'MacLaverty is a master' *Guardian*

Bernard MacLaverty

COLLECTED STORIES

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About the Book

Since the publication of *Secrets and Other Stories* in 1977, Bernard MacLaverty has been celebrated as one of the finest living short-story writers. Writing in the *New York Times*, William Boyd summoned the shades of Yeats, Joyce and Flann O'Brien, insisting that 'MacLaverty sits perfectly comfortably' in their company. The *Guardian* simply said 'MacLaverty is a master.'

Melding his native Irish sensibilities to those of his adopted west-coast Scotland, these tales attend to life's big events: love and loss, separation and violence, death and betrayal. But the stories teem with smaller significant moments too – private epiphanies, chilling exchanges, intimate encounters. A writer of great compassion, insight and humanity, MacLaverty surprises us time and again with the sensitivity of his ear, the accuracy of his eye. Each of these extraordinary stories – with their wry, self-deprecating humour, their elegance and subtle wisdom – gets to the very heart of life.

The Collected Short Stories includes most of *Secrets*, *A Time to Dance*, *The Great Profundo*, *Walking the Dog* and *Matters of Life & Death*.

About the Author

Bernard MacLaverty was born in Belfast in 1942. He worked as a lab technician in the anatomy department at Queen's University for 10 years before studying English and training as a teacher. In 1975 he went to live in Scotland with his wife, Madeline, and their four children. MacLaverty has published five collections of short stories – *Secrets*, *A Time to Dance*, *The Great Profundo*, *Walking the Dog* and *Matters of Life & Death* – and four novels: *Lamb*, *Cal*, *The Anatomy School* and *Grace Notes*, which was shortlisted for the Booker Prize and won the Saltire Scottish Book of the Year Award. He has written for radio, television and screen. His short film *Bye Child* won a BAFTA. He lives in Glasgow.

by the same author

Novels

LAMB
CAL
GRACE NOTES
THE ANATOMY SCHOOL

Short Stories

SECRETS
A TIME TO DANCE
THE GREAT PROFUNDO
WALKING THE DOG
MATTERS OF LIFE & DEATH

Film

BYE-CHILD

For Children

A MAN IN SEARCH OF A PET
ANDREW McANDREW

for Madeline

Collected Stories

Bernard MacLaverty

JONATHAN CAPE
LONDON

INTRODUCTION

Writing essays is not what fiction writers are necessarily good at so writing an introduction to this volume of my *Collected Stories* is not easy. I can't praise the stories or point out weaknesses. I suppose the easy answer is to ask you to skip this bit and go on and read the stories. The other way is to tell you bits of my life and how I first came to writing.

I remember my mother, after watching a TV play of mine, saying to me with an incredulous and worried shake of the head, 'Where did all this come from?'

She was partly responsible, having married an artist. It was a surprising choice given that she was so full of notions of correctness. She was a good and kind woman, fastidious in the practice of her religion, who was concerned about the properness of how to talk, how to walk, how to eat. In the bus she would say to my five-year-old self, 'Sit nicely'. Everything had to be done nicely – except that you can't do creative things nicely. If you do them nicely then they cease to be any good.

My childhood was spent in a Victorian red-brick terraced house in Atlantic Avenue, Belfast. The rooms had leftover bell handles for my brother and I to summon the staff: my mother, father, grandfather, grandmother and great aunt. Across the street was another grandfather and yet another aunt. I thought that everybody grew up surrounded by old people. When you had a fight in one house you could always run to the other – and make your demands on different servants.

In our house the elders would sit round the fire making toast on the end of a long custom-made wire fork, clandestinely wrought in the shipyard by an uncle. It went in and out like a telescope. They also used to eat thinly sliced orange sandwiches and wonder aloud if it was the kind of thing the Queen ate and, if so, did she eat them at the same time of day as they did. The air was full, always and everywhere, with the sound of the old ones talking. At one time I was ill and feverish, lying on a sofa in front of the fire happed in blankets. The way the hushed conversational tones faded *diminuendo* into sleep is one of my best childhood memories.

Another is of starting a notebook to record some of the things Aunty Betty said – she had such a quirky way with words. I must have been in my mid to late teens and I see this as one of the first stepping stones to being interested in writing. Aunty Betty had four boys and one day she was down on her hands and knees wiping round the floor of the toilet and shouting, ‘All you wains must have crooked flutes.’

Nowadays people who aspire to write get themselves into their nearest creative-writing class. In my day there was no such thing but I am grateful to the folk who encouraged me: teachers, neighbours, friends. The first one to draw my attention to the importance of written words was my primary-school teacher. He looked like the kind of man who could bend lamp-posts or bite through dictionaries. But he was very gentle. He set a homework to describe ‘A rainy day’. When he returned our corrected jotters he gave me a sweet and a sixpence and read my effort out to the class. I think my mother liked it better than anything I ever wrote after. She kept it in a box with the insurance and other important documents until the day she died. She said to me once, ‘Son, I pray every night you’ll not write anything dirty.’

My primary-school teacher was an eccentric. He also told us stories that scared the wits out of us. One was his version

of the man who sold his soul to the devil so's he could become the best accordion player in Ireland. But you don't get irony at that age; all that comes across is stomach-churning fear. In his telling of the story he suggested that the would-be accordionist could briefly escape from the fires of hell, and ask you for help. Don't think of it as a dream or a nightmare because the proof will be there in the scorch-marks in the wood at the foot of your bed.

In grammar school at senior level I had a great and inspirational teacher – a priest nicknamed 'the wee Dean'. He taught us about poetry, Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Macbeth*, D.H. Lawrence and much more. Each class he'd rush in with a stack of freshly Gestetnered sheets in his arms. He'd tell us how late he'd sat up preparing these. Each page was spattered with blackened 'o's like it had been hit by buckshot. The plastic centre of each 'o' had fallen out, so enthusiastically had he typed it. After I left school I met the wee Dean on the street one day. I had just borrowed a book from the library – a novel of some import. It could have been one of my discoveries of that time – Dostoyevsky or Kafka, Tolstoy or Thomas Mann – and because I might be thought a pseudo-intellectual I carried the book with the title hidden against my chest. However when I saw my former teacher approaching I turned the book face outwards – much to my shame. But he engaged with it, 'Ah I see your reading such n' such by so n' so. Great book; wonderful writer.'

It must have been around this time – coinciding with the onset of occasional shaving – I started writing: deeply embarrassing poetry, mostly in the sprung rhythms of Gerard Manley Hopkins. Then, when these so obviously failed, I made attempts at the short story. I wrote these on blank examination booklets stolen from exam rooms policed by careless invigilators. We had a neighbour – a Mrs Theo McCrudden – an English teacher (Theodora was her first

name) from a few doors away who read and encouraged my first hesitant efforts. Looking back I'm glad my neighbour was not the wonderful Flannery O'Connor who, when she was asked if she thought universities stifled young writers, said that they didn't stifle half enough of them.

Religion both terrified and elevated me. It dominated my childhood. The fact that I don't believe a word of it now doesn't diminish the effect it had on me then. It elevated me because of the intimacy I had with the maker of all things – the most important personage in the Universe. We were on the best of terms, able to chat day or night. It was only much later that I realised the workshop was empty. But at that time I believed in the Church's acres of symbolism, knew without thinking that vestments were colour-coded – red for martyrs, black for death, purple for penance, green for hope, white for grace or purity. Indeed all ceremonies were layered with meaning – at Easter the passing from one person to another of the flame of a candle in a darkened church; the cleansing nature of the waters of Baptism, the secrecy of the Confessional, the reverberations of the altar bell, the scarlet glow of the sanctuary lamp, the gym shoes we wore as altar boys so as not to be too noisy in the presence of God (although why God should want the place quiet I never knew). So I grew up knowing things represented other things. This can only be good for someone who is going to be a writer.

It is difficult to be precise when an awareness of words first began for me. There was always a time when I repeated a word so frequently that it lost all meaning and the black swamp closed over my head. The meaning of words and the meaning of the universe sat very close.

Seamus Heaney puts it well – as he puts so many things well – in *Preoccupations*: 'Maybe it began with the exotic listing on the wireless dial. Stuttgart, Leipzig, Oslo, Hilversum. Maybe it was stirred by the beautiful sprung

rhythms of the old BBC weather forecast: Dogger, Rockall, Malin, Shetland, Faroes, Finisterre; or with the gorgeous and inane phraseology of the catechism; or with the Litany of the Blessed Virgin that was part of the enforced poetry of our household: Tower of Gold, Ark of the Covenant, Gate of Heaven, Morning Star, Health of the Sick, Refuge of Sinners, Comforter of the Afflicted.'

I am able to say 'snap' to all of these and add the word-induced nausea of the response to the Litany. After each item the response was 'Pray for us' which blurred into 'prefrus', 'prefrus', 'prefrus'. And the black swamp closed again.

Heaney goes on to observe, 'None of these things was consciously savoured at the time but I think the fact that I can still recall them with ease, and can delight in them as verbal music means that they were bedding the ear with a kind of linguistic hard core that could be built on someday.'

In the same vein there was the Latin we parroted as altar boys. Not having a clue what it meant we were in love with the sound of it – and the grandeur it lent to our Belfast accents.

In the missal, kneeling beside my mother at mass, I came across the word 'concupiscence'. At eight or nine I hadn't realised that the young James Joyce had a similar problem with the word 'simony'. I rolled the word 'concupiscence' round my mouth like a gobstopper and asked my poor mother what it meant but she shook her head from side to side. What did she know about the yearnings of lust and the desires of the flesh?

In an essay, early in secondary school, shortly after reading a passage of D.H. Lawrence I used the phrase 'the fecund darkness'. My Great Aunt Mary, looking over my shoulder, gave a little sniff and said there was something 'not quite right' about that word. She had been a school teacher herself but she mustn't have read much Lawrence because she nearly collapsed when she caught me reading

the school set text of Thomas Hardy's adult tale *The Woodlanders*.

This fascination with words became worrying when I found myself enjoying Roget's *Thesaurus*. It was like opening a gold mine.

Another thing which might have been part of my 'linguistic hard core' was – I hate to admit it in public – being sent to elocution. It was just another bullet in my mother's bandoleer of 'doing things nicely.' Maybe that was because the other cultural nightmare was not an option – the piano. In our house there was one which had not been tuned for years and half of the notes, when pressed down, played silent. 'A dust-gatherer', my mother called it. So it was my job to stand up straight and try to speak like a BBC child. The only advantage was an early contact with poetry – particularly that of James Stephens – its sounds and rhythms. I can't remember what age I was but I was young enough to be unskilled about blowing my nose. Before going on to do my recitation at a competition my mother would give me a clean, freshly ironed hanky and tell me to get somebody backstage, preferably a woman, to do the needful before I went on.

One of the best learning experiences was long after leaving school when Philip Hobsbaum, an English lecturer at Queen's University, after reading a short story of mine in a medical magazine, invited me to come along to the 'Group'. I was an employee of the university at the time – a medical laboratory technician in the Anatomy Department. There were an amazing number of talented people in the Group, none of whom had published anything. It included the poets Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley, Frank Ormsby, Paul Muldoon, Jimmy Simmons, Joan Newman and Ciarán Carson, the playwright Stewart Parker and many others. Hobsbaum chaired the meetings and always took the part of the writer

against those who were being critical, waggling his pencil as he did so.

What happened was that you submitted a story or a sheet of poems or whatever, and they would be typed up and copies would be run off and posted out to members. On Monday night the author would read his contribution aloud to the other writers, all slumped in armchairs in Philip's flat. Then people would either make helpful suggestions or, if they were feeling aggressive, unhelpful ones. The only formality was that there was no alcohol – coffee was the drink – writers, alcohol and criticism do not go together.

But the thing which amazed me about the Group was that my attempts at writing were being taken seriously. And this seriousness encouraged me to send stories to more permanent publications like *The Honest Ulsterman* and David Marcus's 'New Irish Writing' page in the *Irish Press*. The latter paid a small fee. The first money I earned as a writer was from the BBC's 'Morning Story'. I was very excited when invited into the BBC to discuss the piece I had submitted. I was told 'Morning Story' was two thousand eight hundred words and that my story was too long. At first I was indignant. Then, back at home, I discovered that the more words you took out the better the story became. Up to a point. If you went too far down that road you'd end up writing nothing.

Much later I was frightened by Wittgenstein's 'In art it is hard to say anything as good as saying nothing.'

Ours was not a great reading family. Like most things, the activity was subjugated to religion. The only reason you would read a book was if it kept you out of hell or made your entry into heaven easier. Books of this nature were kept in a glass-fronted bureau bookcase. I know the names of the authors and can recall the colours of the spines – D.K. Broster, H.V. Morton, A.J. Cronin – the initials making me think of a literary cricket team. I once talked to a man in a

pub about books and he told me that I should read those *Reader's Digest* Classics. 'They cut out all the rubbish and you're left with pure classic.' The only reason a book was owned, rather than borrowed from the library, was because it had been a present bought for Christmas. Then it ended up in the glass-fronted bureau bookcase. I only read one of them, it was the first grown-up book I'd ever read – essays by the humorous Irish writer John D. Sheridan. I was about ten years of age and was returning the book to where I'd found it. Whether it was 'The Right Time' or 'My Hat Blew Off' I can't remember. What I do recall was my father's interest: that I was leaving behind the Just William and Biggles books. He must have asked me why I liked the John D. Sheridan and I told him that it made me laugh – those people on the street who always asked the author for the *right* time – nothing else was any good to them. We were alone in the room standing by the window and when the issue of books was raised he sat down on the arm of a sofa to carry on the conversation. I remember that with clarity – because conversations with adults never happened.

My grandmother or my Great Aunt Mary used to read to my brother and I: a chapter a night – mostly of Enid Blyton – once *Coral Island* and *Kidnapped*. The magazines and papers which came into the house were religious – the only English newspaper allowed across the threshold was the parochially named *The Universe*. All other English newspapers had views and reported things which could damage young minds – especially the *News of the World*. We took one magazine called *The Far East* – an Irish missionary publication – and it was full of photos of smiling priests in white soutanes surrounded by 'black babies'. There was a nice story going the rounds much later – of the woman in the Falls Road post office:

How much would it be to post clothes to the Far East?

Whereabouts in the Far East?

Where do’you think, the Far East in Dublin.

I suppose the end of my childhood came with the death of my father. I did not know he was going to die. I was twelve at the time. He had been to Lourdes but I thought it was just another of his ‘good works’, helping with the sick – instead of being one of them. My last vivid memory, after his return, was of walking with him in Alexander Park – going round the back of the pond, the darkness under the trees, the blackness of the water – but it’s as if the sound is missing. Although it was a summer’s day he wore his heavy navy overcoat. His yellowed complexion I thought the result of French sunshine.

Looking back over the early stories I could not resist the urge to correct where there were mistakes and clarify where there was fog. Where clumsiness embarrassed me I rearranged. Flannery O’Connor writes somewhere that she has spent all day removing ‘like’ and ‘as if’ phrases from her manuscript. Then adds, ‘it was like getting ticks off a dog’ – dryly condemning the device with a brilliant use of an example of it. But mostly I let things stand as they were, and forgave myself for writing these stories of an inexperienced young man. Some stories I dropped as they jostled for space. Also, in a very few places, the meaning of words has changed and what was in the original is now offensive. So I rewrote.

It’s impossible to name all the people to whom I owe a debt of gratitude but I would like to thank my agent Gill Coleridge, Anne Tannahill of Blackstaff Press, Xandra Bingley of Jonathan Cape and Robin Robertson for all their friendship and advice. And, of course, Madeline – for everything.

Bernard MacLaverty, 2013

I

SECRETS 1977

THE EXERCISE

‘WE NEVER GOT the chance,’ his mother would say to him. ‘It wouldn’t have done me much good but your father could have bettered himself. He’d be teaching or something now instead of serving behind a bar. He could stand up with the best of them.’

Now that he had started grammar school Kevin’s father joined him in his work, helping him when he had the time, sometimes doing the exercises out of the text books on his own before he went to bed. He worked mainly from examples in the Maths and Language books or from previously corrected work of Kevin’s. Often his wife took a hand out of him saying, ‘Do you think you’ll pass your Christmas Tests?’

When he concentrated he sat hunched at the kitchen table, his non-writing hand shoved down the back of his trousers and his tongue stuck out.

‘Put that thing back in your mouth,’ Kevin’s mother would say, laughing. ‘You’ve a tongue on you like a cow.’

His father smelt strongly of tobacco for he smoked both a pipe and cigarettes. When he gave Kevin money for sweets he’d say, ‘You’ll get sixpence in my coat pocket on the banisters.’

Kevin would dig into the pocket deep down almost to his elbow and pull out a handful of coins speckled with bits of yellow and black tobacco. His father also smelt of porter, not his breath, for he never drank but from his clothes and Kevin thought it mixed nicely with his grown up smell. He loved to smell his pyjama jacket and the shirts he left off for washing.

Once in a while Kevin's father would come in at six o'clock, sit in his armchair and say, 'Slippers'.

'You're not staying in, are you?' The three boys shouted and danced around, the youngest pulling off his big boots, falling back on the floor as they came away from his feet, Kevin, the eldest, standing on the arm of the chair to get the slippers down from the cupboard.

'Some one of you get a good shovel of coal for that fire,' and they sat in the warm kitchen doing their homework, their father reading the paper or moving about doing some job their mother had been at him to do for months. Before their bedtime he would read the younger ones a story or if there were no books in the house at the time he would choose a piece from the paper. Kevin listened with the others although he pretended to be doing something else.

But it was not one of those nights. His father stood shaving with his overcoat on, a very heavy navy overcoat, in a great hurry, his face creamed thick with white lather. Kevin knelt on the cold lino of the bathroom floor, one elbow leaning on the padded seat of the green wicker chair trying to get help with his Latin. It was one of those exercises which asked for the nominative and genitive of: an evil deed, a wise father and so on.

'What's the Latin for "evil"?'

His father towered above him trying to get at the mirror, pointing his chin upwards scraping underneath.

'Look it up at the back.'

Kevin sucked the end of his pencil and fumbled through the vocabularies. His father finished shaving, humped his back and spluttered in the basin. Kevin heard him pull the plug and the final gasp as the water escaped. He groped for the towel then genuflected beside him drying his face.

'Where is it?' He looked down still drying slower and slower, meditatively until he stopped.

'I'll tell you just this once because I'm in a hurry.'

Kevin stopped sucking the pencil and held it poised, ready and wrote the answers with great speed into his jotter as his father called them out.

‘Is that them all?’ his father asked, draping the towel over the side of the bath. He leaned forward to kiss Kevin but the boy lowered his head to look at something in the book. As his father rushed down the stairs he shouted back over his shoulder.

‘Don’t ever ask me to do that again. You’ll have to work them out for yourself.’

He was away leaving Kevin sitting at the chair. The towel edged its way slowly down the side of the bath and fell on the floor. He got up and looked in the wash-hand basin. The bottom was covered in short black hairs, shavings. He drew a white path through them with his finger. Then he turned and went down the stairs to copy the answers in ink.

Of all the teachers in the school Waldo was the one who commanded the most respect. In his presence nobody talked, with the result that he walked the corridors in a moat of silence. Boys seeing him approach would drop their voices to a whisper and only when he was out of earshot would they speak normally again. Between classes there was always five minutes uproar. The boys wrestled over desks, shouted, whistled, flung books while some tried to learn their nouns, eyes closed, feet tapping to the rhythm of declensions. Others put frantic finishing touches to last night’s exercise. Some minutes before Waldo’s punctual arrival, the class quietened. Three rows of boys, all by now strumming nouns, sat hunched and waiting.

Waldo’s entrance was theatrical. He strode in with strides as long as his soutane would permit, his books clenched in his left hand and pressed tightly against his chest. With his right hand he swung the door behind him, closing it with a crash. His eyes raked the class. If, as occasionally happened, it did not close properly he did not turn from the

class but backed slowly against the door snapping it shut with his behind. Two strides brought him to the rostrum. He cracked his books down with an explosion and made a swift palm upward gesture.

Waldo was very tall, his height being emphasised by the soutane, narrow and tight-fitting at the shoulders, sweeping down like a bell to the floor. A row of black gleaming buttons bisected him from floor to throat. When he talked his Adam's apple hit against the hard, white Roman collar and created in Kevin the same sensation as a fingernail scraping down the blackboard. His face was sallow and immobile. (There was a rumour that he had a glass eye but no-one knew which. Nobody could look at him long enough because to meet his stare was to invite a question.) He abhorred slovenliness. Once when presented with an untidy exercise book, dog-eared with a tea ring on the cover, he picked it up, the corner of one leaf between his finger and thumb, the pages splaying out like a fan, opened the window and dropped it three floors to the ground. His own neatness became exaggerated when he was at the board, writing in copperplate script just large enough for the boy in the back row to read – geometrical columns of declined nouns defined by exact, invisible margins. When he had finished he would set the chalk down and rub the used finger and thumb together with the same action he used after handling the host over the paten.

The palm upward gesture brought the class to its feet and they said the Hail Mary in Latin. While it was being said all eyes looked down because they knew if they looked up Waldo was bound to be staring at them.

'Exercises.'

When Waldo was in a hurry he corrected the exercises verbally, asking one boy for the answers and then asking all those who got it right to put up their hands. It was four for anyone who lied about his answer and now and then he would take spot checks to find out the liars.

‘Hold it, hold it there,’ he would say and leap from the rostrum, moving through the forest of hands and look at each boy’s book, tracing out the answer with the tip of his cane. Before the end of the round and while his attention was on one book a few hands would be lowered quietly. Today he was in a hurry. The atmosphere was tense as he looked from one boy to another, deciding who would start.

‘Sweeny, we’ll begin with you.’ Kevin rose to his feet, his finger trembling under the place in the book. He read the first answer and looked up. Waldo remained impassive. He would let someone while translating unseens ramble on and on with great imagination until he faltered, stopped and admitted that he didn’t know. Then and only then would he be slapped.

‘Two, nominative. *Sapienter Pater*.’ Kevin went on haltingly through the whole ten and stopped, waiting for a comment from Waldo. It was a long time before he spoke. When he did it was with bored annoyance.

‘Every last one of them is wrong.’

‘But sir, Father, they couldn’t be wr . . .’ Kevin said it with such conviction, blurted it out so quickly that Waldo looked at him in surprise.

‘Why not?’

‘Because my . . .’ Kevin stopped.

‘Well?’ Waldo’s stone face resting on his knuckles. ‘Because my what?’

It was too late to turn back now.

‘Because my father said so,’ he mumbled very low, chin on chest.

‘Speak up, let us all hear you.’ Some of the boys had heard and he thought they sniggered.

‘Because my father said so.’ This time the commotion in the class was obvious.

‘And where does your father teach Latin?’ There was no escape. Waldo had him. He knew now there would be an

exhibition for the class. Kevin placed his weight on his arm and felt his tremble communicated to the desk.

‘He doesn’t, Father.’

‘And what does he do?’

Kevin hesitated, stammering,

‘He’s a barman.’

‘A barman!’ Waldo mimicked and the class roared loudly.

‘*Quiet*.’ He wheeled on them. ‘You, Sweeny. Come out here.’ He reached inside the breast of his soutane and with a flourish produced a thin yellow cane, whipping it back and forth, testing it.

Kevin walked out to the front of the class, his face fiery red, the blood throbbing in his ears. He held out his hand. Waldo raised it higher, more to his liking, with the tip of the cane touching the underside of the upturned palm. He held it there for some time.

‘If your brilliant father continues to do your homework for you, Sweeny, you’ll end up a barman yourself.’ Then he whipped the cane down expertly across the tips of his fingers and again just as the blood began to surge back into them. Each time the cane in its follow-through cracked loudly against the skirts of his soutane.

‘You could have made a better job of it yourself. Other hand.’ The same ritual of raising and lowering the left hand with the tip of the cane to the desired height. ‘After all, I have taught you some Latin.’ *Crack*. ‘It would be hard to do any worse.’

Kevin went back to his place resisting a desire to hug his hands under his armpits and stumbled on a schoolbag jutting into the aisle as he pushed into his desk. Again Waldo looked round the class and said, ‘Now we’ll have it *right* from someone.’

The class continued and Kevin nursed his fingers, out of the fray.

As the bell rang Waldo gathered up his books and said, ‘Sweeny, I want a word with you outside. Ave Maria, gratia

plena . . .’ It was not until the end of the corridor that Waldo turned to face him. He looked at Kevin and maintained his silence for a moment.

‘Sweeny, I must apologise to you.’ Kevin bowed his head. ‘I meant your father no harm – he’s probably a good man, a very good man.’

‘Yes, sir,’ said Kevin. The pain in his fingers had gone.

‘Look at me when I’m talking, please.’ Kevin looked at his collar, his Adam’s apple, then his face. It relaxed for a fraction and Kevin thought he was almost going to smile, but he became efficient, abrupt again.

‘All right, very good, you may go back to your class.’

‘Yes Father,’ Kevin nodded and moved back along the empty corridor.

Some nights when he had finished his homework early he would go down to meet his father coming home from work. It was dark, October, and he stood close against the high wall at the bus-stop trying to shelter from the cutting wind. His thin black blazer with the school emblem on the breast pocket and his short grey trousers, both new for starting grammar school, did little to keep him warm. He stood shivering, his hands in his trouser pockets and looked down at his knees which were blue and marbled, quivering uncontrollably. It was six o’clock when he left the house and he had been standing for fifteen minutes. Traffic began to thin out and the buses became less regular, carrying fewer and fewer passengers. There was a moment of silence when there was no traffic and he heard a piece of paper scraping along on pointed edges. He kicked it as it passed him. He thought of what had happened, of Waldo and his father. On the first day in class Waldo had picked out many boys by their names.

‘Yes, I know your father well,’ or ‘I taught your elder brother. A fine priest he’s made. Next.’

‘Sweeny, Father.’

‘Sweeny? Sweeny? – You’re not Dr John’s son, are you?’

‘No Father.’

‘Or anything to do with the milk people?’

‘No Father.’

‘Next.’ He passed on without further comment.

Twenty-five past six. Another bus turned the corner and Kevin saw his father standing on the platform. He moved forward to the stop as the bus slowed down. His father jumped lightly off and saw Kevin waiting for him. He clipped him over the head with the tightly rolled newspaper he was carrying.

‘How are you big lad?’

‘All right,’ said Kevin shivering. He humped his shoulders and set off beside his father, bumping into him uncertainly as he walked.

‘How did it go today?’ his father asked.

‘All right.’ They kept silent until they reached the corner of their own street.

‘What about the Latin?’

Kevin faltered, feeling a babyish desire to cry.

‘How was it?’

‘OK. Fine.’

‘Good. I was a bit worried about it. It was done in a bit of a rush. Son, your Da’s a genius.’ He smacked him with the paper again. Kevin laughed and slipped his hand into the warmth of his father’s overcoat pocket, deep to the elbow.

A RAT AND SOME RENOVATIONS

ALMOST EVERY ONE in Ireland must have experienced American visitors or, as we called them, ‘The Yanks’. Just before we were visited for the first time, my mother decided to have the working kitchen modernised. We lived in a terrace of dilapidated Victorian houses whose front gardens measured two feet by the breadth of the house. The scullery, separated from the kitchen by a wall, was the same size as the garden, and just as arable. When we pulled out the vegetable cupboard we found three or four potatoes which had fallen down behind and taken root. Ma said, ‘God, if the Yanks had seen that.’

She engaged the workmen early so the job would be finished and the newness worn off by the time the Yanks arrived. She said she wouldn’t like them to think that she got it done up just for them.

The first day the workmen came they demolished the wall, ripped up the floor and left the cold water tap hanging four feet above a bucket. We didn’t see them again for three weeks. Grandma kept trying to make excuses for them, saying that it was very strenuous work. My mother however managed to get them back and they worked for three days, erecting a sink unit and leaving a hole for the outlet pipe. It must have been through this hole that the rat got in.

The first signs were discovered by Ma in the drawer of the new unit. She called me and said, ‘What’s those?’ I looked and saw six hard brown ovals trundling about the drawer.

‘Ratshit,’ I said. Ma backed disbelievingly away, her hands over her mouth, repeating, ‘It’s mouse, it’s mouse, it must be mouse.’

The man from next door, a Mr Frank Twoomey, who had lived most of his life in the country, was called – he said from the size of them, it could well be a horse. At this my mother took her nightdress and toothbrush and moved in with an aunt across the street, leaving the brother and myself with the problem. Armed with a hatchet and shovel we banged and brattled the cupboards, then, when we felt sure it was gone, we blocked the hole with hardboard and sent word to Ma to return, that all was well.

It was after two days safety that she discovered the small brown bombs again. I met her with her nightdress under her arm, in the path. She just said, ‘I found more,’ and headed for her sister’s.

That evening it was Grandma’s suggestion that we should borrow the Grimleys’ cat. The brother was sent and had to pull it from beneath the side-board because it was very shy of strangers. He carried it across the road and the rat-killer was so terrified of the traffic and Peter squeezing it that it peed all down his front. By this time Ma’s curiosity had got the better of her and she ventured from her sister’s to stand pale and nervous in our path. The brother set the cat down and turned to look for a cloth to wipe himself. The cat shot past him down the hall, past Ma who screamed, ‘Jesus, the rat’, and leapt into the hedge. The cat ran until a bus stopped it with a thud. The Grimleys haven’t spoken to us since.

Ma had begun to despair. ‘What age do rats live to?’ she asked. ‘And what’ll we do if it’s still here when the Yanks come?’ Peter said that they loved pigs in the kitchen.

The next day we bought stuff, pungent like phosphorous and spread it on cubes of bread. The idea of this stuff was to roast the rat inside when he ate it so that he would drink himself to death.

‘Just like Uncle Matt,’ said Peter. He tactlessly read out the instructions to Grandma who then came out in sympathy with the rat. Ma thought it may have gone outside, so to

make sure, we littered the yard with pieces of bread as well. In case it didn’t work Ma decided to do a novena of masses so she got up the next morning and on the driveway to the chapel which runs along the back of our house she noticed six birds with their feet in the air, stone dead.

Later that day the rat was found in the same condition on the kitchen floor. It was quickly buried in the dust-bin using the shovel as a hearse. The next day the workmen came, finished the job, and the Yanks arrived just as the paint was drying.

They looked strangely out of place with their brown, leathery faces, rimless glasses and hat brims flamboyantly large, as we met them at the boat . . . Too summery by half, against the dripping eaves of the sheds at the dock-yard. At home by a roaring fire on a July day, after having laughed a little at the quaintness of the taxi, they exchanged greetings, talked about family likenesses, jobs, and then dried up. For the next half hour the conversation had to be manufactured, except for a comparison of education systems which was confusing and therefore lasted longer. Then everything stopped.

The brother said, ‘I wouldn’t call this an embarrassing silence.’

They all laughed, nervously dispelling the silence but not the embarrassment.

Ma tried to cover up. ‘Would yous like another cup of cawfee?’ Already she had begun to pick up the accent. They agreed and the oldish one with the blue hair followed her out to the kitchen.

‘Gee, isn’t this madern,’ she said.

Ma, untacking her hand from the paint on the drawer, said, ‘Yeah, we done it up last year.’