

# The Henry Game

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*Random House Children's Books*

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Acknowledgements

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## About the Book

'You're not scared are you, Abbie?'

'Not exactly scared. Why should I be? It was my idea. I mean, if he suddenly materialised right here on the table, then I'd be scared. As long as he stays in the glass, we're all right.'

It only started out as a game: three teen girls, one homemade ouija board and an unusual way of spending a hot summer afternoon. But when Marina, Abbie and Lauren discover they've summoned up the spirit of a long-dead randy royal, the 'Henry Game' suddenly turns into something more sinister. Are the girls in danger of losing their heads?

An hilarious and shocking new novel that will keep you on the edge of your seat!

# The Henry Game



SUSAN DAVIS

**CORGI BOOKS**

*For my mum, Kath, who read the very first stories but did not make it to see this one. RIP.*

*For Terry, who kept the faith, and me with it. Also Mia, Joby and Josh.*

## Chapter One

I SUPPOSE THERE *was* a time *before* Henry, although it's hard to imagine it now. It's almost like talking about the time before the Ice Age, or the Big Bang. Like the time before you were born, a time that maybe never was, that you can't possibly imagine in a million years. A time when we were just normal girls, fifteen going on sixteen, and doing the stuff that normal teenagers do.

BH. Before Henry. A time before that sultry July afternoon in Marina's kitchen, blind drawn against the sun, the filtered light striping our fingers greeny-gold on the glass. This was how it began.

'A seance,' I said to the others. 'We'll call up the spirits. A pity we haven't got a real Ouija board. Still, all we need is a few letters and a glass. Then we just stick our fingers on it and concentrate. Couldn't be easier.'

You see it was all my fault. I take the blame. We might have done anything that afternoon. Anything *normal* girls do, that is, with their exams behind them and the summer stretching ahead. We might have toasted ourselves on Marina's lawn, rattled the double glazing with her new sound system, or read our horoscopes aloud from *Crush*. We might even have come over all swotty and discussed our project on the Tudors, which Henry Purviss, our history teacher, had set for all of us intending to take A-Level history next year.

But there I was busily scribbling letters and cutting them into squares. 'Well, come on, you lot. Not chicken, are you? It'll be a laugh. Unless you've got any better ideas?'

They shook their heads. They hadn't got any better ideas. So that was how we came to be sitting five minutes later,

Marina, Lauren and me, fingers glued to the glass, waiting for the spirits to come.

You couldn't blame the spirits really, for being a bit reluctant. I mean the location wasn't exactly ideal. Marina's space-age kitchen with its whizzy appliances, and the black slab worktops that reminded me of headstones. And then there was the low churning rumble of the tumble-dryer.

'Can't you turn it off?' I whispered to Marina after another five minutes had ticked by. 'It might be putting them off.'

Marina snapped that no she could not. 'I've got two more loads to do.'

Then Lauren's stomach was making gurgly noises, like one of those cheap squeaky toys that kittens play with.

'Do you have to?' I glared at her.

Lauren reminded me crossly that she needed to eat every three hours, something to do with her low-protein, allergen-free diet. 'I can't help my bodily functions, can I?'

I prayed silently: *Please, God, spare us from Lauren's 'bodily functions'.*

Lauren was what you might call a serious hypochondriac. She could have been quite pretty with her hazel eyes and shiny brown hair, if not for that agonized expression of hers, as if someone had just told her the world was about to end in, like, five minutes.

Now she scratched her knee, and the table shifted slightly. 'Oh look. It's levitating.'

I took a deep breath. 'Lauren, this is serious. Can you, like, stop fidgeting?'

This was asking for trouble of course. I had no idea, Lauren said, what an eczema-sufferer like her had to go through. 'It's like insects, millions of creepy-crawlies all scritch and scratch and burrowing under your skin. And anyway, how much longer is this going to take?'

'Well how do I know? It's not like waiting for a bus or anything, is it?'

At that time, I didn't know much about spirits. But it stood to reason they couldn't be rushed. They had to be lured, surely? Tempted into the land of the living with spooky panpipes, and flickering candles. Yet here we were, the place we always gathered after school for some reason, Marina's kitchen with its electrical hum and cooker buzzers. Enough to frighten the living, never mind the dead.

'You have absolutely no concept of what it's like,' Lauren was groaning.

'I think we have. You look like you're possessed already. Or is that shoulder-wiggling thing you're doing some kind of work-out for your pecs?'

'Hah, very funny. I'm dying for a really good scratch.'

'Die then.' Marina gave her that look of hers, a kind of disdainful snarl that she'd honed to perfection and was much admired for.

'Yeah,' I said, backing her up, 'you're always *dying* for something.'

It was all Lauren's fault, I was sure, for scaring the spirits off. Still, what else could you expect from someone with those chewed, ridged fingernails?

*Cheiro's Book of the Hand* was my Bible in those days. And the fingers pressed to the glass that afternoon told me all I needed to know about their owners.

Take Lauren for instance. Her flabby white palms were a sign of poor health (Cheiro was spot on there), what with her allergies to pollen, cat fur, the house-dust mite, and practically everything else under the sun. Apart from the skin rashes, she also suffered from blocked sinuses. Sometimes in class, she'd snort. I mean a really disgusting farmyard, piggy kind of snort. I willed her not to do that today. One snort from Lauren and the spirits would go wafting back to the other side, to their immaculate green garden, which I once read about in *Spiritualist Monthly*.

But Marina was taking charge. 'Take deep breaths . . . empty your minds . . .' She sounded all wise and

mystical, like one of those voices on a Learn-to-Meditate tape. She closed her eyes, and Lauren and I followed suit. Marina had that effect on people; a natural authority. If anyone could tempt the spirits from their flowery paradise then Marina could. With her psychic fingers, I just knew she had the power to make my seance work. The Psychic Hand, it's one of the highest types.

Actually it was that hand which had brought Marina and me together in the first place. I'd taken Cheiro's book to school with me one breaktime, and found it worked like a magnet. Girls who barely gave me a second glance normally were thrusting their hands at me. 'Do mine . . . please do mine next!'

Really it was only *Marina's* palm I was interested in. She seemed so exotic compared to the other girls in our class. While they prattled on about celebs and pop stars, Marina's talk was all of gods and goddesses. Aphrodite, the goddess of Love and Beauty for instance; the way Marina talked about her, you'd think she was a real person, a distant cousin or something.

'Wow! You have got an unbelievable Mount of Venus.' Holding her small hand in my own, I had flattered her shamelessly.

'Really?' Marina had tried hard not to sound impressed. Still she couldn't resist asking, 'Is that good then?'

'It's quite unusual actually. I've never seen one like it before.'

This was enough for Marina, to be special, different from everyone else. After that, well, I knew I had her hooked.

Now I opened my eyes a fraction and saw her forefinger pressed to the glass, her dark head tilted dramatically towards the ceiling. Lauren looked as if she was trying to stop a sneeze coming. Another minute, and it would all fall apart. My brilliant idea of communing with the spirits declared a joke, a complete and utter failure.

MOVE, glass, please . . .! Perhaps if I really concentrated I might shift it by sheer force of will. I closed my eyes tightly, until there was nothing but the glass, shimmering like the Holy Grail, in the dark space of my mind.

Like I said, it was just a game to begin with. I mean, I never *really* expected it to move. When Lauren snuffled that ‘Someone must be pushing it,’ I actually gasped.

Marina stuck up her hand for silence. ‘Shush a minute. It’s trying to tell us something.’

Typical of Marina, of course, to be so totally cool, hardly raising an eyebrow as the glass jerked uncertainly about the perimeter of cut-out letters, as if testing its boundaries.

The glass, or whatever it was inside the glass, teased us at first. It skittered, first this way, then that, skating towards the word YES, then NO. Whooshing back and forth, it skimmed the table surface with an uncanny squeaking sound.

Marina commanded, ‘If there is a spirit present, then please tell us who you are!’

The glass hesitated, as if it was thinking about it.

‘Spirit. We wish to communicate with you. Please tell us your name.’ Marina’s sweep of dark hair nudged a few of the letters out of place, and I quickly poked them back in line.

The glass responded to Marina’s command. It swung decisively to the circle edge. It began to spell a word, the three of us repeating the letters aloud. ‘H . . . E . . . N . . . R . . . Y . . . Henry.’ We all spoke the name together.

It was kind of a disappointment, I suppose. Somehow, we hadn’t been expecting a Henry.

‘Not Henry Purviss, is it?’ Lauren wondered.

I glared at her. ‘How can it be? He’s not even dead. Well, *half*-dead maybe.’ I was thinking about that mind-numbing stuff Purviss had given us on the Tudors a few weeks back.

‘Shhh!’ Marina hissed. ‘It’s moving again.’

The glass jerked, faster this time, and again we repeated the letters aloud . . .

SOME CALL ME HAL.

‘Hal?’ We looked blankly at each other.

‘Well, hey, Hal, how you doing?’ I said finally. ‘Do you, like, have a surname or anything?’

The glass swept at once to the letters K . . . I . . . N . . . G.

‘Hal King,’ I shrugged. ‘Hal King mean anything to you lot?’

Perhaps, seeing our dumb looks, the thing in the glass offered another clue: OF HAMPTON COURT.

‘Hal King of Hampton Court,’ Lauren repeated slowly. She was frowning like a contestant on a quiz show, as if getting the wrong answer would lose her thousands of pounds.

‘Hampton Court!’ I was almost bouncing up and down in my chair by now. ‘Oh wake up, Lauren, you prune. Hampton Court! There *is* only *one* Hampton Court?, isn’t there?’

‘But didn’t King Henry the Eighth live at Hampton Court?’ Lauren said.

‘Yes! She finally got it. Go to the top of the class,’ I sighed with impatience. ‘Look, forget Hal King. Hal was kind of a Tudor nickname for Henry. *King Henry*, get it? Hampton Court was, like, Henry’s Des Res. Well, Marina’s been reading about him for her project. I’m right, aren’t I, Marina?’

But Marina was already way ahead of us. She was gazing at the glass as if she was about to get down on her knees any minute. ‘It was the King’s favourite. It was his favourite palace.’ Marina spoke in a kind of churchy whisper, as if she was actually being received in the golden splendour of the famous Long Gallery.

‘But, Henry of Hampton Court . . .’ Lauren doggedly persisted. ‘I mean, what are you two trying to tell me? I mean, it can’t be . . . it can’t really be . . .’

‘King Henry the Eighth? In the glass?’ Marina’s eyes were bright. Huge. ‘Why not? We called up a spirit, didn’t we? It could have been anyone. Why not someone important? Famous. Why not the most notorious English king ever? Give me one good reason.’

‘It’s a bit of a coincidence though, isn’t it, Marina?’ Lauren suggested. ‘I mean, you said you were choosing Henry the Eighth for your project next term, and now he just turns up.’

‘Well, why shouldn’t he?’ I snapped in Marina’s defence. ‘Better if it had been one of the six wives though, like Anne Boleyn for instance.’

I’d decided on Anne for *my* project. What with all those lovers and her snappy dressing, Anne had real style I reckoned.

‘But,’ Lauren squinted in disbelief, ‘I mean, he’s been dead for at least . . . at least . . .’

‘He came to the throne in 1509,’ Marina stated coolly. ‘He died in . . .’ She hesitated for a moment. ‘He died in 1547.’

‘So he comes back nearly five centuries later, just to say “hi” to us lot? I don’t want to spoil the fun or anything, but you’ve got to be joking.’

But this time, the glass spelled out the words without hesitation. A whole, gob-smacking sentence. SWEET LADY I DO NOT JEST.

*I do not jest*, it said. *He* said rather. Henry VIII. The same Henry who had burned heretics and beheaded wives, and snogged anything in a farthingale like there was no tomorrow, had just given Lauren a telling off for her cheek.

I suppose that was the, like, *defining moment*. The moment when we could have just dumped the letters into the bin, and sauntered off to the park to check out the talent. But, this is the whole trouble with *defining moments*, you never recognize them until years after, when it’s too late. How could we have known then, that one of the worst male chauvinist pigs known to history was about to disrupt our

entire lives? And anyway it was too late. Already our world had shrunk to that upturned brandy glass, to its squeak and slither and glide. As that afternoon ticked on into evening, all our energy seemed concentrated in the very tips of our fingers. Henry was taking us for a ride.

We didn't need to ask questions. Henry's messages came without prompting. There was hardly even time to interpret.

MY LADY IS A GOGGLE-EYED WHORE, Henry said. Then, THAT MADAM IS A POISONED LILY.

It didn't take too many brain-cells to figure out who he was on about. Anne Boleyn. Anne who flirted with half the hunks at court and lost her head for it. Of course, the fact that she couldn't give Henry a son and heir didn't help much either. Still, as if she hadn't paid enough for her misdeeds, Henry had to gripe about her. He had to give us three girls the old 'my wife didn't understand me' line.

THAT MADAM IS A WITCH, Henry said.

'Poor Anne Boleyn,' I whispered. 'He hasn't forgiven her. After all this time. He must have fancied her once though.'

At once the glass whirled out a reply: FANCY . . . ALL SWEET LADIES TAKE MY FANCY . . .

"Sweet ladies". I couldn't resist a snigger. 'Dirty old devil's getting it on with us. Oh God. Sorry. That just . . . that just about cracks me up.'

Maybe it was the tension of the past hour or so, I don't know. But sometimes, when you start laughing you just can't stop. Especially when someone's glaring at you, all disapproving, like Marina was. It felt like a kind of sacrilege almost. Like getting the giggles in church, or at someone's funeral.

'Sweet ladies . . .' My hysterical giggles turned into hiccups. 'That's US, you realize. Eugh! Pass me the sick bag . . . puh . . . lease!'

Well it wasn't *all* my fault. I mean, it could have been Lauren's explosion of sneezing that scattered the letters.

But the glass, suddenly disorientated, spelled out a string of gibberish with the remaining letters. Something like MWEGLTOFCOT. Then nothing. The glass was motionless, just an old upturned brandy glass again. Henry, if it was Henry, had abandoned us in a fit of royal pique. I could even see him, strutting back to the other side with a dismissive swirl of his ermine-lined cape, and a roar of disgust. Like Anne before us, we were in the black books.

'Did you have to? Just when it was getting interesting?' Marina said. If looks could kill, Lauren and I would shortly be headed for the spirit realm ourselves.

Lauren mumbled an apology: 'I think it's that perfume Abbie's wearing.'

'*Oh, Frenzy*, you mean.' Just to annoy her, I took a slurping sniff of my own armpit. 'Fancy a squirt?'

'It's not funny, Abbie. You could have shown more respect, you of all people.' Marina released the blinds, and the kitchen was flooded with rosy light. 'We've just been talking to a *king*. Not just any common old everyday spirit, but *royalty*. Doesn't that mean anything to you two?'

She glanced up at the clock and I saw the look of alarm flash across her face. It was six already. At once she began setting up the ironing board, ready to slip into her little housewife role.

The Pauloses kept a small grocery store in Commerce Road, dark and pungent with yeast and spices, exotic fruits, and hessian sacks spilling odd beans and seeds. Marina's parents never returned home from their shop much before nine, but she had a list of chores to do before then, pinned to the cork notice board above the fridge.

Anxious to make amends, Lauren bent to clear up the letters while I replaced the brandy glass in the drinks cabinet. It was funny to think of Marina's father coming home and filling it with the other kind of spirits. And where was Henry now? Somehow I couldn't visualize him floating

among the herbaceous borders described in *Spiritualist Monthly*. A Tudor knot-garden maybe, with herbs and secret arbours and fountains. Or was he banished to some outer darkness until we took out the letters again? Or maybe he was still hovering in the kitchen, watching greedily as Marina prepared the evening meal, old hungers and memories stirring.

Marina's lounge had a stuffy smell. You could smell the carpet, which was new, and the velour suite, all padded and plumped and tasselled. The lampshades were tasselled too, and the curtains swagged in loops and scallops across the French windows, like old-fashioned ball-gowns. The mock chandelier hanging from the ceiling reminded me of a giant jelly-fish. Every surface was cluttered with family photos; different versions of Marina's own dark eyes following my every movement, as if to say, 'Hey, English girl, what are you doing here?'

'I'm her friend,' I felt like saying to all those aunts and cousins and grandfathers. 'Best friend actually.' The mysterious eyes dismissed me. What did friends matter? Family was what counted, family.

I slid the glass door of the cabinet softly back. As I straightened, I noticed one of the plumes of dried pampas grass that sat either side of the electric log-fire. It seemed to be waving ever so slightly . . . if you looked at it, half squinting . . . surely? The windows were closed. They always were for security reasons, no matter how hot it got, Marina said. There wasn't a breath of air in the place.

Back in the kitchen, Marina left off ironing her father's shirt to take lamb chops from the fridge.

'I think I might do Elizabeth I for my project actually. The Virgin Queen.' Lauren was brushing her hair with her pure bristle brush. 'Eugh! You're not eating red meat, are you?'

Marina sighed. 'That was the plan. Lauren, would you mind *not* brushing your hair over the cooker?'

‘Sorry. I’m just telling you what I’ve read, like it takes your body two whole days to rid itself of the toxins in red meat. Chicken’s even worse. Boys are actually growing boobs from eating too much chicken, because of the hormones and everything.’

Marina caught my eye. We both smiled secretly, to show how sick we were of Lauren’s health lectures, we who had higher concerns in the spirit realm.

‘Wooh,’ I said, in my mock-impressed voice. ‘That explains some of the dorks in our class. That Andrew Warrender really should wear a trainer-bra, don’t you think?’

‘Hormones aren’t funny, Abbie,’ Lauren reprimanded me. ‘Anyway, I should go. I want to call in at the library before it closes, so I can make a start on my project. You coming?’

‘No. No, not just yet. See you tomorrow, yeah?’

The chops were sizzling in the pan by now. It was quite a relief as Lauren trundled off, vanquished by the smell of charred flesh. Marina tossed me the potato peeler. ‘Catch! If you’re staying, you can make yourself useful.’

This was the time I liked best, when I had Marina all to myself. It seemed only fair. Hadn’t I got to her first? I was admiring Marina’s Mount of Venus, calculating her birth number, long before Lauren came snivelling round.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said. ‘For what happened earlier, laughing, I mean. I think it was nerves actually.’

‘You did go a bit white when the glass began moving,’ Marina conceded. She was very nifty with that iron, angling it just right for the collar. This was the bit about her I didn’t get. How domesticated she was. Almost mumsy. ‘You’re not scared, are you, Abbie?’

We began talking about tomorrow, how we would create a more fitting atmosphere for Henry, with music and incense, the works.

‘Not exactly *scared*. Why should I be? It was my idea. I mean, if he suddenly materialized right there on the table,

then I'd be scared. As long as he stays in the glass, we're all right.'

I pretended to concentrate on the potatoes, removing the peel in thin unbroken curls. As long as he stayed in the glass. Would he though? I couldn't imagine old Henry staying anywhere he didn't want to. Confined by a silly circle of letters.

'Why? Are *you* scared?'

Stupid question. Marina was never afraid of anything. She didn't even bother to reply, just smiled her mysterious smile, padding barefoot between cooker and ironing board. Marina was small and curvy, yet she moved with such grace, she might have been gliding through citrus groves, a basket of Cyprus oranges balanced on her head. I watched her shake out a pillowcase. Imagine if Henry could see her too, as I did. What would he think? I reckoned Henry would have been really gone on Marina, he'd have fallen for her, just like he did for the unlucky Anne, his 'goggle-eyed whore'.

'Anyway, we might get someone else next time. Henry might have been a sort of one-off.' I took up another potato, the peaty skin making me cough.

'A one-night stand you mean?' Marina said. She was shaking her head. Henry would be back, she was certain of it. She felt it in her bones, deep in her gut, underneath her skin. She just *knew* it. 'As long as Lauren doesn't back off.' She stared at me, her dark eyes wide. 'Lauren can be a pain, but we need her to make up the numbers. As long as you don't get cold feet. As long as you and me are here, then Henry will come.'

'I'll be there. I'm not that much of a wimp.' I felt myself flush with pride. It thrilled me to be bonded in this way with Marina. Me and Marina, a potent psychic combination, irresistible to the unseen forces.

'We must keep it between the three of us though.' Now that the mound of potatoes was done, she padded behind

me to the front door. 'Whatever you do, Abbie, don't talk about it to anyone. People are so dumb. They'd think we were making it up, that we were freaks or something.'

Marina had a kind of shimmer about her as she stood framed in the doorway. She looked all misty-eyed. She looked the way people look when they're in love. 'Henry,' she said. 'I'm sure he's come to teach us something. You know, like a spirit guide.'

It was still hot outside. Thick privet hedges wafted their tangy scent, and nearly every front garden in Arcadia Avenue had one of those sugar-pink lavatera things trumpeting into the sky. I broke into a jog. After the quiet cool of Marina's house, the buzz of traffic on the main road was somehow a shock.

Joining the queue at the bus stop, I thought of Henry. I imagined him, left behind in that kitchen. The King as he had been in life, sucking meat from the chop bones, shaking snowstorms of salt with his pudgy jewelled fingers. His ermine-trimmed cap would perch on the kitchen stool; the gold-sheathed dagger would mist in the steam from the pans. He would suck the bones clean, then chuck them over one shoulder. Then he would gaze at Marina, and lick his mean red little lips. Slowly.

## Chapter Two

ONE THING WAS for sure, no way would the ghost of Henry VIII want to materialize in *my* house. I lived about five bus stops away from Marina, just round the corner from the tube station. There were no lavateras in our front gardens. Actually, there *were* no front gardens, only strips of concrete wide enough for a dustbin. Smedhurst Road. Number sixty-two. Not even a house, but a maisonette, which is kind of like two flats together, one up, one down, both sharing a porch. We shared the porch with Mrs Croop from downstairs.

That night I burst in, clumping up the stairs two at a time as usual. Then stopped. The living-room door was open. Through it, I had a telescopic view of our elderly neighbour, enthroned in one of the fireside chairs. And there was my mother, crouched at her feet, as if she was paying her some sort of homage. In fact, she was most likely doing something unmentionable to our neighbour's toenails.

Mrs Croop's eyes lit up when she spotted me. 'Here's your Abbie, bless her. Hallo, my ducks! Your mum's just been giving me a quick seeing to. My old feet have been giving me gip, I don't mind telling you.'

This was the trouble with Mrs Croop. She didn't mind telling you *anything*.

'Oh,' I said, very sniffy, making it plain how utterly disgusted I was. I mean having a chiropodist for a mother was bad enough, without having to witness the grisly procedures under your own roof.

'Well, I'll be off then.' Mrs Croop levered herself from the chair. 'I don't want to hold up your tea, ducks.'

'Why does she have to call me "ducks"?' I said when she'd gone.

My mother decided to ignore my 'sick' noises. 'I'll just Hoover these toenails up, dear, and then I'll get your tea.'

I thought of Henry suddenly. Henry would probably have had crones like Mrs Croop flung in the Tower dungeons. Somehow that thought made me feel better, as I spread out my project work on the table.

No, no self-respecting spirit would be seen dead in this house. It was bad enough inviting my friends round, what with Mum's collection of teapots on the gingham-frilled dresser, and Dad's favourite picture of *The Crying Boy* who looked, my dad said, as if he was crying 'real' tears.

'I hope you washed your hands, Mother,' I remarked.

Having disposed of Mrs Croop's remains, my mother was laying the table for tea: salad with jars of gherkins and pickled onions and all that stuff that gives you dog's breath, and ensures that no man will ever want to kiss you in a million years.

Not that I had a man - a boyfriend rather. This much the three of us girls had in common at least. Lauren because her constant snuffling was a bit of a turn-off, Marina because her dad never let her out of the house, and me . . . well I was working on it. One day, I would go to bed looking like Quasimodo and wake up like Kate Winslet, and the phone would never stop ringing.

'Of course I did. Is that history you're doing, dear?' My mother was trying to lay the table around me.

'Anne Boleyn,' I told her. 'She's my character for my project.'

'Is she, dear? Wasn't that the poor woman who got her head chopped off, just for having a lovely little baby girl? Disgraceful.'

'I don't think that was the only reason, Mother,' I said. 'There was a bit more to it than that. Actually she had six fingers on one hand, and that, as you may not know, was the classic sign of a witch.'

‘A witch! What superstitious nonsense. A simple operation would have put that right. I had a patient once, and she had an extra little toe on her . . .’

‘Mother please! Spare me the details.’

‘Sorry, dear.’ She began that tuneless humming, a sort of medley of hymns and TV theme tunes, which nearly drove me insane, and I knew that she was wondering about Anne Boleyn’s feet and the state of her toenails.

My mother didn’t believe in witches of course, or spirits, or anything that didn’t walk on two feet. I longed to lift her from the lowly heights of cutting old folks’ toenails, from their bunions and corns and hard skin, lift her into another spiritual dimension, onto another plane. Maybe I would tell her about Henry. On second thoughts, what was the point? I knew exactly what she would say: ‘That’s nice dear,’ humouring me as if I was six again, and chatting to my imaginary friend.

Glancing up at *The Crying Boy*, I tried to reassure myself. Beyond our poky flat was a world of art and culture, of poets and media people, and musicians.

‘Is that an original?’ Lauren had sniggered, when first she saw *The Crying Boy*. I had to agree with her, of course, that it was entirely lamentable. In fact it made me want to cry myself. ‘My dad thinks they look like real tears,’ I said. Then felt ashamed for making fun of my dad’s taste. I felt angry with Lauren too. It was all right for her. Her parents, like the parents of most kids in our class, were divorced. She lived with her mother, Izzie, who wore big earrings and boogied to Van Morrison while she fired her pots in the basement. Izzie even had a boyfriend. Whereas my mother was always fussing about in her crochet tank top and stretch pants, making plates of sandwiches cut in silly triangles and calling my friends ‘luvvy’. Most embarrassing of all though, she’d been forty-seven, practically geriatric, when she found she was pregnant with me.