

Tony Hogan
Bought me
Ice Cream
an
Float before
he Stole
my
Ma



Kerry Hudson



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About the Book

When Janie Ryan is born, she's just the latest in a long line of Ryan women, Aberdeen fishwives to the marrow, always ready to fight. Her violet-eyed Grandma had predicted she'd be sly, while blowing Benson and Hedges smoke rings over her Ma's swollen belly. In the hospital, her family approached her suspiciously, so close she could smell whether they'd had booze or food for breakfast. It was mostly booze.

Tony Hogan tells the story of a Scottish childhood of filthy council flats and B&Bs, screeching women, feckless men, fags and booze and drugs, the dole queue and bread and marge sandwiches. It is also the story of an irresistible, irrepressible heroine, a dysfunctional family you can't help but adore, the absurdities of the eighties and the fierce bonds that tie people together no matter what. Told in an arrestingly original - and cry-out-loud funny - voice, it launches itself headlong into the middle of one of life's great fights, between the pull of the past and the freedom of the future. And Janie Ryan, born and bred for combat, is ready to win.

About the Author

Kerry Hudson was born in Aberdeen. Growing up in a succession of council estates, B&Bs and caravan parks provided her with a keen eye for idiosyncratic behaviour and plenty of material for this, her first novel. She currently lives, works and writes in London.

To the three best women I know: Susanna, Maria, Levia.

Tony Hogan
bought me
an
Ice Cream
Float before
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my Ma

Kerry Hudson

Chatto & Windus
LONDON

1

'GET OUT, YOU cuntin', shittin', little fuckin' fucker!' were the first words I ever heard. The midwife, a shiny-faced woman who learned entirely new turns of phrase that night, smoothed Ma's hair.

'Yer both fine. We'll have tae give yeh a quick stitch-up later, but - baby girl just ripped you a wee bit coming out.'

Ma laid me, sticky and slack-limbed, on her chest and wondered how something so pink, puckered and fragile could be so vicious as to tear the person who was meant to love her most in the world. But that was the Ryan Women: fishwives to the marrow, they were always ready to fight and knew the places that would cut deepest.

I was not vicious, though. No one could tell if I was clever, or sly as my grandma had predicted while blowing Benson & Hedges smoke rings over my ma's swollen belly. I was a 'bad baby', forever gurning and spitting out my ma's nipple. My delicate skin had mottled with the indignation of being ripped by forceps from a warm, cosy spot where I was perfectly happy.

For all my fretful kicking at the air and scratching at my own face, my saving grace was beauty. Everyone said so; a golden baby with extra-blue eyes, the slope of my nose and forehead just so.

'She'll be a wee heartbreaker,' Grandma said, smoothing down her mint-green nylon trousers. 'But she'll have a lot o' jealousy. An' I know wha' a burden it is tae be born with

beauty.' Grandma's violet eyes filled and the tears seeped through her pale powder into the wrinkles underneath.

Ma held me to her bony chest, resting my bum on the roll of flesh under her sharp ribs, which was all that remained of my home.

'Aye, she takes after her daddy. He was gorgeous. Those American blue eyes. She's the spit of him.'

Ma's face crumpled, her mouth sagged in a whine and her face turned pink. I wondered what I'd been born into.

Other mas in the ward came over and eyed me suspiciously, checking I wasn't heavier, livelier or prettier than their babies. Ma's - my - family came and held their faces so close to mine I could smell whether they'd had booze or food for breakfast. It was mostly booze.

Uncle Frankie, who had a scatter of freckles across his face, eyes the colour of Aberdeen skies and hair like silky copper, picked me up and held me above his head like a football trophy.

'Yeh did it, sis! An' what a little beauty an' all!'

Even though he was as short as Ma and a bit chubby around the edges he made the other mas laugh and tuck wisps of hair behind their ears and the nurses raise their eyebrows and lower their chins; a very nurse thing to do, I'd noticed.

My Great Auntie Aggie came, wearing saucer-sized glasses and carrying a half-eaten bag of sherbet lemons. She said I was the image of Rodney Boyle, her first love who broke her heart, and went to sit at the end of the bed, with an unlit fag in her hand, to update Grandma on the 'Andy Maguinness fiasco'. My ears, no bigger than a slice of button mushroom, told me the young one 'was begging for it'. After they'd sucked and crunched their way through the sherbet lemons and the juicier details, 'standing up in the bus station toilet, Aggie. Imagine, the filth! I won't be using them again, I'll tell yeh that,' they hoisted their handbags

onto their shoulders and marched off in their matching beige high heels to the bingo.

The flickering light was switched off and the nurse put me in the plastic box of a cot. When the squeaks of her shoes were far enough away Ma picked me up and tucked my head in the crook of her shoulder. I allowed her one minute of peace and curled my lips, so small and sweet that they asked to be bitten like jelly sweets, into what my ma joyfully thought was my first smile. It was, in fact, the beginnings of wind. As I felt her arms slacken with the possibility of sleep, I filled my lungs and screamed like only a Ryan Woman can.

The crabbit woman opposite sat up and snapped her bedside light on.

'For goodness' sake, lassie -' her gold cross glinted as she leaned forward - 'see to your child and give the rest of us some peace. She'll be spoilt before she leaves the crib.'

My ma, Iris Ryan as they knew and loved her, sat up and declared with as much dignity as a woman who has two milky wet patches on the front of her nightie can, 'My lassie can cry as long as she wants tae, an' anyway, it was probably yer ugly mug that set her off!'

She swung her heavy legs to the floor and took me out to walk the green, gleaming corridors. I stopped crying, gave her the gift of another woozy, windy smile, and understood for the first time that she was my ma and it was us against the world from that night on.

Uncle Frankie borrowed a red car from his pal Meathead and I was swaddled in my basket on Ma's knee in the front seat, sucking on two fingers, my feet cushioned on the stringy wet tissues that Ma kept stuffing there. She'd cried for the last twenty-four hours, the sobs getting quieter and her eyes puffier with each hour. She'd cried so much there wasn't a clump or speck of mascara to be seen; Frankie

said he hardly recognised her. In those hours Ma undid years of indelible mascara residue.

'Come on, sis, yer going home. Ma'll look after the wee un and yeh can have a rest.'

Ma bit the inside of her cheeks, stared straight ahead and let tears stream and soak into the neckline of her T-shirt.

'Just start the car, Frankie.'

But he didn't; instead he reached to the back seat for a plastic bag.

'An' look what I got yeh. A wee pressie!'

Ma took it, sandwiched it between her stomach and the end of my basket, then waited for the car to move.

'Look inside then.'

She pushed down the sides of the bag and produced a thin black bottle of vodka and a lurid pink miniskirt, which even in her pre-pregnancy days my skinny ma couldn't have got herself into. She stared at the pink skirt as though deciphering a code, turned it over in her hands.

'What's this?' she demanded, her temper stopping the tears. 'Is this some kind of joke? Taking the piss out of yer sister's fat arse?'

Frankie's blue eyes were wide in confusion, a blush spread behind his freckles. 'What? Reenie, naw, I -'

'For the last time it's fuckin' Iris! I didnae go all the way to fuckin' London to come back an' be the same old Irene!' A fleck of spit landed on my cheek, my engine revved, I gave a few hiccups and started up crying.

'Iris. Sorry. But honest, it's no' a joke. I just wanted tae remind yeh there'll be lots more nights out tae be had. Now yer no preggers any more. Yeh can hit the town. An' Shelley, she's my new girl, she was meant tae come an' help me choose an outfit fer yeh but then she had tae babysit an', I just ...'

Even with my eyes closed to summon my loudest wails I could tell Frankie was close to tears himself.

‘Forget it, Frankie. Let’s just go.’

‘See, Reenie, I mean Iris. I just got this wee thing until yeh could come with me an’ pick somethin’ proper.’ The last sentence was barely audible over the rain smashing down on the windscreen and my tantrum.

Tears gathered on Ma’s lowered lashes. ‘Sorry, Frankie. It’s a lovely thought. I’m just tired, will yeh start the car now?’

Frankie looked at Ma, her eyes closed, head back against the seat, then at my legs and fists beating in rhythm with my screams, and shook his head.

‘An’ another thing,’ said Ma, eyes still closed, ‘what’s so important that Ma couldn’t come?’

A bead of sweat popped on Frankie’s forehead and rolled into the auburn thicket of his eyebrow. His eyes roamed but found nothing to rest on.

‘Aw, ehm, bingo.’

Colour rose in my ma’s face for the first time that day, her eyes snapped open. ‘Bingo? Yer telling me the two fat ladies and legs eleven is why she’s no here tae collect her first grandchild?’

Frankie turned off the heater, wiped the back of his neck with the palm of his hand. ‘Aye, but it’s -’ he looked over at Ma then directed the rest of his sentence in a whisper to his knees - ‘Triple Jackpot on Thursdays.’

‘The fucking bitch.’

As we pulled out of the car park, Ma stared straight ahead, glitter-eyed and tearless, and I let sleep seep into my exhausted wee body.

We drove through the grey estate and Frankie helped us to the door, carrying me with the bottle of vodka under one armpit and a teddy with a pink bow under the other. Ma said he could keep the skirt to clean his windows with and followed behind dragging her string bag that held a

nightie, a Harold Robbins novel, a few grubby sanitary towels.

At the doorstep Ma gave a twitch of her lips that might have been a smile.

'Thanks fer getting us. An' sorry fer earlier, I'm a hormonal monster. I just can't believe I'm back at this dump.'

Frankie leaned over to give her a kiss, their close-together heads putting me in shadow until the blue sky and smoke-puff clouds opened up between them again.

'Listen, yer going tae be a great ma. Member how yeh looked after me?'

'Aye, well our darling ma was always half pissed or down the bingo so ... no' much has changed, has it? Will yeh come up an' have a drink of that fancy vodka? Wet the bairn's head?'

'Sorry, sis, Shelley promised tae make it up tae me fer no coming shopping.'

'Well, Romeo, yeh'd best not keep her waiting.'

Frankie's grin dropped. 'There's another thing.' He passed me to Ma, put the vodka and teddy on the doorstep and pulled out a brown envelope from his back pocket. 'Now don't get pissed off. It's just a wee bit of cash in case anything comes up an' yer no' wanting tae go back to McHennessy's.'

Ma's eyes filled as he slid the envelope into my basket. 'Frankie ...'

'It's no much because of the rent going up and that new telly, just a few hunner in case.'

'Yer too good, an' that's the truth.' They stood and looked at each other. 'Now, are yeh going tae keep yer hot date waiting?'

Frankie gave Ma another quick kiss and squeezed my hand between forefinger and thumb - 'She's gorgeous -' and bounded down the steps.

'An' Frankie?' Ma shouted to his back. 'Fer fuck's sake use some protection! You don't want tae end up with one of these!' But he was already inside the car, the Specials' 'Too Much Too Young' vibrating through the windows.

Ma wrestled, vodka under one arm and me balanced on her knee, to unlock the door. The little flat smelt of fag ash and stale dinner dishes. In the bedroom Ma sat on the rumped bed, putting me behind her, and reached for a note on the bedside table that said 'IRENE' in big block capitals, a circular scribble where the pen wouldn't work above the R. Ma leaned forward and I saw the bumps of her spine through her T-shirt, the sag of her shoulders once she'd finished reading.

'Well, my wee one, Granny wants us tae run out fer some milk an' twenty Benson & Hedges. Welcome fuckin' home.'

She put me in the cot and through its slats I saw the glint of the slim bottle as she tipped it towards her lips.

It was half empty when she staggered from the room and came back with the pink teddy, sodden and grimy from its hours discarded on the doorstep, and put it into my cot. Then, she lay down and fell into a sleep so deep that even my screaming for dinner wouldn't break it.

2

GRANDMA HAD COOKED mince, tatties and skirlie. It was pension day. Ma sat in a nylon nightie, one with scratchy lace around the sleeves, stirring the oatmeal-and-onion slop into her tatties.

'Aye, well, it just wasnae what I was expectin', that's all. I've only been home a few days.'

'I just thought, since she isnae taking the breast, it wouldnae make a difference if it was me or you. An' McHennessy's will bring in more than the dole.'

'But I'm sick of it, Ma. The white boots that reek of other women's feet an' the buckets of bloody water an' fuckin' stink of fish guts. I'm no' a fishwife, I don't want tae be one.'

'No' good enough fer yeh, is that it? Miss High an' Bloody Mighty thinks she's too fancy fer the fishhouse now she's been tae London and got herself preggers by a Yank? Well, what an affront. It was good enough tae put food on the table fer my ma and her ma before her.'

Ma stirred her tatties slower, twitched her left foot.

'Naw, Ma, it's no' that. I just want tae get tae know my bairn. An' what about when you're at the bingo or want tae go down the Black Dog?'

'I'll just take her with me of course.'

Ma stared down at her muddy plate of mixed food her lips set firm. 'Well, I'm not doing it and yeh can't make me.'

Grandma put down her knife and fork, food half finished, and reached for her fags. 'While you're in my house yeh

bloody well will. Yeh'd think yeh've forgotten that it was you who turned up on my doorstep, without a penny to yer name or a father fer yer bairn.' Grandma didn't raise her voice, though there was steel there: cold, sharp and ready to cut. But Ma wasn't afraid, she was used to her own ma's slicing words.

'What? An' have her dragged about from pub tae pub like we all were?'

'An' what's that supposed tae mean? At least I could keep a man, someone fer yeh all to call yer da.'

'But it wasnae one man, was it? It was three, an' what a fuckin' bunch of charmers an' all!'

Grandma took a puff of her fag and stubbed it out. 'At least they stuck around an' helped tae bring some money in. And yours hasnae. That is why, my ungrateful wee daughter, you've got tae work.'

From my cocoon of pillows on the sofa I saw the gleam of the knife and fork in my ma's tight white knuckles.

'An' where are they now, Ma, yer army men? Are you keeping them under the sink, eh? Maybe you rush off tae a penthouse at the Palace Hotel when I'm at the fishhouse? Because the last time I looked it was just you, by yourself, in this wee flat.'

She put her knife and fork on the plate. Grandma's face crumpled, like air had been sucked from her lips and cheeks, but she rallied, raised her chin, pointed a polished nail at Ma.

'Yeh ungrateful bitch. Tae make fun of a poor pensioner who's taken yeh in, out of the kindness of her heart, offering tae look after yer wee bastard.'

'Aye, cause yeh did such a good job of that on our first day back from the hospital.'

'Still the same old Irene Ryan, yeh'll never change. Runt of the litter, a black sheep. Runnin' off tae London and getting intae God knows what. Runnin' around wi' a Yank that couldn't get shot of yeh quick enough. You always

were a nut job but I ignored the gossip, held my head high an' I never loved yeh any less.' Grandma's teeth slipped out and she snapped them back in. 'Yeh've never been a proper Ryan, yer nothin' better than a cuckoo in the nest.'

I felt myself roll sideways, watching Ma's stunned face upside down before I saw a rush of velour and my arm and shoulder exploded with a thump, my cheek scraping itself across the sour-smelling brown carpet.

Silence, a stilling of six lungs, as Ma and Grandma stared in horror until I screamed. I felt the burn on my silky cheek, the burst of pain in my shoulder no stronger than pipe cleaners and Play-Doh.

Ma grabbed me. 'Are yeh alright?' She picked up my limbs and shook each one. 'Is she alright?' She turned to Grandma who took me in her rough grip.

'Ach, it's nothing. Look, she's kicking away an' that's just a wee carpet burn, but this is proof, yeh can't look after her yerself.'

Ma looked over, lips tightening into a line of skin, and put her arms out to take me back. 'I see what yer trying tae do. Yer trying tae take my bairn but yeh can't take this away. She's mine an' yeh won't keep me here by stealing her.'

Ma had her hands around Grandma's wrists trying to wrench them from my middle. My head waggled back and forth in the struggle.

'Yer not a fit mother an' anyone would tell yeh the same.'

'Aye? Well, look in the mirror, Mother.'

In a burst of mad genius, Ma lifted her hands to Grandma's damp armpits, gave them a tickle then grabbed me, my neck snapping backwards with the force of it.

'Yer nothing but a bitter old bitch, an' yeh'll not see her or me again. I'm her ma, fit or otherwise, an' that's not fer you or anyone else in this town tae judge.'

Grandma pulled back her hand and delivered a slap that echoed from her fox-hunting decorative plates and rang in my ears like a scream.

'Get out o' my fuckin' house then.'

'Don't you worry, we're going.'

Grandma sat back in her chair, turned up the TV and didn't look round as Ma left, holding me with one arm and fingering the burning red blotch on her cheek with a shaky hand.

So we trundled through the rainy streets; Ma in her nightie, winter coat and grubby plimsolls and me in a Moses basket propped on my pram. Underneath me was a tumble of knickers tangling with rattles and leaky shampoo bottles.

Ma had stuffed me into my snowsuit, letting out a growl each time my slithery legs escaped. We left in a frenzy of clothes-throwing and screaming and, finally, the slamming of Uncle Frankie's note-stuffed envelope through the letter box. The scatter of notes a reminder to her ma: she was no one's Charity Case. The weather girl told us it would be 'rain, rain and more rain again' at high volume, as if the volume itself was proof enough of how little Grandma was reacting.

The rain beat down; I imagined drops sliding down the inches of bare flesh between Ma's coat and plimsolls, slicking her bony ankles. At the phone box Ma wedged the pram half in half out and rummaged till she found a 10p piece. She tried two times before she got the right number.

'Frankie? No, she's alright, but me and Ma had a massive screaming match an' she's chucked us out. We've nowhere tae go. Come an' get us? It's pissing down.'

The rain covered my blanket with sparkling wet diamonds.

'What? What do yeh mean yeh don't want tae take sides? Fuck's sake! What do yeh mean go back? She threw me out

an' then she slapped me, while I was holding the wee one an' all ... I shoved it back through the letter box, I'll not have her saying I was sponging ... Aye? Well, fuck you then!

She slammed down the receiver, banged the window with the palm of her hand, looked at me with pity, maybe a little hate, picked up the receiver again and punched in three sharp numbers.

'Hello?' She spoke in a posh, softer voice. 'No, not the fire service an' not the ambulance either. Maybe the police? Aye, well, I'm out in the rain with my two-week-old baby an' we've nowhere tae go.' She listened, whispered 'bitch' under her breath.

By the time Ma had spun half-truths (a slap, a baby, no place for the night) and half-lies (there was no storming out, no Postman Pat with twenty-pound notes, no telling Frankie to fuck himself) we had an address.

I was wet, crying the fat, futile tears of a baby who thinks she is owed something. We walked for twenty minutes, past warm squares of window and sprinkles of laughter from pub doorways left ajar. Ma cried the whole way too, her salty tears mixing with the rain and glossing her cheeks. The family that cries together stays together. Aberdeen, as cold, hard and grey as you would expect from a town carved from granite.

A woman wearing a plastic headscarf, anorak and wellies stopped us.

'You alright, love?' She looked at the bluish stretch of skin where Ma's coat fell open. 'Yeh shouldnae be out in this weather.' She peered into the pram at my pink screaming face and the pile of sodden clothes. 'An' with a baby. Do yeh have somewhere tae go, lassie?'

'We're going somewhere now. Thanks though.'

'Where to, love? Would yeh not catch a bus?' She looked at the pile of clothes, the huge showpiece pram that

Frankie had bought. 'No. Maybe a taxi would be better for yeh?'

Ma's exhalations came out in low sobs.

'No, honest, we're just ten minutes away now. Don't worry, we are going somewhere.'

The woman, cheeks ruddy and rounded, took Ma's elbow. 'Then yeh'll let me put yeh in a taxi, aye?' She looked closely at Ma's face. 'For the baby, if no' for you.'

Ma nodded. And so we three waited for a taxi to splash along the shining street. The taxi that would take us somewhere warm, after the cab driver had bundled our knickers, shampoo bottles and pram into the boot and the woman pressed five pounds into Ma's hand and made the sign of the cross when she heard the street number and name, though you couldn't have known it if you hadn't been there yourself. Ma took the note in her wet, limp hand and forgot to say thank you when the taxi pulled away.

That's how we found ourselves at the Grafton Women's Shelter, a house so inoffensive you'd never guess how many bruised faces and hopes were sheltered inside.

Years later I'm told this story, as a humorous cautionary tale about the famous Ryan Women's temper, but as Ma summoned the strength to ring the bell there was nothing funny, nothing funny at all, about a shivering twenty-year-old in her nightie and winter coat, with a screaming baby in the pram beside her.

A circle of light, a shiny star, flashed in the centre of the door and darkened just as quickly.

The door opened ajar showing a mousy fringe and a nose that dipped up and down assessing us. Then it opened and flooded our miserable bodies in syrupy golden light and I heard Ma exhale; breathing out the cold, horrifying afternoon.

The woman in the doorway smiled, looked closely at Ma's face, and seeing me, smiled wider. She had short hair,

a haircut that made you think of a bathroom sink and a pair of kitchen scissors. Her square, short frame was covered with a green, bobbled sweatshirt and she had the kindest face I had seen in my two short weeks of life.

The hallway was heavy with the sweet smell of tomatoes and garlic.

'Iris, is it? I'm Jane the Centre Manager.' She gave a short light laugh and smiled at Ma's expression. 'They called and let us know to expect you. You're safe.'

Her accent was different, the *r*rs sliding like soft butter into your ears.

It was so quiet I wondered if the people who lived there ever turned up the telly or stitched their sentences with shouted swear words aimed to wound.

'Now I'll just take you into the Welcome Room and get you set up. I'm sure you're exhausted, cold too.'

We left the pram in the hallway and in Ma's arms I was ushered into a hot room with pink floral wallpaper and fat orange armchairs. There was an electric fire in the corner, yellow light dancing behind the dusty plastic coals.

In one of the armchairs, a dirty-blonde head stooped; she turned and I saw two wide blue eyes full of fright and a face like a stamped-on overripe fruit: yellow and purple, split with gashes, swollen and sunken in the wrong places.

'Oh, Sandra. You're still waiting for the doctor? Sorry, I'll just get Iris settled and I'll see where she is.'

Ma looked at the girl in the chair, who was maybe younger than her, with her mouth open.

'OK, Iris, we'll have a chat about everything tomorrow. In the meantime I'll -'

'There's nothing tae talk about.'

'Well, we won't make you talk about anything you don't want. There's time, please don't worry about anything right now.'

Ma's head shot from side to side, looking for an escape route. 'No, what I mean is I, I'm no' like her.' She jerked

her head to the girl who gave a derisive, flat 'Ha' in response.

Ma bit her lip. 'Sorry, I didnae mean ... No, I just mean I think there's been a mistake. I didnae know this is where they were sending us.'

Jane placed her hand on Ma's shoulder. 'Listen, whatever the case is with you, and everyone is different here I promise, there's a place for you and ... what's your little girl's name? Can I?'

She opened her green sweatshirted arms and Ma settled me in. Jane smelt of vanilla and newspapers.

'Oh, I've not decided. But listen, I don't belong here.'

The girl in the chair let out an exasperated sound, turned round and said in a hard, child's voice, 'Listen, none of us want tae come here. Just be fuckin' grateful. Do yeh have anywhere else?'

Ma's arms hung at her sides, a shamed look on her face, and Jane looked up from me.

'Come on, Iris. Have a shower and warm yourself up. I'll look out some clothes for you. We'll talk about how to move on after you've had a sleep.'

Ma nodded dumbly and Jane's arms loosened from around me.

'You don't mind, Sandra? I'll just show Iris the shower room and then come back and find out where that doctor is.'

Transported from the warm sureness of Jane's embrace to Sandra's tentative arms, I felt her holding her breath, then exhale as she looked down towards me, my own little battle scar still on my cheek.

In the corridor I heard Jane tell Ma that the house was completely secure. I looked up at Sandra's big blue eyes and thought how beautiful all those beaten-up colours were.

3

A MODERATELY STAINED mattress was brought in from the hallway into a room three others shared.

Two of them only left their beds for their meals. They sat silently, spooning in mouthfuls, gulping them down at Jane's insistence, before retreating to their duvets. One had the jutting body of a little boy and the other heavy drooping breasts and they were known, in plural, as 'the Sleepers'. It was Jodie, our third room-mate, who first called them that and it stuck like pillow creases on their cheeks.

Jodie had a body that dipped and oozed with the suggestion of sex and dressed to show it off in sleeveless, plunging blouses and denim minis, though her skin was greying and puckered from the cold climbing all over.

Her face was generous too; she had a round lopsided nose, a blob of pallid pastry squashed there in a hurry, her teeth protruded from loose lips and her eyes bulged inside the stumpy prickles of ginger hair that circled them. The same coarse orange colour stuck up from her head in an unruly pelt, no two sections going the same way.

The first night in the Grafton Hilton, as the guests liked to call it, Jodie and Ma swapped stories in whispers, fat velvet caterpillars curling into each other's ears.

'... ended up in topless bar, Mayfair though. I didnae care - before I had this one I had a lovely pair. I was chuffed tae show them off.'

'They're still nice, Iris, I noticed right away. I bet yer heart goes out tae me, blessed with a body like this an'

cursed with a mug like this. One of my boyfriends, and not the one who landed me here either, would only do me from behind. Did me like a dog so he didnae have tae see my face. An' I liked him that much that I didnae really mind. An' then he borrowed forty quid an' stopped coming round anyway.'

'Jesus.'

'Aye, an' he was a fat fucker an' all. Talk about the pot calling the kettle black.'

Smiles lingered in the dark. Shared secrets, warmer than five blankets and a radiator.

Jodie turned on her side. 'I'm chuffed yer here, Iris. It's good tae have someone tae talk to who isnae writing it all down and nodding in sympathy or dozing off like them two. How long will yeh stay?'

'No idea, but not long cause of the bairn. I didnae plan any of this, Jodie.' Ma stopped, as though those fat velvety caterpillars had started crawling down her throat.

'Well, none of us did, Iris, that's for sure.'

'I know, an' I'm much better off than some, but the last time things weren't spinning I was in a squat in London an' planning tae catch the Victoria Line tae a clinic tae get rid. I don't know why I changed my mind and I don't think I can do it.'

Ma's voice was thick, the words rushed out in a panic. Jodie climbed from her bed; the light from the hall warming the edges of her wild hair and neat curves.

'None of us think we can, Iris. But we do, an' you will too. Spinning or not you'll find your way.'

She brushed Ma's hair with her fingers.

'Now get up an' share with me cause yeh'll be hot as fuck by that radiator an' I can't sleep by myself anyway.'

So we lay, two Ss and a comma tucked together, surrounded in a blanket of each other's heat.

We stayed at the Grafton Hilton for three weeks. In that time I saw tears fall into spaghetti-hoop dinners and spines jolt at the sound of drunken passers-by.

There were fourteen of us in total but only two kids; me and Mark. Mark was a fat four-year-old famous for putting things down the back of the nappies he still wore. A fried egg from breakfast or Jane's mini-stapler; he wasn't fussy.

Within two days, with Jodie as her sidekick, Ma was holding court at mealtimes talking loudly about her psychedelic trip to London and my da.

'Yank. Loaded he was, but I said, "It doesnae matter tae me. Yer just no man enough for a good Scottish woman.'" Chuckles rose and fell around the table. "'Please!" he begs me. "I've taken eight Valium." Eight? "Well," I said to him, "yeh'll have a nice afternoon sleep. Now ta-ta!"'

The women laughed so loud that Jane stuck her head in to see what the commotion was. Shepherd's pie sat forgotten on plates except for the Sleepers who grudgingly ploughed through theirs, eager to get back to their beds. Jane gave them an ignored thumbs up and my ma a lingering look.

Since the only things I stowed away in my nappy were what nature intended I was the favourite, passed from woman to woman 'for a hold', like a coveted toy in a poor family. Sometimes Ma would come in, smelling of outdoors and fags, and shout, 'Where's the bairn? Jodie, if yeh've painted her nails again I'll murder yeh!'

Jodie and Ma shared mascara wands and blow-job tips and planned nights out down the Roxy, for when they had some cash and no curfew.

'I've a suit from Selfridges in London. It cost a bomb but the Yank bought it when he was trying tae win me back. I wear it with nothing on underneath, it's dead sexy.'

Every few days Jane took Ma and, if I wasn't being petted by one battered wife or another, me into her office

to discuss Options for Moving On.

'Well, we have the house in Monarch Avenue and -'

'I'm not moving tae Monarch Avenue, I've told yeh. What sort of area is that for a bairn? I might as well start shooting her up on smack now since that's what'll happen.'

Jane took a deep breath, nodded.

'Or, the other option -' Jane lingered for a moment, lowered her voice as though to protect me - 'is temporary state care; just until you get yourself sorted out? We have some really good foster-parents and it is very temporary.'

'No, I'm not having her taken intae care. I know how it works; yeh get her an' then some posh woman with dried-up ovaries takes a fancy tae her an' I'll never see her again. No fuckin' way.'

Jane looked above Ma's head at the clock.

'OK.' She met Ma's eye. 'Iris, everyone here is very ... fond of you. I especially am very fond of you indeed. But four weeks is all the relocation time we are given when there's a minor involved.'

Jane took Ma's hand, rubbed the palm with the pad of her thumb.

'There is ... another way. I've got a -' she gave an uncomfortable cough - 'a spare room in my flat, and as I said I have grown, been growing, very fond of you.'

Ma straightened, her head tilted to one side as if straining to hear, though the message was loud and clear.

'And I know you've become close to Jodie but I thought ... well, once you're officially out of my care there's no reason I shouldn't offer you a place to stay. With me.'

Jane's face was a beacon; red, full of wishing and embarrassment. Ma removed her hand slowly and gave Jane's knee a stiff pat.

'Jane, you're wonderful, but I'm not that way inclined. I mean, if I was I wouldnae be in this state! But I'm flattered, honest. An' I mean, if yeh had a cock, well, then -' a giggle gurgled up Ma's throat - 'that would be a different matter!'

Jane gave a dry laugh and looked down.

Ma leaned over and gave Jane a soft kiss on her burning cheek. 'Always worth a try, eh? Now, tell me about the Monarch Avenue place again.'

Two days later Jane bought us all fish and chips and bottles of pop. Mark stole a fishcake and put it down his nappy, but no one paid any attention, it was mine and Ma's night. They said how much they would miss us and smeared my face with fish-and-chip kisses. The rustle of hot newspaper filled the room as greasy raspberries vibrated on my stomach.

Ma stood, clinked her Coke bottle with a wooden fish fork.

'Ladies, ladies! I'd like tae make an announcement. As yeh all know, so far the wee shitting an' eating machine here has been nameless as well as gormless. But I've decided she should be called after two of the best women I know.' She held me high, 'Everyone, meet Janie!'

Silence, a few women exchanged confused glances, one snuck another chip.

'See? It's Jane and Jodie mixed together?'

Jodie piped up. 'All I get is "ie"?''

Ma looked at her, lowered me slightly. 'An' the "J", yeh both get that!'

'Iris, it's an honour, thank you so much.' Jane's eyes shone.

'Aye, ta very much,' Jodie said sulkily, taking a bite of saveloy.

Jane stood. 'Everyone, a toast to Janie and Iris and Monarch Avenue!' Eyes rolled at the words Monarch Avenue but Coke and Irn-Bru bottles were raised. Ma held me above her head, and surrounded by chip wrappers, raised bottles and bruised women with wary eyes and smiling mouths, we celebrated the night I became Janie Ryan.