she prays to?’

‘Talk to the divil, would my wee Lily,’ Xavier says, reaching over and touching her cheek with the blunt tips of his fingers.

When he looks into her eyes, Xavier’s face reminds me of

a sleepy moon and I think that he must really like her, even though she does talk to blacks.

‘Tell me this, Rita,’ Father Vincent says. ‘Now that you and Lily are back in touch, would you consider taking a trip over to London yourself?’

‘Indeed, I would not. I’ve no desire to go chasing excitement, Father. A couple of days on the Donegal coast is more than enough for me.’

‘Not to worry,’ Xavier says, and straightens himself up in the armchair, ‘because Lily and I –’

‘No, no. Not yet, Xavier,’ Auntie Lily says.

‘Sure, why not, love? Isn’t now as good a time as any?’

Auntie Lily tips the last of her whiskey into her mouth. Then she nudges her husband. ‘OK, go on so. Tell them.’

‘That trip into Castleown the other day – well, it wasn’t just a shopping excursion. Lily and I have put a deposit on a house in Sycamore Street. I’m selling the bar beyond, and we’re moving back.’

Father Vincent says it’s great news and won’t it be ideal for both of them to be so close to their families. Isn’t Xavier’s hometown of Armagh just a stone’s throw from Castleown and yet they’ll be south of the border and not stuck in the middle of all the troubles. From what he’s heard, it’ll get worse before it gets better.

‘That’s right,’ Nancy says. ‘He has a good point there, right enough.’

‘Well, isn’t that a good one,’ my father says. ‘Castleown, begod.’

Both himself and Auntie Lily are looking across at my mother. Her eyes are downcast. She’s picking off specks of wool from the bottom of her sleeve.

‘Here’s to your health and happiness,’ Father Vincent says,

raising his glass. 'And to coming back to your home country. Lily and Xavier.'

The men hold out their arms and chink their glasses.

'To Ireland,' Xavier says. 'All thirty-two counties.'

'Come on,' my mother whispers, taking my hand. 'Time for bed.'

We're just at the door when Auntie Lily says, 'And what do *you* think, Rita?'

My mother half turns her head but looks no farther back than the door handle. 'You become very accustomed to a way of life after seven years. Woolworths is a far cry from Harrods, isn't it? Just don't expect too much.'

1 October 1999 (middle of the night)

I've been thinking a lot about Auntie Lily and my mother. In fact, they've been keeping me awake tonight. What I cannot fathom is how two sisters could turn out to be so different from one another. Auntie Lily was everything my mother was not – funny, exciting, modern, but, most of all, tender. She was motherly; the kind of woman who nearly couldn't stop herself from reaching out and stroking my head if I was walking by her, or putting her arm around me if I was sitting next to her. It felt strange to me at first because I wasn't used to being touched. But I got to like it. It made me feel loved: mothered. That's all I wanted to do the day I took the baby. To mother.