

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



The Bright One

Elvi Rhodes

About the Book

Molly O'Connor's life was not an easy one. With six children and a husband who earned what he could as a casual farmhand, fisherman, or drover, it was a constant struggle to keep her family fed and raised to be respectable. Of all her children, Breda - the Bright One - was closest to her heart. As, one by one, her other children left Kilbally, Kathleen and Kieran to the Church, Moira to marriage, the twins to war, so Breda, the youngest, was the one who stayed close to her parents. Breda never wanted to leave the West of Ireland. She thought Kilbally was the most beautiful place in the world.

Then tragedy struck the O'Connors and the structure of their family life was irrevocably changed. Reeling from unhappiness and humiliation, Breda decided to make a new life for herself - in Yorkshire with her Aunt Josie's family. There she was to discover a totally different world from the one she had left behind, with new people and new challenges for the future.

About the Author

Elvi Rhodes was the eldest of five children brought up in the West Riding of Yorkshire in the depression between the wars. She won a scholarship to Bradford Grammar School and left to become the breadwinner of her family. A widow with two sons, she lives in Sussex. Her other novels include *Opal*, *Doctor Rose*, *Ruth Appleby*, *The Golden Girls*, *Madeleine*, *The House of Bonneau*, *Cara's Land* and *The Rainbow Through the Rain*. A collection of stories, *Summer Promise and other stories*, is also published by Corgi Books.

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THE BRIGHT ONE

Elvi Rhodes



CORGI BOOKS

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Epub ISBN: 9781446463789

Version 1.0

www.randomhouse.co.uk

THE BRIGHT ONE
A CORGI BOOK : 0 552 14057 0

Originally published in Great Britain by Bantam Press, a division of Transworld Publishers Ltd

PRINTING HISTORY

Bantam Press edition published 1994

Corgi edition published 1995

Corgi edition reprinted 1999

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Corgi Books are published by Transworld Publishers Ltd,
61-63 Uxbridge Road, London W5 5SA,
in Australia by Transworld Publishers (Australia) Pty Ltd,
15-25 Helles Avenue, Moorebank, NSW 2170,
and in New Zealand by Transworld Publishers (NZ) Ltd,
3 William Pickering Drive, Albany, Auckland.

*This book is for Mollie Prior,
dear friend and fellow-writer*

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Acknowledgements

Many people, both in Ireland and in this country, gave me help in researching *The Bright One*.

I wish particularly to thank Veronica Steele, who answered scores of questions and also accompanied me to the scenes of her childhood in the West of Ireland.

I also wish to thank Veronica's mother, Mrs Mary Corbett, who looked back for me over a lifetime of more than ninety years, and Mary's son, Paddy Corbett, who shared his reminiscences and sang and recorded songs for me.

I also wish to include other kind friends in County Clare who gave us such warm hospitality.

Once again, I thank my son, Anthony Rhodes, who accompanied me on my research trips. With the utmost patience he took me wherever I wanted to go, and joined in in all my research.

PART ONE

One

She sat on the grass at the top of the cliffs; damp grass, because the rain came and went, came and went, day in, day out, seldom more than a day or two without at least a shower, usually heavy, which was why the grass was of a green which dazzled the eye with its brilliance. In spite of the wind which always blew around the cliff top, the grass never had time to dry out. In any case, the wind was laden with spray from the sea which, at high water, swirled around the base of the cliff, pounding against the rock with vicious intensity, as if determined to smash it.

The sea was roaring in now, great waves as high as walls, which broke on the strand in wide bands of white foam, frothy as whipped-up egg-white. Close into the shore the sea was slate grey, but only a little further out it was the deep, dark colour of blue-black ink, the surface broken, because the wind was fresh, by galloping white horses, ridden by adventurous seabirds.

The sea stretched away in the distance until the sky came down and met it, until you could hardly tell one from the other. It looked like the edge of the world, and Breda had once thought it was; but now she knew differently. The world did not end there because the sea was the Atlantic Ocean, and it went on for thousands of miles. Her Dada had said so and she could not but believe him, though today he had her so annoyed that she would have preferred not to believe a word he said. However, Miss McCleary had also said the same thing. She had pointed it out on the map of the world, which covered a fair-sized area of the classroom wall. Miss McCleary was never wrong.

The waves which left Ireland, Dada had said, finally broke on the shores of America. In which case, Breda had replied, America must be a very wet place, with all that water.

‘‘Tis not so at all,’ Dada had said. ‘It all comes back again to Ireland.’ When she’d asked how this could work he’d changed the subject.

‘You are too full of questions,’ he’d complained.

America was where her Uncle Fergal and Aunt Cassie lived with her cousins. They had gone over the water more than ten years ago so that, in fact, Breda had never set eyes on them, but there was more than one proof that they existed.

For a start, there was the photograph of her uncle and aunt, with the four children they had had in Kilbally, on the sideboard, flanked by likenesses of the three who had been born to them in America, and a more recent one of Uncle Fergal taken when he had been promoted to sergeant in the New York City Police Force.

There were photographs in almost every home in Kilbally of relatives who had crossed the water to America or to England. ‘And not only in Kilbally,’ Mammy said. ‘‘Tis the same all over Ireland. You can tell how long they have been gone by how much the photograph has faded. Many are those who have died in a foreign land, God rest their souls!’

Another proof of the existence of Breda’s relatives in America was the parcels of clothing which arrived twice a year, as regular as clockwork; hand-me-downs from Breda’s cousins, one of whom was only a year older than she was. Lovely clothes they were; so smart, so stylish. Last winter a warm coat, its collar trimmed with glossy, dark fur; for this summer crisp cotton dresses in floral patterns, with fancy touches – braiding and piping, tucks and pleats – which made them stand out a mile from the serviceable, everyday clothes of her friends. All they needed was to be shortened but this Mammy refused to do. ‘You’ll grow into them soon enough,’ she said.

‘Twas a pity. ‘Twas a pity also that her mother made her wear a pinafore over the dresses. Without it she might have been the best-dressed girl in Kilbally. She would have liked that.

She was wearing one of the dresses at this moment – a blue and white checked gingham with a full, gathered skirt and a white collar embroidered in blue cross-stitch – though she should have been doing no such thing since it was school holidays and for that Mammy said any old clothes were good enough. The best ones, the latest arrivals, were kept for Mass on Sundays, and the second-best for term time, though even then she had to change out of them the minute she was home from school.

‘If you want to look smart when it matters,’ Mammy said, ‘– and don’t we all know you’re as vain as a peacock, the way you prink and preen in front of the glass – then you’ll learn to look after your things. ’Tis the way you will always be having some fit to wear.’

’Twas not easy to prink and preen, Breda thought. The only looking-glass in the house was one foot square, and though it stood on the dresser in the living kitchen for the benefit of all, Breda was not tall enough to use it without standing on a stool. Even then she could only see bits of herself, never the whole picture.

Earlier in the summer she had been invited to tea at Deirdre O’Farrell’s house and there, in Mrs O’Farrell’s bedroom, was an oak wardrobe with a full-length mirror in the door. Breda had gazed upon herself in her full glory, a sight so far only seen by others, frowning critically at her curly red hair, which was common in these parts. She would have preferred it to be black, and dead straight, like Mammy’s. She was not displeased with her blue-green eyes, which Dada said were like the sea on a good day.

Seeing the whole picture she realized that she was not as tall as she liked to think herself. Deirdre, standing beside her, was a good two inches taller, though the same age. Also, Deirdre had black hair and a beautiful name, and was that rare thing, an only child. Nor were the O’Farrells, who ran a small farm, as poor as everyone else, else why would they have a wardrobe like this? Deirdre was so lucky!

And my legs are too thin, Breda thought. But still and all she was not totally dissatisfied. Wasn't there a certain something? She struck a pose, head tilted, right arm raised in a graceful curve, toe pointing forward like a dancer.

'Would you come away from that mirror now,' Deirdre said. 'Else it's the Devil himself will jump out and get you!'

But now she was sitting on the top of the cliff, her arms clasped around her knees, her head shrunk into her shoulders, and if she could have seen her eyes they would have shown dark with anger and frustration. She hated her father, and with good cause. Had he not promised that the next time he went to the races she should go with him? And this was the day.

Last night, before going to bed, she had washed herself from top to toe so as not to have to spend time this morning, and as soon as she had wakened, though it was annoyingly later than she had planned, she had put on the gingham frock, clean white socks and her best shoes with double straps across the instep, outgrown by her American cousin, and hurried downstairs.

'Where's Dada?' she demanded.

'He left an hour ago,' Mammy said. She spoke calmly. Only the extra vigour she gave to kneading the dough for the soda bread hinted that she was not as calm as she sounded. She had told James that there would be trouble.

'You promised her!' she had told him.

'Twas not serious,' he replied. 'She knew that. I did not promise the day.'

'You said, "Next time I'll be after taking you with me." Today is the next time. You should never had said it, putting ideas into her head!'

It was entirely like James O'Connor, Molly thought. Wouldn't he say anything to please? Would he not charm the birds off the trees or the ducks off the water? Had he not done it to her when they had met eighteen years ago at Ballinasloe Fair in the autumn? And he had been doing it

ever since, and she still falling for it. Still, it was wrong to do this to Breda.

'The races is no place for a child of eight,' James said.

'Then you should have said so to the child,' Molly persisted.

'In any case it's fast asleep she is. Why would I want to be waking her?' he asked.

He kissed Molly – after eighteen years of marriage not many Kilbally men kissed their wives on parting – blessed himself at the small font by the door, and left.

'God go with you!' she said.

She watched him stride away down the street, to the corner where his mates would pick him up in the trap. He was thirty-eight and looked ten years younger. She looked all of her thirty-seven years. But then hadn't she borne seven children and raised six, though thankfully it seemed as if Breda was to be the last. The priest had stopped coming around asking wasn't it time there was another to fill the cradle. She did not know why there wasn't. She and James had never ceased to be lovers.

'Tis the will of God, no doubt!' she'd said to Father Curran, though not admitting that she was pleased.

'Where is Dada?' Breda repeated.

'He's gone.'

Breda looked at her mother blankly.

'What do you mean? Where would he have gone?'

'To the races. He left an hour past. 'Tis a long way to Galway and his friends were waiting for him. You were asleep.'

'But why would you not have wakened me?' She was shouting now, distraught, unwilling to believe it.

'We thought it better not. 'Twas Dada's belief that the races were not suitable for a little girl of eight. I had the very same thought myself.' She sounded unconvincing even to herself, nor was Breda to be fobbed off.

'But he *promised*, Mammy! He *promised*!' Breda persisted.

“’Twas not for today he meant it, *dote*,” Molly said. “’Twas for some other time, when you are older.” She spoke gently, quietly, her own heart aching for her daughter’s disappointment. If I had the man here, I would hit him, she thought – though she knew she would not.

‘Will we go for a picnic this afternoon, then?’ Molly suggested. ‘You and me and Moira? Perhaps the twins?’

‘And why should I want to go for a picnic with my sister and my brothers when I was to go to the races with Dada?’ Passion rose in Breda to boiling point.

‘I hate him!’ she cried. ‘I hate you all!’

Tears of rage pouring down her face, she ran out of the house, not stopping to bless herself, and away down the long street towards the sea.

‘Come back!’ Molly cried. ‘Not a bite of breakfast have you inside you! Come back!’ She freed her hands from the dough and ran into the street.

Her words were wasted, carried away on the air. She went back into the house, set the dough to rise, and went to waken her other four children still at home, though how they had slept through the last ten minutes she could not imagine.

For a minute, before waking them, she paused to look at her children. So innocent they looked in sleep, so good! Butter wouldn’t melt in their mouths now, but when they were up and doing it would be different.

Kieran, the eldest of those left, would be the easiest to waken. However quietly she spoke his name, he would open his eyes and be immediately in the world. He slept at the top of the double bed and the twins, Patrick and Colum, slept top-to-tail at the bottom. It had been all right when they were small, but now they were growing like weeds and their legs tangled and kicked half way up the bed, regularly causing trouble. And since the twins were two to one, and Kieran was gentler, they always won, always, too, had the best of the bedclothes.

This morning Kieran's thin shoulders were bare, while the twins were comfortably covered, but wasn't it always the way? And it was summer, so it was all right.

'Time you were up!' she said to Kieran.

Blue eyes met hers, and he smiled.

'As for these lazy lumps . . . ' Molly said.

She included Moira, spread out fast asleep on the second bed, now that Breda had left it. The girl's dark hair spread out across the pillow; long eyelashes lay against cheeks rosy with sleep. Moira was, Molly admitted, the beauty of the family, yet she never felt totally comfortable with her, never felt quite in control as she did with her other children, however naughty they were.

Moira was the difficult one. From the earliest possible age, from babyhood, she had made her wishes known and had managed to get what she wanted.

'And is it not your own fault?' James always said when his wife complained about Moira's selfishness. 'Did you not always give in to her, right from a baby at the breast?'

'You were no better,' Molly said. 'Did you ever say "no" when she was little?'

'It was not my job to be bringing up the children,' James had said. 'It is the mother's job. My job is to earn the living.'

He was right, Molly conceded. It *was* her fault. She had had a difficult pregnancy with Moira and she was tired after the birth. Also she had four other children, the eldest, Kathleen, not yet six years old. They took her energy and needed her attention. Then to her dismay, though not to her surprise, she became pregnant again with Maeve before Moira was six months old.

What could be said about little Maeve, since she had lived less than two weeks? The other children could not remember her, except Kieran just a little, and Kathleen who, like Molly, would never forget.

Very early one morning - James was out fishing - Molly, roused from her sleep after a bad night caused by Moira's

teething, took the new baby into bed to feed her. The baby nuzzled into her breast and started to feed. Molly fell asleep. When she waked an hour later the baby was dead, suffocated against her breast. It was Kathleen who had run, in her nightgown, to fetch the doctor, though too late. Everyone said it was not Molly's fault and hadn't it happened before to others, though Molly, when she thought about it, could not but feel guilty. It was this way there was a four-year gap between Moira and Breda.

'Moira!' Molly called now. 'Waken now, Moira. High time you were up and doing.'

Moira groaned and turned over, burying her face in the pillow. With one swift movement Molly pulled all the bedclothes off her, before turning her attention to the twins.

By the time they were all downstairs Kieran had pumped the water and refilled the kettle.

'Where's Breda?' he asked. 'Did Dada take her to the races after all?'

He knew his little sister had been on about it but he had not taken her seriously. Nor, he had thought, had Dada. It was just one of those things Dada had talked about. You had to understand that Dada talked about lots of things which, in the end, didn't happen. He meant nothing by it, but you had to understand, and Breda took him seriously. But had he kept his promise this time?

'Indeed he did not,' Molly said. 'It was never on the cards. Wasn't he gone an hour past when she came down, and all dressed up, the poor child?'

'So where is she?'

'Ran out of the house as fast as her legs would take her, and not a bite inside her. It is my notion she has gone down to the strand. When you have had your breakfast, will you go after her? You and Kathleen were always the best to calm her down.'

She missed Kathleen, her eldest. She missed her sorely, but she had always known that this would happen. It came

as no surprise that at seventeen years old Kathleen had joyfully and eagerly entered the novitiate of the Convent of Our Lady of Lourdes and was away in Dublin.

Even as a small girl she had been devout. When she played with her dolls it was to take them to church services, to baptize them, read the scriptures to them. Not that she had ever been a melancholy child, not by any means. The lark on the wing was not happier than Kathleen. But she was closer to God than the other children.

Well, Molly had thought, quite early on, there is no higher calling than for a girl to give her life to God. A Catholic mother must give thanks for having any child with a true vocation. She had not doubted once that Kathleen would be a nun.

Breda was born when Kathleen was nine years old, and from the first there had been a special bond between them. Kathleen had cared for her sister like a little mother. She had all the caring qualities of motherhood.

‘It seems sad that she will never have her own children to care for,’ Molly had said to James.

‘It’s too soon to know that,’ James protested.

‘Oh no it is not!’ Molly contradicted him. ‘I am certain sure. As certain as that the sun will rise tomorrow morning!’

And so it had been. And so it was Kieran she sent after Breda now. But as she watched him walk away down the road there was pain in her. She knew, as she had known with Kathleen, that one day *he* would walk away from her, for Kieran had a vocation to the priesthood. As with his sister, his future path had shown at an early age. Wasn’t it because of that, because it was so clearly recognized, that the Parish was paying for him to be educated by the Christian Brothers in Ennistymon? And would see him through the seminary, for there was no way James O’Connor could afford this.

When Kieran was out of sight Molly turned back into the house. Am I to give all my children to God, she asked

herself, not for the first time? It was too much. It was cruel.

When she saw the twins scrapping on the floor, Patrick astride Colum, holding him down, she was momentarily reassured. These two were not for sainthood, that was for certain! As for Moira, was there ever an easier target for the temptations of the Devil? Twelve years old and parading in front of the boys whenever she got the chance!

Breda was different again, different from any of them. She was one on her own. In spite of the morning's tantrums, Molly's heart lifted at the thought of Breda. She was like the sunshine itself, even though, like the sun, she was sometimes behind a cloud. But when she came out she lightened the whole world. And that, thought Molly, was not just the opinion of a fond mother. Wasn't it Father Curran himself who had said, 'When she comes into the room, she lights it up. The Bright One! She is beloved of God.'

But not *too* beloved, Molly thought fearfully. Not Breda!

'Of course, you must never tell her so,' Father Curran said. He was not a man who believed in praise.

Molly had told James.

'The Bright One!' he said. 'Isn't that entirely right!'

Kieran knew just where Breda would be. It was the place they all went, the unofficial meeting place of the children of the neighbourhood. He'd been there himself a thousand times, though less so now than when he was younger. Sixteen was too old for it. Though still at school, to his own mind he was no longer a child. Some of his friends had left the National School at fourteen, others had gone on to the technical school, but in either case they had jobs, or were looking for jobs, to earn a bit of money for the family purse.

It was a sorrow to him that he could not do this, at least not permanently, though he always tried for jobs in the school holidays. He hated watching his mother struggle to make ends meet, to feed and clothe them all on his father's small, and erratic, earnings. His father had no trade; he relied entirely on casual work: farm labourer, drover,

fisherman, odd job man. But to give him his due, Kieran thought, when he was in work, he worked hard. He knew that to leave school now would be to deny his vocation. That he could not do, it would be a sin. God had called him, he knew that for certain. Nor would his mother have expected or wanted it.

After half a mile, the unmade road petered out, dividing into two rough tracks, the one sloping down to the strand, to the firm beach with the sand, where the sea had not yet reached it, of so pale a gold that it was almost white, the other track climbing to the cliff top.

He saw Breda before she spotted him. She was sitting on the grass, her knees drawn up to her chin, gazing out to sea. So small she looked against that wide background, and she was too young to be there on her own. Though the wind had dropped for the moment, it could spring up again just as suddenly along this coast, blowing with strong, sharp gusts. She was also much too close to the edge.

Later in the day there would be other children there, but it was still early, not long after nine o'clock, and they would be at their chores, or running messages. Since there was no school some would still be in bed, but his mother did not allow that except for illness.

He quickened his pace, though not calling out. His feet made no sound on the short grass and the second after Breda heard him he flopped down beside her on the ground.

'So what are you doing here, so early in the day?' He asked the question pleasantly, no criticism in his voice.

She looked at him solemnly.

'I was wondering, will I go to America? Will I go to live with Uncle Fergal and Auntie Cassie?'

'And when would this be?' Kieran asked.

'Now, if I could. Has anyone ever swum to America?'

'Not that I have heard of. 'Tis unlikely,' Kieran answered.

'I'm a good swimmer.'

‘You are so,’ he agreed. ‘But it’s a long way. What would you do for food?’

He asked the question deliberately. She was fond of her food, greedy almost. It was a wonder with all she ate why she didn’t grow faster.

Breda did not need her brother’s questions to remind her that she had not eaten since yesterday teatime. In the evening she had been too excited, and this morning too angry. She felt now as though she had a great dark hole in her middle. She wondered if she were to starve herself to death, would her father be sorry for ever? Would she be made a saint? Saint Breda of Kilbally?

‘Mammy has sent you some soda bread,’ Kieran said.

He took the packet out of his pocket, rather squashed, and handed it to her. Swiftly, she tore off the wrapping and bit into the soft bread, thickly spread with the farm butter Deirdre’s mother had given her to bring home – was it only yesterday?

She did not speak until every crumb was finished. Nor did Kieran. His sister would be more amenable on a full stomach.

‘I will so go to America,’ Breda said. ‘As soon as I am old enough.’

‘But not swim there?’ Kieran said, and saw the corners of her mouth turn upwards at his teasing.

She might well go there, he thought. There was no way the whole family could stay here, even though Kathleen and himself would be away. In every large family – and most were large – someone emigrated. It was the story of Ireland, not just in the time of the potato famine, about which every schoolchild knew, and wasn’t there a very old woman in Kilbally whose grandmother had told her about it first hand? It was the way of life. The land couldn’t support them. They crossed the water, and sent money home to help those who stayed. But he had thought it would be the twins who would go, not little Breda.

'I will travel on a big ship,' she said.

'Or perhaps an aeroplane, by the time you are old enough? But what will Mammy and Dada do without you?'

'Mammy will be sad,' Breda conceded. 'But Dada does not love me, else why did he not take me to the races?'

'Because it is not a thing for a little girl. Besides, won't they have to stay overnight in Galway because of the horses, which will be too tired to go there and back in one day?'

Clearly, Breda thought, no-one was on her side, not even Kieran, who was kinder to her than anyone.

'Will he bring me back a present, do you think?' she asked.

'If he wins,' Kieran said, 'I daresay he will.'

If he won plenty they would all get presents. If he won a little, then Mammy and the girls. If it was a bad day he'd had then he'd turn out his pocket linings to show they were empty, and it would be a hungry week to follow.

'Mammy thought we might bring a picnic down to the strand this afternoon,' he said. 'It will be low tide. You could look for your pebbles.'

Breda was making a collection of pebbles. They must be small, because she hadn't much space to keep them, but they must also be beautiful, unusually marked, uncommonly coloured. Only the very best would do.

'It would not be as good as the races,' she objected.

'It would so,' Kieran said.

'And who would come?'

'All of us.'

'Even you?'

'Yes,' he promised. 'Perhaps Mammy too.'

That was one of the best things about their mother. It was there she differed from the rest. Busy though she was, she would sometimes leave the work to join them in whatever they were doing. In the evenings she would often sing to

them in her rich voice. She knew hundreds of songs. She was not like all the other mothers, not at all.

‘Would you ever help me with my pebbles?’ Breda asked cautiously. She had no intention of being easily persuaded. She had been badly done by.

‘I might,’ Kieran agreed. ‘But we need to go home now. I have to see Mr O’Reilly about a job in the shop. It’s important.’

Mr O’Reilly kept the grocer’s. He had almost promised that he would find something for Kieran to do: sweeping up, packing and unpacking, delivering. It would not fetch much in the way of money but hopefully there would be extras – sugar, lard, flour, tea – to bring home.

‘Anyway,’ Kieran added, ‘we must do the chores this morning if we are to picnic this afternoon. Would you have fed the hens at all?’

‘I forgot,’ Breda admitted.

‘Then won’t they just be hungry? What if Mammy forgot to feed you? You had better come back with me and do it!’ He spoke gently, but as one who expected to be obeyed.

Breda sighed, and gave in, and felt surprisingly better. Kieran held out his hands and pulled her to her feet. There were grass stains on her dress which she hoped would not show or she would be in more trouble.

Her hand in her brother’s, she started for home. But I will not forgive Dada, she thought. Well, not at once. I will not speak to him for a week, and if he speaks to me I will not answer.

The picnic was good. There were other children on the beach; most of them Breda knew, so there were plenty of games to join in. The older boys, those who did not have holiday jobs, sat apart, Kieran with them, though it would be his last afternoon for doing so since Mr O’Reilly had given him the job and tomorrow morning he would start work in the shop.

At one point he left his group and kept his promise to help Breda look for pebbles. They were lucky, finding at least a dozen which, after being washed in one of the pools, were judged worthy to join the collection.

‘I hope you don’t think you’re going to keep that lot in the bedroom?’ Moira complained. ‘There isn’t enough room!’

‘There is so!’ Breda retorted. ‘They will go in my treasure box.’

Mammy had given each one of them, the minute they were old enough to own things, a cardboard box in which to keep their possessions apart from everyone else’s.

‘A stupid treasure, old stones!’ Moira said scornfully.

‘Not as stupid as lipstick!’ Breda said.

Moira blushed. She had had the lipstick from a girl at school, and Mammy did not know about it. Would she ever be allowed to use it, she wondered? Mammy was so old-fashioned. She said little girls did not need such things. But I am twelve, Moira thought rebelliously. I am not a little girl.

It was evening, and the sea rolling in, before they packed up and left for home. Breda had recovered her spirits. She is never down for long, Molly thought as she watched her youngest count her pebbles. I didn’t want another child after Moira, but think what I would have missed!

‘Will Dada be home when we get back?’ Breda asked. Not that she had forgiven him; not quite.

‘No. I told you. Not until the morning.’

‘Then where will he sleep?’

‘Who knows?’ Molly said. ‘There is no money for beds. They will sleep rough, I expect. In a field, or under a hedge. It was one of the reasons he could not take you.’

‘I would sleep in a field,’ Breda said. ‘I would so!’

‘Not if I could help it,’ Molly said.

For a little while after they reached home they played in the street, Breda and Moira with a skipping rope, the twins kicking a ball. It was still daylight, though looking towards the sea there were bands of red and gold across the sky.

Presently Molly called them in to prepare them for bed; Breda first, because she was the youngest.

She lay alone in the bed, savouring the space that was hers until Moira came. She could have fallen asleep at once, but there was no way she would allow herself to do that because she enjoyed watching Moira's nightly ritual: the brushing of her hair before tightly braiding it so that it would have some semblance of waviness in the morning; the massaging into her near-perfect skin of the Ponds Cold Cream for which she had saved her pocket money; the anxious search in the small square of mirror she kept in her treasure box for non-existent spots and blackheads. Breda propped herself up on one elbow, enjoying every minute of her sister's *toilette*. But tonight there was a bonus.

From her box, Moira took out the lipstick and applied it carefully to the cupid's bow of her mouth, sighing with approval at her image in the glass.

'You look gorgeous!' Breda said with true admiration. 'But why are you putting lipstick on to go to bed?'

'Because I can't put it on any other time,' Moira said crossly.

'What will Mammy say if she sees it?' Breda asked.

'She'll make me wash it off,' Moira said. 'But she won't see it, because when she comes in I'll hide under the clothes and pretend to be asleep. And if you tell her I'll kill you!'

'I won't tell her,' Breda promised. 'I won't breathe a word.'

'Move over,' Moira said, climbing in. 'You're taking far more than half the bed!'

Breda was asleep before the twins came to bed, and long before Kieran, who was always last. As her eyes closed she thought of the long summer holiday which stretched ahead, and of Dada, who would be home again tomorrow, perhaps with a present.

Molly, coming into the room much later to look at her children, smiled at the sight of Moira's red lips, pulled the

covers over Breda, looked with satisfaction at her three sleeping sons. Here were her jewels.

She wished James was home. She hated going to bed without him.

Two

Four days a week Molly went up to the Big House to give a hand with the cleaning. It was always known as the Big House, though by rights it was Adare House. From leaving school at fourteen she had worked there full time, but when she had met James O'Connor in the autumn of 1920, and married him by Christmas, he would have none of that.

'Am I not able to keep a wife?' he'd demanded. 'Is that it?'

'Tis just that it would help until the children come,' she had said, blushing at the thought. 'Help us to get set up.'

'I will not have it.' James had been adamant. 'Ours will be a proper marriage; me supporting you, you looking after me.'

In fact, the children had come quickly. Kathleen had been born nine months to Saint Stephen's Day, and although Mrs Adare, not wishing to lose a good worker, had said that Molly might bring the baby with her, James had remained obstinate.

Well, she thought, climbing the hill to the Big House now, hadn't seventeen years and seven children changed *those* fine ideas? And wasn't the money, though only five shillings a week, the greatest blessing? She did not know how she would manage without it. The fact was that James, faced with a hungry brood, had either come to terms with his objections or, for a long time now, had kept quiet about them.

What would be the outcome today, she wondered? Would he come home with his empty pockets turned inside out, or would there be a bit of money in them? Not much, she reckoned. James's gambling was small-time; had to be because he didn't have much to wager, and she was glad about that.