

Prologue

2007

At exactly 6:16 on a Friday morning the front attendant at Champion Parking Garage looked up from the nine-inch monitor of his television screen and watched Michael Ward steer his car onto the lot of the construction site at the corner of Thirtieth Street and Tenth Avenue. This one is always first, the attendant thought as he strolled over to stand under the fluorescent light at the garage entrance. When Michael looked over at him, the attendant nodded. Michael raised his arm and nodded back. It was getting close to a shift change for the sandhogs, and as he did every morning of the five weeks the attendant had been working at Champion, he watched the cars arrive in the hope that there would be too many and some would be forced to come over and park with him.

If there was nothing good on television, the attendant sat, peered out across the faint dawn light, counted the sandhogs' cars as they parked and then the men inside them as they got out, stretched, disappeared behind the sixteen-foot aluminum fence that marked the boundary of the site. The guys who shuffled and reshuffled the cars downstairs had told him that the sandhogs had been working across the street for years now, but from where he sat there was no sign of what they could possibly be building. As he watched Michael attach the club to the steering wheel of his little red Corolla and then circle the car to make sure the doors were locked tight, he remembered Mr Zan from the business office telling him that they were digging, not building. They were digging down, down, down below the city, below the subway tunnels, below the riverbed all the way over on the East Side, below Roosevelt Island, below Queens. 'Take the highest building you've seen since you came to America,' Mr Zan had said. 'Now pretend it stretches down instead of up. That's how deep they

dig.’ When the attendant asked why, Mr Zan shrugged, threw up his hands. Who knew? In America they dig just to keep busy.

The sun, risen now for twenty minutes, had not yet reached its arms across the city to the westernmost stretch of Thirtieth Street. Michael Ward angled his wrist to catch the dim light and narrowed his eyes to read his watch. He had forgotten something, he felt sure of it, but he couldn’t remember what it could be. It was a feeling that kept stopping him lately, like a tiny, nagging hair that kept brushing his skin but he couldn’t find. He stood in the middle of the parking lot, hoping it would come to him, and then, after ten seconds of stretching his mind back to earlier that morning, to Greta in the kitchen, to the lonesome curves of the Palisades before rush hour, he abruptly wondered why he’d stopped walking. He looked down to find his lunch hanging from his fist in a plastic Pathmark bag – one roast beef sandwich, one Granny Smith apple, one banana, two slices of brown bread, one can of ginger ale, two bottles of water. As usual, Greta had wrapped everything neatly, even the soda can, which she’d covered in two layers of tinfoil. ‘Keeps it cold,’ she said almost every morning when she showed him what she’d packed. She’d learned the trick back in 1969, the year their oldest daughter, Julia, started kindergarten. Julia had come home one afternoon and told Greta what she’d seen in the other lunch boxes, and Greta had been wrapping soda cans in tinfoil ever since. After thirty-seven years working underground, Michael didn’t have the heart to tell her that down in the tunnel it wouldn’t get a chance to get warm, foil or no foil.

Everything else he would need for his shift was in his locker. The code to his lock was written on a small piece of paper in his wallet – Greta’s idea, and a good one. He’d had to go to that piece of paper quite a few times in the past months. Recently he’d forgotten that the code was in his wallet and had had to use a sledgehammer to break the lock. The guys on his shift had joked that he’d need another reminder – on the back of his hand or pinned to the steering wheel of his car – to remind him where the reminder was. Standing motionless in the half-empty lot, he recited the numbers quickly: 26 right, 3 left, 9 right. But the nagging feeling was still there, as if someone had stolen part of his morning and he couldn’t figure out which part was missing.

A low-grade buzz still sounded in his ear from the blast of the day before, and he cupped his hand over the side of his head as he started walking again. He pressed hard with his palm and tried to suction the noise away. When this failed, as it had failed fifty times already that morning, he jammed his index finger into his ear as far as he could, hoping to steady the vibration. With his finger working its way deeper, he glanced over at the hoghouse, which was lit up on the outside by a tripod of industrial floodlights. It reminded him of a school play he'd seen once. Which of the kids was performing? He couldn't remember. He couldn't remember the story either, but there was a handsome American barn painted red with pure white along the eaves, and that barn was in the background of every scene, lit up like Christmas by the lights at the foot of the stage.

'You might be sad,' Greta had said after dinner the day before. 'Last days can be sad, you know.' He'd laughed, nearly had to spit his tea back into his mug. Then that morning she'd all but asked if there would be a farewell party. The things she came out with sometimes. And yet, once he'd navigated the car through the local roads of Recess and finally hit the Palisades, he couldn't get the possibility out of his mind. Not a cake or balloons or that kind of thing, but something. Not many had lasted as long as he had. As he did every morning – winter, spring, summer, and fall – he'd rolled down the car windows to breathe in the Hudson as it flowed south to meet the Atlantic. He'd seen a lot of rivers in his life, but this one was mighty. Broad, solemn, abused, the Hudson was a special case. In the years when he'd worked the overnight shift, he would insist to anyone who challenged him that it was the Hudson that carried him home each morning. When his eyelids refused to stay open and the dust that rimmed them burned as he blinked it away, he would position his hands on the steering wheel, let the speedometer fall to sixty, and follow the sound and smell of the river.

Keeping his focus on the low-slung and windowless building that was not a building, really, but a simple shelter, a runty eyesore stuck in among the brick and brownstone of the much taller buildings that surrounded the site, Michael knew he wouldn't be able to tell if anything was unusual, not from a distance, not with the ringing in his ear.

Still, the hoghouse looked quiet. He laughed, the sound breaking up the steady crunch his new loafers made on the gravel. It was a thing Greta would say: that something looked quiet. Once, at a benefit dance in the Bronx, she'd spotted an American woman they'd both known when they first came to America, a woman they hadn't seen in almost forty years. Greta had rushed up to the woman and said, 'Is that you? Here at the dance?'

The world knew New York as the city that never sleeps, but it seemed to Michael that there was an hour each morning, maybe less than an hour, maybe only fifteen minutes, that were so singularly still and silent that those minutes stretched out until they felt like an hour, when there were no cars on the avenue, no horns, no dog walkers, no one hosing down the sidewalk, no one sweeping, no heels clicking, no brakes squealing, no nine-to-fivers weaving in and out of pedestrian traffic, because there was no pedestrian traffic, not yet. The commuter trains were just beginning to trickle in. He'd passed only a dozen or so cars between the George Washington Bridge and Thirtieth Street, and now, as he continued the walk from his car to the heart of the site, despite the damn ringing in his ear, he would be willing to swear he heard the Hudson lapping up against the pilings two avenues away.

He looked again at the plain off-white structure that housed the lockers, the showers, and a small table they called the breakroom even though it wasn't its own room at all, only a corner inside the larger room. As he got closer, he told himself to smile, to shake a few hands. Not smiling and not shaking hands, instead turning red and nodding, letting them see that he was touched by their gestures, would make him the mickey for the entire shift. After too, at the union picnics and memorial services and all the other occasions that would keep bringing them together. Maybe they'd even had a joke trophy made for him. There were shops that did it. His son, James, had one with a baseball figure on top of a toilet paper roll. Across the gold plate it said FOR ONE POOPER OF A SEASON.

Now, as he went for the knob of the hoghouse door, he agreed with Greta: a cake wouldn't be unheard of. Who else had been working as a sandhog since the very first day the water tunnel project

began? Even when the construction contract passed from company to company and the work site moved from borough to borough, Michael moved with it. Who else had lasted thirty-seven years? No one he knew. Twenty, yes. Thirty, sometimes. More than thirty, barely ever. One of the wives might have suggested it, might even have volunteered to pick it up and run it over at the end of the shift. Yes, cake was a possibility, but it was his locker he prepared himself for as he pulled the door wide, and them playing cool until he opened it. One of the young guys had been down in the tunnel with a camera a few weeks back. Maybe they'd had a photograph blown up and framed.

Inside, nothing seemed unusual. The showers were on and the air in the long room was thick with steam and the smell of soap. Half a dozen muck-covered rain slickers hung from the hooks that ran across an entire wall. A row of steel-toed rubber boots, also covered in muck, were lined up underneath. If he'd told them once, he'd told them a million times: rinse your gear before you rinse yourself. It was easier. It was more logical. But no, he thought, day after day they just peel off and head for the showers, and later, when the muck gets on one of their nice clean shirts, they curse like the devil. Then their wives curse them again when they get home. He walked farther into the room and saw two men from the overnight shift sitting at the breakroom table, the television on low. They'd already changed back into civilian clothes, the teeth of their combs visible on their damp hair. In an hour, when they finally reached their homes, they'd strip once more, down to their clean undershirts and shorts, and try to sleep out the day while their wives and children tiptoed around the rest of the house, reminding each other to talk in whispers.

'How's it goin', Ward?' one of them asked. Michael nodded, stood and watched what they were watching for a minute, and then made for his locker. One of them snakes that pops out, he thought. Or something that makes a loud noise. They were always riding him for his hearing.

Finding he needed the reminder after all – damn it altogether, but that was strange, didn't I just now have those numbers in my head? – Michael removed the small piece of paper from his wallet and, after reading it, turned the dial of the combination lock. He fiddled with

the latch for a moment, then lifted the little metal handle and pulled hard so the door wouldn't stick in the bottom corner. There were his boots, his thermal socks, his work jeans, his flannel work shirt, his yellow rain slicker, his hard hat, his flashlight, his fold-up ruler, his nail clipper, all arranged as they'd been arranged in similar lockers all over New York City for the past thirty-seven years. He stared at his things for a moment, then unbuttoned the top two buttons of his blue shirt – a golf shirt, Greta called it, though he'd never picked up a golf club in his life – and pulled it over his head. He unzipped his khaki pants. He slipped off his new loafers. He hung everything but the shoes on two hangers where they'd wait for the next eight hours. Limb by limb he put on his work clothes, rough and stiff from industrial strength detergent and years of fine gray rock dust embedded in the cotton fibers. He pulled on a pair of white kneesocks, then the thick gray thermal socks. May or December, the weather was always the same in the tunnel.

With ten minutes to go, he was at the shift check-in board, flipping the tag under his name so it was red side out. He looked over at the midnight shift board; no red tags meant that they were all up top. All up top meant there hadn't been any problems. There were three others from Michael's shift already in the steel cage, including Ned Powers, a sandhog for twenty-nine years and Michael's closest friend. They waited for him. 'Losing your step, Ward?' Asante, one of the power guys, asked. 'It's your last day so you figure what the hell, they can fire me?'

'Greta was up. Wanted me to take my vitamins. Am I late?'

'Ward, wait just a second,' Powers said as he stepped out of the cage to stop Michael from stepping in, and to the engineer who operated the lift he said, 'Hold it a minute.' He clapped a broad hand on Michael's back and steered him toward the hoghouse.

'What's happening?' Michael asked. It could be now – a party when he least expected it.

Ned pointed down at Michael's feet and then said loudly, so the others could hear, 'I know you said you don't plan to do a lick of work today, Ward, but I don't see why you have to ruin good shoes just to stick it to us.'

Michael looked down and blinked. There were his double-socked feet shoved into his new loafers. One step into the tunnel and he'd be ankle-deep in muck. The two waiting in the cage laughed as Ned said gently, so only Michael could hear, 'Go on, now, Michael. Get your boots. Put those shoes in your locker. Will I go with you? No, you're grand. All the commotion of last day, isn't it? Makes a person lose his head.'

Michael hurried back to his locker and, not wanting to fiddle with the lock again, grabbed a spare pair of boots from storage and left his loafers on a bench. When he finally got back to the cage and the engineer latched the door, the steel platform swayed above the hole for a moment and then with a loud groan began to descend.

The men looked down through the darkness at the murky light more than six hundred feet below. It was a woman's department, Michael decided, goodbyes and gag gifts and that kind of thing. It made sense for nine-to-fivers, office workers, where there were rooms you could have a little party in and desks you could decorate. But in the tunnel? Maybe he'd been watching too much television lately. It was just that one of the Jamaicans had retired in February, twenty-five years in the tunnels, and they'd made a to-do out of it, passing around a card everyone had to sign, chipping in for a gift certificate to a restaurant uptown.

The cage picked up speed. 'One hundred,' Powers shouted. Michael heard Powers say something, saw his lips move, but wouldn't have known what was said if he hadn't taken the same ride five, sometimes six, days a week for almost four decades. Despite the damage to his ears, he could usually tell if someone was shouting at him over the roar of the machinery. Human voices were weak compared with so many other sounds, but often, when someone yelled over the machines, there was something in the pitch, some quality added to the noise that did not quite fit, and that made him look up. Other men had made the same discovery, and no one could explain it. Down below, when the machines were off, the men's shouts ricocheted inside the tunnel, hitting the dead end and bouncing right back like a rubber ball thrown hard against a wall. When the machines were on – the shaker, the mole, the muck train, the conveyer belts, the pumps, the fans – they

filled the tunnel with sound in a way that felt almost physical, and was physical, actually, when the ground began to tremble.

‘Two hundred,’ Powers called after another thirty seconds. What little daylight had begun to creep in at street level disappeared entirely. At four hundred feet the dim light at the bottom of the hole became brighter, though it remained hazy, as if Michael were looking at it through the oily gauze left on his car windshield after a rainy commute, truck after truck kicking up grit and greasy puddles from the road. At five hundred fifty they were nearly there. At six hundred twenty-five feet the cage came to a stop. As always, the journey had taken just over three minutes. The exposed bedrock wept constantly, big, wet tears that fell in heavy drops or streamed down the rock face in rivers. The air was dense with moisture and dust. The thermometer read fifty-five degrees. The men stepped out of the cage and walked the last twenty feet down the wet aluminum staircase, single file, each making sure to hold tight to the railing.

The week before, Michael heard the walking boss yelling at one of the new guys that only a fucking moron would walk across the bottom of the shaft – hard hat or no hard hat. It took years for the new guys to be as careful as they had to be, and it usually took a tragedy to make them cautious. Once, in 1988, a man on Michael’s shift was passing across the bottom of the shaft with his hard hat tucked under his arm when a socket wrench fell from six hundred feet above and cracked his skull as neatly as if someone had gotten him from behind with a cleaver. Every year on the job brought a new tragedy. And then, only a few months ago, there were the stories out of West Virginia, newspapers left open in the breakroom, articles tacked up to the board, novenas said before each shift for nine consecutive shifts, men who hadn’t set foot inside a church since they were children, who’d never been south of New Jersey, bowing their heads, clasping their hands, asking God to save the coal miners, to protect them and their families, just as they felt sure those men in West Virginia would ask God to protect New York’s sandhogs if the tables were turned.

The men left their plastic lunch bags and mini-coolers on the damp and mold-freckled picnic table that had been lowered into the hole six years before. They boarded the mining train – a single car, no doors,

no roof, like a ride you might see in the littlest kids' part of an amusement park – that would take them to the dead end two miles away. As Michael took his seat, he reminded himself that it was his last trip to the end of the tunnel. It didn't feel like his last time; it felt like every other time, no better, no worse. As the train began to move, he saw that someone had used the chalk meant to mark drilling points to draw a huge yellow sun on a dry section of the rock face. Drawing on the rock was common, and if you picked a good spot it might last for days before being erased by the constant dripping and the wet air. Farther down the tunnel were more drawings: a shamrock, the flag of the Dominican Republic, a series of stick figures. Strung along the mesh wire that covered the sides of the tunnel was the occasional lightbulb. As one bulb flickered and then went out, Michael thought about his first day, and how he thought he'd last just a few weeks. The job was in the Bronx then, in Woodlawn. It was good money, he and Greta kept reminding each other at the time, but the money meant far less when he went down the shaft for the first time and realized he'd have to arrive in the dark, work in the dark, eat in the dark, finish his day in the dark, drive home in the dark. And when he arrived home he was too tired for supper, too tired to talk, too tired to touch Greta for weeks at a time or even to sense her body curled up against him all night long until the alarm went off again and he discovered her behind him, the small spoon holding the big.

Throughout his shift, Michael kept searching for some part of his day to feel different, kept waiting for a feeling to come over him as it had some others who were surprised to find themselves torn about leaving. As always, the mud below sucked him deeper while the mud above kept dripping until it ran down the sides of his hard hat, down his cheeks, his neck, under the collar of his shirt. What was there to miss? Not the muck, these men insisted, not the work, but the strange life lived so many stories under the sidewalk, too deep and dark even for the city's rats. For a lot of men, it didn't hit them until the very end that the job they'd done for so long was actually important. They were the men who were building the new water tunnel – number 3. Tunnels 1 and 2 – dilapidated, vulnerable – were built more than a century earlier and could fail at any moment. They were already

leaking, crumbling, propped up and patched so crudely that Michael couldn't see how a disaster had not already happened. Failure of the first two tunnels before number 3 was complete meant that there would be no water for eight million New Yorkers. No water to drink, to bathe, to boil for tea, to put out fires, nothing. 'Any moment' was the phrase that had been used for decades to describe the impending disaster. These men were so busy scrubbing behind their ears, cleaning their fingernails, washing the filth off their skin so as not to be embarrassed when they re-entered the world at sidewalk level that they never took the time to stop and think: this project is crucial to this city's survival, and I am a part of it. Michael wasn't one of these men. He'd known all along how critical the new water tunnel was and how that need was, in a way, the city's biggest secret.

By the time Michael took the train back to the picnic table and ate his lunch, listened to the usual arguments about whether it was better to work fast or work slow, about which shift did the least work, about how many of them probably had silicosis, about whether or not there would be a strike, he decided he just wasn't the sort of person who got affected by things like leaving. After lunch, he and Powers had to weld five large pieces of rustproof sheeting together. It was a difficult task because of the position of the sheets – mostly overhead – and because the seams had to be absolutely perfect or they would leak. As they worked the blowtorches back and forth across the edges of the metal squares, applying constant temperature and speed, the sparks rained down around them like fireflies flaring, disappearing, flecks of light erupting in an arc over Michael's head, over Powers's head, and landing somewhere behind them. Taken together in the otherwise dark tunnel, the storm of light and the blue glow of the torches' flames seemed like a celebration.

It didn't hit him that he wouldn't be back, didn't honestly become a circumstance he felt for certain, until the very end of his shift when he took his turn on the buster. The muck train went out with the bulk of the rocks, but the men had to use the buster to break the bigger rocks into smaller pieces before loading them onto the conveyor belt that would bring them up to street level. Michael sighed as he approached the buster, bigger than the jackhammers used at street

level. He braced himself for the noise, as loud as dynamite explosions even through his earplugs and his one buzzing ear, and he was surprised all over again at just how loud it could get. And then there was the actual shaking, the lights trembling against the tunnel wall, his joints, his neck, the disks of his spine, his brain vibrating inside his skull. Fuck this, Michael thought. I should get them the cake, not the other way around. I should get the lady in the store to write on it FOR THE GUYS WHO HAVE TWENTY YEARS TO GO.

At 3:00 P.M., as the rest of the men made their way to street level and a hot shower, the walking boss kept Michael back. 'It'll be impossible to replace you,' the boss said, and shook Michael's hand until Michael felt he could be back on the buster. Behind him, he could hear the cage begin the ascent to the street, and he knew it would be at least fifteen minutes before it returned. By the time he finally got to the hoghhouse, rinsed off his slicker and boots, rolled up his muddied clothes, put them in a black plastic bag, retrieved his loafers from the storage room and took a shower, only Powers was around. Michael tried not to be disappointed, but he couldn't help but think they'd all left unusually fast.

'Will we go for a pint?' Powers asked. Powers was two years younger than Michael, and was the only person, aside from Greta, Michael had known since he first came to New York. They never went for pints after work. They were tired. They were hungry. Greta expected Michael home. He and Powers saw each other often enough outside of work. Powers, who was from Mayo, was first drawn to Michael because he heard he was from Galway. When they first met, Powers had asked Michael what town he was from, what village. He knew every village in Connaught, he claimed, or at least the ones worth mentioning.

'We moved a lot,' Michael had explained. 'But I liked Greta's place. If I could pick a place to be from, I'd pick there.'

'Moved a lot,' Powers had repeated, drawing his eyebrows together. The year was 1963, they were both working as furniture movers, and Michael had not yet considered how he'd answer the question from other Irish. Ned looked at his new acquaintance for so long that Michael scolded himself for not taking Greta's advice, for not just making up a place and sticking to it. And then Powers had nodded, a single, conclusive dip of the head and thrust of the chin, putting an

end to some dialogue he was having inside his own head. ‘*An Lucht Siúil?*’ Powers had asked.

The walking people. Travellers. Wanderers. Tinkers. Thieves. *An Lucht Siúil* was a country person’s way of putting it. They were all walking people now, Michael had considered pointing out. They were all travellers. Instead, he crossed his arms and waited for whatever Ned would say next.

‘I understand completely,’ Ned said finally. And then: ‘We’re all Americans now anyhow, isn’t it true?’

Now, decades later, Ned waited for Michael to make a decision about going for a pint. ‘*An Lucht Siúil,*’ Michael said out loud, shaping the sounds to fit the old language. Michael had been thinking of home a lot lately, and now, remembering the Irish for what he once was, his thoughts tripped away once more. Greta said he’d been talking about ponies in his sleep, but Michael knew he’d been awake on the night she referred to. Daydreaming at night, he guessed, though he couldn’t remember ever dreaming so vividly. He’d been instructing Greta to pull out the pony’s wisdom teeth so she could be sold as a two-year-old, and he only realized how little sense he was making when Greta said, ‘Wake up, Michael. You haven’t any ponies in America. Wake up.’ He’d lifted himself on his right elbow to look at her, and she’d lifted herself on her left to look right back. They’d been through every phase of their lives together, and that night, for the first time, it felt as if change was in the air again. Greta could feel it too. He could tell by the way she watched his mouth and waited for him to speak. She seemed different to him that night, apart from him in a way he’d never felt before, and he felt a chill run through him that he couldn’t understand. Greta, who he’d known since childhood. Greta, the girl who’d seemed so hopeless back then and who never would have believed herself capable of making the life she ended up with.

‘I met you fifty-one years ago,’ he had pointed out after doing the calculation in his head.

‘Lord,’ Greta had said, finally turning her eyes away from his face and letting her head fall back on the pillow. ‘Don’t tell me you’re getting sentimental.’

‘A quick one,’ Ned Powers urged his friend now, and Michael was

pulled back to the present, to the city, to the construction yard that was busy with the arrival of the afternoon shift. 'For myself, really, or else I'll have the guilts all summer that we didn't make a fuss over you.'

Michael smiled. 'Do I seem like the fuss type to you?'

'Well, you never know now, Ward. You just never know. Come on, you'll be bored silly in a week's time.'

So they went up the street to The Banner – south for three blocks along Tenth and then a left onto Twenty-seventh – and had exactly one pint. When they finished, the froth still sliding down to the bottom of their empty glasses, they stood, lifted their chins in the bartender's direction, and walked back to the lot at the site. They shook hands, and at four-thirty in the afternoon they said good night.

PART I
1956—1957

One

At home in Ballyroan, in the single-story cottage that stood beside the sea, in the bed she shared with her older sister, eight-year-old Greta Cahill woke before dawn to a sound that was not the ocean, was not the animals bawling into the wind, was not a slammed gate, a clanging cowbell, or the rain beating on the gable. The sound was different, it was a first, and to hear it better Greta pushed the layers of blankets away from her shoulders and sat up.

‘You’re letting in the cold,’ Johanna said into the dark without whispering, and tugged at the blankets Greta had pushed away. As they struggled, a faint whiff of salmon stopped Greta’s hands. She had forgotten that part of last night’s catch was lined up on a shallow tray and resting in the emptied top drawer of the dresser she and Johanna shared. Greta pictured the six flat bodies in a neat row – tails to the back, heads to the front, all split along the backbone and buried in salt. The smell was barely noticeable so far, but Greta knew that in a few more hours the delicate tang of the drying fish would be like an itch inside her nose that could not be scratched. The salt would pull the water from the salmon’s river-logged bodies, and it would be Johanna’s job to drain the brine with Greta looking on and their mother standing behind saying, ‘Are you watching, Greta? Are you seeing how your sister does it?’

‘Christ,’ Johanna said, and pressed her face to her pillow. Greta knew what her sister was thinking. Last night, late, after listening to the usual activity at the back door and then in the kitchen, and after following the tsk-tsk of their mother’s slippers as she scurried around the cottage to the other hiding places, Johanna had sat up in bed just as Lily opened their door and said she’d not have any fish in her room, thank you very much.

Holding the tray flat so the salt wouldn’t spill, Lily had set the lantern on the floor, placed the tray in the drawer, and reached over to give Johanna a lug. Smart, fast, her hand fell from the dark space above

their bed and caught Johanna square on the cheek. There were salmon in drawers all over the cottage and in the highest cabinet of the press in the hall.

Now Johanna flipped over to her back as Greta worked to identify the sound that had woken her. 'There was blood left last time,' Johanna said. 'She says they're all cleaned, but –'

Greta put her hand over Johanna's mouth and held a finger in the air. 'Listen,' she said. Then Johanna heard it too. Greta could tell by the way her sister's back went rigid and her head lifted from the pillow.

'What is it?' Johanna asked. 'A horse and cart,' she answered herself a second later, and jumped out of bed to go to the window. 'Coming fast.' It was bouncing violently on the stones and dips in the road, the wood of the cart splintering as it slammed against the iron hitch. For a half second here and there the world went silent, and Greta cringed in expectation of the airborne cart landing with a clatter. The racket grew louder as it came closer, rolling toward their cottage like thunder, like a stampede. The bedroom window didn't face the road, but Johanna stayed there, hopping from foot to foot on the wood planks of the floor as she peered through the gray-green light. Just as Greta was about to shout for their mother, they heard the crash, an explosion of wood coming to a sudden halt against stone and hard ground, followed by the everyday sound of a horse galloping away.

'Tom,' Greta heard Lily say on the other side of the wall. 'Get up.'

Johanna opened the door of their bedroom and the cold of the hall swept into the room just as cruelly as if they'd stepped directly outside.

'You stay where you are,' Big Tom said when he emerged from his bedroom and saw Johanna. 'Don't make me say it twice.' He walked over to her, looked over her head to Greta, who was still in bed, and then to every corner of the room. 'And keep that drawer well closed.'

'It's something to do with the salmon,' Johanna said when he left, still hopping from foot to foot. Greta didn't understand about the salmon, so she didn't answer. She suspected that Johanna didn't understand either but liked to pretend that she did.

In another minute Lily came out, tying the belt of her long cardigan, and told Johanna to either get back under the covers or get dressed. 'You too,' she said to Greta. She lit the paraffin lamp in the hall, twisting the

knob to raise the wick and make the yellow flame higher. The boys – Jack, Little Tom, and Padraic – were already outside with Big Tom; Greta could hear the low hum of their voices traveling on the heavy air of dawn. As her much older brothers, they existed for Greta as a unit, all roughly the same age – twenty, nineteen, eighteen – all tall, black hair, black stubble on their cheeks by the end of each day. The only thing that kept them from being three identical spokes on the same wheel was Little Tom, who was born with his top lip attached to the bottom of his nose and something wrong with the inside of his mouth.

Greta squinted to find Johanna. ‘What’s happening? Did Mammy go out too?’ She felt for the lump of wool stockings she’d tied and left beside her bed the night before, and then for the navy cardigan that hung alongside Johanna’s at the back of the door. ‘Johanna?’ she said, turning around and stretching her neck toward the shadowed corners of the room. ‘Are you there?’ She felt a draft from the front door opening and closing, and she heard the other doors in the cottage shaking in their frames.

‘Well, look it –’ Big Tom shouted from outside a moment later. His voice was big, full of tobacco, turf smoke, and crushed seashells whipped up by the wind. ‘Get inside, girl. Lily! Get this child inside!’ Lily had just plunged her hands into the water pail in the kitchen when she heard him and rushed out of the house to catch Johanna, who’d taken off in a run across the yard to the field, where a woman’s body lay in the grass.

‘It’s the tinker from yesterday,’ Johanna shouted as Lily hooked her around the waist and pulled her back toward the house. ‘Greta, remember your tinker from yesterday?’ Johanna kicked as she was pulled. She put both heels into the dirt and drew tracks.

Greta stood framed in the open cottage door, pulling the sleeves of her cardigan over her hands. It was the kind of day that wouldn’t get any brighter, gray upon gray in every direction. She could feel the dampness on her skin, weighing down her clothes and making her shiver. She put her knuckle in her mouth and began to suck.

‘Greta?’ Lily said. ‘Come in now, will you? Like a good girl? Like two good girls, you’ll both wait by the fire.’ Lily blessed herself. ‘Lord to mercy on the poor woman.’

‘It’s an awful day to be dead in a field, isn’t it, Mammy?’ Johanna said, her breath ragged, the heat of her body coming through her sweater, cutting through the cold and the damp so that Greta could feel it as her sister brushed past, flicking her hair this way and that as she looked back and forth between her mother and the field, where Big Tom had gone down on one knee to lift the woman into his arms.

‘I’d say so, love,’ Lily sighed. ‘Greta, take them fingers out of your mouth.’

Ballyroan sat at the very western edge of Ireland. Once, when the book man came to the Cahills’ door selling volumes on all subjects, he’d taken Greta on his knee and told her to find her village on the map he unfolded and unfolded until it was the width of their kitchen table. When she couldn’t do that, he told her to find Connemara. When she couldn’t do that either, he used his finger to find Galway for her and covered the whole west of Ireland in the process. She was surprised to learn that at the end of all that ocean that began at the end of their lane was a piece of land a hundred times the size of Ireland, and that someone over there might be standing at the end of her own lane and looking back toward her.

At the start of the Second World War, the village of Ballyroan consisted of seven families, which came to just over fifty people spread over one square mile. Conch, the closest town, was four miles inland and not a single person lived on the bogland or in the fields that stretched between Conch and Ballyroan, leaving those seven families alone, except when the children went to school or the people from town rode their bicycles out to swim in the sea or for some other equally isolated purpose. Big Tom often said that living in Ballyroan was like living on an island, except better. In every direction was water, but unlike the islands that sat out in the ocean like the backs of whales, Ballyroan had a freshwater river running through it. Not a stream, mind you, but a river. Fast, deep, full to the brim with fish if you knew the right places to look. It was because of the river that the Cahills never had to leave. Not when the Normans came, not when Grainne O’Malley ruled the clans and the seas, not even during the potato blight when the people either fled or turned into shadows.

‘Because of this,’ Big Tom always said at the end of this familiar speech, and held up his fishing net.

‘Put that away, you fool,’ Lily said when she saw him at it. Sometimes she would grab it out of his hands, gather it up in her arms until it was as small as she could make it, and carry it out of the kitchen to a hiding place only she and Big Tom knew.

But by 1956, despite centuries of gathering seaweed from the high sea ledges, drying it, giving it to the children to chew or keep for the flower beds, despite generation after generation of the same families driving cattle, footing turf, churning butter, bleeding the fall pig from the ceiling rafter of a dark back room before covering him with salt the size of hailstones and closing him up in his barrel, despite all the narrow headstones sticking out of the fields like milk teeth, five of the seven houses in Ballyroan were abandoned, their windows boarded, their inhabitants gone to England or Australia or Canada or America. Every one of these families said they were certain they’d come back one day, once they had their legs under them, once they’d put aside a little money to bring back home and start again, and when that day came, could they please write the Cahills to take the boards off the windows, light the fire in the kitchen, let the air and sunshine in.

Greta assumed that these families did not have a net like her father did, or they wouldn’t have had to leave. According to the man on the wireless radio, all of Ireland was leaving for England and America, all except the very young and the very old. It seemed a simple thing, a net. Such an ordinary piece of daily life – like a bucket or a spade – and Greta couldn’t see why people wouldn’t just go out and get one.

In the only other house left in Ballyroan lived Mr Grady. Mr Grady’s house stood exactly one mile north of the Cahills, and considered together the two houses were like signposts marking where one entered and exited Ballyroan. Big Tom said that no one ever wrote to Mr Grady, and when Greta asked why, Big Tom said it was because Mr Grady was a miserable son of a bitch. Lily didn’t like Mr Grady spoken ill of in the Cahill house. She said it would bring bad luck. Sometimes she included Mr Grady in the bedtime prayers she said with the girls, and when Big Tom said she should pray for the net

and the salmon as long as she was praying for Mr Grady, she said that would bring bad luck too.

If there were still seven families living in Ballyroan in 1956, the travelers might have decided to keep going to a roadside farther away. They came to Conch at roughly the same time every year, after the Ballinasloe Horse Fair in October, and stayed until the middle of December. Greta and Johanna had seen them there when they went to town for Mass or errands, which they weren't allowed to do alone if the tinkers had set up camp. They had passed the brightly colored barrel-top wagons, their hands clenched firmly in Lily's fists. But by 1956 the travellers had worn out their welcome in Conch. They were run from town, run from the outskirts of town, run up the western road toward the coast, where the townspeople didn't have to pass their damp clothes drying in the bushes, their collection of tinker tools scattered in the grass, their gypsy stews cooked in open view, their made-up language no one could understand. Ballyroan was a compromise that had been reached after name-calling, fist fighting, denial of entrance to pubs and shops, spitting on ancestral gravesites. The travellers were run all the way to the ocean, where that October they lined up their wagons, set up their tents, built their fortresses of plywood, cardboard, scrap metal, and oil-cloth, and lit their fires on that particular high sea ledge for the very first time. It was an easy walk from there to Conch, where they could spend the days going door to door begging or offering their services or stealing, depending on who was describing it.

The morning before the traveling woman landed in the Cahills' field, she'd come to their door and knocked. 'God bless all here,' she'd said when Greta answered. Big Tom said that tinkers were without religion. They only pretended when they came to Catholic homes. They had rosaries in their pockets and the string of the scapular peeking out above their collars just like country people, but it was all a trick where a tinker was concerned. Lily said they were born into their lives the same as anyone, and if Big Tom had been born in a tent by the side of the road he wouldn't know any different either.

'I'd know enough, no matter where I was born, not to go around

begging instead of going out and doing. They'll pull the hay from our haycocks to make their beds, and they'll turn their animals into our fields at night.'

'And what harm?'

'And then after that the whole lot of them will come pleading at the door for the clothes off our backs. What harm? And them with more money than any of us with their goats and donkeys and ponies.'

'I've come across a few good ones, is all I'm saying. There's bad ones and good ones just like country people. You think you're perfect, Tom Cahill? Think of what we sell from this house. That's right. Now think of people who might say we're no better than the tinkers.'

Greta had opened the door for the woman, and though she shouldn't have been surprised – Lily had said they'd start at the two Ballyroan houses before they headed into town – she couldn't remember what she was supposed to do. Lily was in the kitchen with her bucket of heads and tails, her fingers sticky from pressing the salmons' bellies and sweeping aside with her cupped hand all that oozed out, when she saw the woman walking down the coast road toward their cottage. She had immediately started cleaning up and shouted to Greta to open all the windows in the cottage as high as they would go.

'God bless.' Greta echoed the woman's greeting, and opened the door wider.

'Is your mam at home?' the woman asked, taking two small steps into the hallway so that Greta could shut the door. She was about the same age as Lily, Greta guessed, except rougher-looking, lined in the face the way leather gets when it's left outside too long. She was wearing an orange scarf wrapped around her hair and a heavy black shawl over her dress. On her feet were thick wool socks stuck into sandals that had once been white. Lily came out of the kitchen wiping her hands. 'Missus,' the tinker said.

'Greta,' Lily said, 'go make the tea.'

The woman, whose name turned out to be Julia Ward, stayed for almost an hour. Big Tom and the boys were out cutting turf; Johanna had taken the bicycle into town to sell the eggs, deliver the salmon, buy flour, tea, sugar. Julia undid her shawl to reveal a heather gray cardigan unraveling at the cuffs, a navy blue skirt. Over everything she wore an

apron turned backward, so that the pockets were facing inward. The woman reached under the apron and drew out a small bag that glinted in the light of the lamp. The little purse was covered with buttons, brooches, beads from broken necklaces. Julia took out needles, pins, spools of thread, a comb, a smoking pipe, asking as she arranged everything on the table if there was anything Lily needed mended. Lily avoided the question as she cut slices from a loaf of brown bread, the same as she would for a priest or a visitor from town. Greta touched the little purse, ran her hand over the flashes of color that quivered when she moved it. Julia looked at Greta when she touched it, looked from Greta's face to the purse and back, then spoke to Lily.

'If it's not sewing you need I have a husband who does good work with a soldering iron. Will I look in at your kettle or your saucepans?' She looked around the kitchen.

'Drink that down,' Lily said as she walked over to the small table next to the fire. She brought back the bundle she'd wrapped. Half a loaf of bread. Butter coming through the paper. A jam jar filled with flour. She left it next to Julia's cup and saucer.

'The one working in the bog by the low road – is he yours? With the mouth?' Julia asked. 'I've seen it before, and I know there's a way to cut inside his mouth and his nose to make the lip fall down to where it's supposed to be.'

'He has his own way. He does as well as you and I. His two brothers understand him and he's a lovely writer and writes down for us whatever we don't understand.'

'And what about that child?' Julia asked, nodding toward Greta. Greta was listening to their conversation only vaguely as she held her teaspoon in her hand and relished again and again the sound of the purse tapping out a miniature racket on the kitchen table as Julia sifted through it. 'Is she in need of a tonic?' The woman leaned in close to Greta's face. 'She has a kind of a look.'

'Don't mind her,' Lily said, and for a moment both women looked at Greta in silence. 'That's our Greta.'

'Is she – ?' Julia asked, touching the side of her own head.

'She has her own way, like Little Tom has his way. She was nine weeks early when she came.'

‘How many have you in all?’

‘Ten in all. Five alive. So she’s either the youngest of ten or the youngest of five, depending on how you look at it.’

Lily noticed Greta peering over at her, peering with that look she had so often, her features drawn together in a clump at the center of her face, her neck stuck out ahead of the rest of her body. Greta the Goose, the children often called her, and Lily lifted her leg to kick anyone she heard at it, whether that child was a Cahill or not.

‘We love her,’ Lily said, and watched the clump at the center of her youngest child’s face relax into itself again. Large green eyes, freckled nose, round cheeks, and perfect chin. Not as pretty as her sister, but still a good-looking girl when she wasn’t making herself the goose. ‘Greta is my pet. Aren’t you, love?’ Lily said, reaching across the table to take Greta’s hand and kiss it. Greta knew this was her reward for being home when the others were not. As far as she knew, Lily had never called Johanna her pet. She’d never given Johanna a squeeze when no one else was looking and whispered that she was the best girl.

Julia rummaged inside the purse once again and drew out a square piece of paper, which she folded, twisted, and tucked until it became a flower. She put the flower in front of Greta.

As Greta examined the flower, they heard a bicycle coming up the path, a skid of gravel outside the front door. Julia looked quickly at Lily and then pushed her chair back from the table, stood, took the bundle of food Lily had wrapped, and tucked it under her shawl.

‘They wouldn’t give me brown sugar in Finnegan’s,’ Johanna announced as she opened the kitchen door. ‘But I –’

Julia dipped her head in greeting and then moved toward the door.

‘Missus,’ Johanna said, still winded from the bicycle. As she struggled to catch her breath, Lily and Greta both, each in their own way, guessed what she was going to ask. The boys had been up to the sea ledge to size up the tinker camp and report to Big Tom how many were in the group. They’d returned home with a full account: seventeen travellers in all, plus three piebald ponies, four dogs, five goats, two donkeys. Two of the young ones, Padraic mentioned, looked about the same age as Johanna. And then there were babies they hadn’t bothered to count.

‘Are you the mother of the two young ones in the group?’ Johanna finally asked. ‘About my age? A boy and a girl?’

‘Johanna –’ Lily warned.

‘The twins,’ Julia said. She kept her hand on the handle of the door and spoke to Johanna over her shoulder. ‘I didn’t mark the day they came. They’re gone eleven, I’d say.’

‘Twins,’ Johanna said. She nodded and clasped her hands together, as if to agree that this made sense.

‘A tinker for tea!’ Johanna said when the woman had left and she had time to comprehend the empty cups, the crumbs on the plates. Lily went to the back room to continue the work that had been interrupted. Johanna turned to Greta. ‘Were you here talking to her the whole time?’

Greta told her about the purse and all the colors and all the things the woman had offered to do. Mending, soldering, milking, how she had a collection of tonics back at the camp, ways to turn gray hair brown, ways to fix a sore back or a sore leg, even Little Tom’s mouth. She showed her the paper flower.

Johanna had pulled Greta close to hear the news and now leaned away from her, sinking back in her chair as if she’d eaten too much at supper. ‘What do you think they do up there all day and all night? The young ones, I mean.’ Greta could feel her sister’s excitement and knew first in her stomach, then in her throat, then in her mind what was coming next.

‘We have to go there,’ Johanna said.

That night, once they were sure their father and brothers would not be going down to the river with the net, and after they heard the creak of their parents’ bedsprings on the other side of the wall and counted to one hundred, Johanna threw off her blankets and reached for her sweater. She pulled on a pair of kneesocks and stepped into the short lace-up boots that had once been Padraic’s and had been carefully preserved by Lily until Johanna’s feet grew big enough. Greta, who was without shoes or boots at the moment, was next in line to be brought to the shoe shop in Conch. ‘Before winter,’ Lily always said, and at night she would have Greta lie on the floor with her feet on Lily’s lap so Lily could rub them.

‘Either come or go but decide right now,’ Johanna said to Greta as she laced the boots.

‘Doesn’t Pop hate the tinkers?’ Greta asked.

‘He buys buckets off them,’ Johanna said. ‘He says some tinkers make buckets that can last forever. And he bought a horse off one once. But it died the next week. You remember. He said they had it well timed.’

‘But does he like them or does he hate them?’

‘Are you coming or not?’

‘Is there a moon?’

‘There is. A three-quarter one, and it’s a clear night.’

‘But what will you do when you get there? They’ll be asleep in their own beds.’

‘You mean in their tents.’

‘In their beds in their tents.’

‘They mightn’t have beds in the tents.’

‘They must! Straw beds, I mean. What about in the wagon?’

‘They might have beds in the wagon, but only for the old ones. Only one or two could sleep in the wagon. I’d say it’s strictly tents for the young ones.’

Greta sucked her knuckle as Johanna lifted the latch on the window. With one quick heave she shoved it all the way up. She waited a minute to hear if the sound had woken the house; then she put one leg through, straddled the window frame for a moment, and fell onto the grass outside.

‘You almost broke it with your boot,’ Greta whispered with as much ferociousness as she could muster. Then she grabbed her sweater and did the same.

Outside, Greta’s stockings immediately wet with dew, they crept around the back of the cottage and swung wide toward the road. Johanna took the lead, fearless of rabbit holes and the ankle that might break if she stepped in one, while Greta stumbled after with her arms and head held in front of the rest of her body. ‘Come on, you goose,’ Johanna said, mimicking her sister’s style of walking and then shooting ahead.

When they got to the road, the way was easier. Greta could feel the

incline begin under her feet, and her body leaned naturally into it. Up they climbed, keeping the ocean to their left, its roar always mightier from the high sea ledge. Both girls held their hands to their heads to keep their hair from flying in the wind. They walked until the road became flat again and curved slightly away from the ocean. Then they saw it at the same time: the flicker of a campfire in the distance.

‘Listen,’ Greta said. She stopped walking. The sound of a harmonica glided through the dark to where the girls crouched by the side of the road. Then: ‘I have to pee.’

‘So pee,’ Johanna said, and edged forward to get a better view. There were three dark silhouettes sitting by the fire and two smaller silhouettes skipping in circles around them. One of the wagons, its door propped open, was pulled up close to the fire. Johanna whispered that there was an old man sitting on a chair inside.

Greta pulled up her nightdress and tried to pee but found she couldn’t. ‘Let’s go now,’ she said, feeling the urge come back the moment she stood up.

‘Wait. I see the twins. I don’t see your woman from today.’ Johanna was crawling to get closer; Greta hung back and kept her focus on the white of Johanna’s legs. She pushed the overgrowth away from her face and arms. She looked up to find the moon, which was slowly disappearing behind a cloud. She heard the first strains of a fiddle joining the harmonica and wondered if, had they stayed in their beds, the wind would have carried the music all the way down to their bedroom. Then the music stopped.

The young girl who’d been skipping called out something in the tinker language, and the three adults around the campfire stood and peered into the darkness. One, a man about the same age as Big Tom, picked up a plank of wood that was lying on the grass and walked toward them. He lifted it, poised to swing. Kneeling on the wet grass, Greta covered her head with her arms and folded over so that her forehead rested on her knees. She held her breath.

Johanna stepped out into the road as if she were out on her usual midnight stroll. ‘Good evening,’ she said.

The man stared at her, then noted Greta just behind. ‘The two girleens from down below,’ he called to the others.

'Lookin' at what?' the tinker girl asked, running up to the man and standing behind him. The man threw his plank of wood into the grass. Just then the young boy who must have been the girl's twin came up quietly to observe.

'The cat can look at the king,' said Johanna, putting her hands on her hips.

'Johanna!' Greta pleaded as she slowly stood up. She could hear people moving in the long grass, the pop and crack of the fire. Johanna didn't flinch. The wind came up off the water, wrapped her nightdress around her legs, whipped her long hair around her face, and still, she kept her hands on her hips. Greta, expecting more of the Ward clan to materialize out of the darkness with their planks of wood, took her one remaining cool nerve and used it to turn herself around and run back the way she came. She moved as fast as she could, keeping her left hand on the low wall that ran all the way down to the Cahill gate.

She went around to the bedroom window and heaved herself in headfirst, using her hands to walk forward and dragging her legs after her. She pulled off her wet stockings, gave her feet a quick rub with the washcloth, crawled under the covers, and prayed that Johanna had survived. She listened for her parents on the other side of the wall and decided that if Johanna wasn't back in five minutes she would wake them. She counted to herself. She gave Johanna another five minutes.

One whole hour later, Johanna's head and shoulders came through the window. 'Christ, Greta,' she said. 'Thanks a million.'

'Where have you been? You could have been murdered.'

Johanna took two long strides to the edge of the bed. She pulled on the string of her boot and casually loosened the laces. 'I sat by their fire, and then the boy one walked me to the gate. They go back and forth all the time in the dark. You wouldn't believe the places they've been, and some of them younger than us. Dublin, Cork, Manchester, Liverpool. Can you imagine?'

Greta listened as Johanna paused after each place she named to give each city its own particular due. The way she said Manchester was different from the way she said Liverpool, and Greta knew that her sister had already walked down their streets, imagined their people, dipped into their shops, and plucked things from their shelves to have

wrapped and tucked into shopping bags. Johanna hugged her arms around her body as if trying to gather these places closer.

‘Julia – your one from today – must have been somewhere. She was the only one who didn’t show herself.’

‘Good night,’ Greta said, pulling the covers and tucking them under the far side of her body so that Johanna couldn’t pull them away.

‘His name is Michael, by the way. Michael Ward. The one who walked me.’

‘Good for him.’

The next morning, just after cock’s crow, Big Tom carried Julia’s body from the field and brought her to Johanna and Greta’s bed. Greta pressed up against the wall as he passed, and the woman’s shawl brushed Greta’s face. It had the same muscular smell as the animals, and it reminded Greta of how she liked to rest her cheek on the cow’s warm flank when she milked. Lily explained that Johanna and Greta’s bedroom was the only choice, with the three boys crowding the front room, and she couldn’t very well go in Lily and Big Tom’s room with the pile of clothes to be washed in a heap under the window. They couldn’t very well put her on the kitchen table or on the floor of the hall. Greta took the news quietly, not minding the recently dead woman in her bed but feeling like she should mind, or would mind soon. She watched from the hall as Big Tom placed the woman over the covers and held her in a sitting position while Lily wrapped a bandage around her forehead and then a clean cloth over the pillow. They laid her down, and Lily arranged her legs, skirt, apron, shawl, hands. The woman’s hair had come loose, and at first Lily gathered it together and tucked it under her head. Then she fanned it across Greta’s pillow.

‘Look at the length of it,’ Johanna whispered.

‘Don’t talk about the dead,’ Lily warned as she reached forward and put her fingers under the dead woman’s chin and gently pushed her mouth closed. She took her hand away, and the woman’s jaw fell open. Lily reached forward again and, keeping her hand on the woman’s jaw, looked around Greta and Johanna’s room.

‘Bring me something,’ she said to Johanna. ‘Cut off a strip of the flour sack.’

Johanna disappeared and quickly re-emerged with a strip of burlap. She handed it to Lily, and Lily wrapped it around the woman’s face, starting under her chin and tying the strip off with a bow at the top of her head. When Lily took her hand away, the woman’s mouth stayed closed, and Greta, stepping closer to the bed for a better look, thought the woman’s face looked like a package, or like a picture in a frame.

‘Are you sure she’s dead?’ Greta asked. The woman seemed to be peering at them from behind lowered lids, peeking at them in the sly way a person might peek if she were only pretending.

Lily placed her hand over the woman’s eyes. ‘Go bring me two coins from the cup over the fire.’

In the kitchen, after they’d done as much as they could for the woman, Big Tom and the boys prepared to go up to the campsite. Johanna begged to go with them. She whinged, she moaned, she followed Lily around the kitchen. She pleaded with Big Tom; she looked desperately at her brothers, but they shrugged and looked away. She stamped and threatened to follow them. She pulled on Lily’s elbow and promised to do anything in the world Lily wanted if she could only go up to the camp.

‘That’s enough now, Johanna,’ Lily said. The men were putting on their caps. ‘You’ll see them when her people come down. It’s not a day for gawking and asking questions.’

Johanna calmed down. ‘Do you think they’ll all come? Will she be waked here?’

‘They have their own way. We have to see.’

As the men were leaving, Lily walked with them as far as the front gate and told her husband the dead woman’s name. Big Tom looked at his wife as if her knowing the tinker’s name was more surprising than waking up to find a tinker dead in his field. Then they turned right and walked up the wind-battered coast road, four across, up past the high sea ledge, until they came to the camp.

The ground of the camp was strewn with half-burned sticks, bits

of paper, and feathers. In the middle was the dark ring of an extinguished fire. A few feet away was another fire, this one blazing, and next to it a woman bottle-feeding an infant. A man with a sharp red face to clash with his red hair put down the bucket he was making and stepped forward. As the Cahill men stood there looking around, the man recognized them first by their coal black hair, then by their number, four together – three young, one older – and then by the one with his mouth pulled up into his nose. The little imp of a thing from the middle of the night might have made up a story. He hadn't liked the way she cast her eye around the shadows, peeked into the wagons whenever someone went in or out, and now the consequence of his hospitality had come calling.

'I'm looking for the husband of Julia Ward,' Big Tom announced.

'I'm Dermot Ward,' the red man said. They rarely had country people in their camp, so to have four at once, and so soon after the strange midnight visit of the two girls, drew every traveller in the group away from what they were doing. Julia had gone in the late evening of the night before to perform what she called women's work on a woman named Mary. Last name not given. It was the reason they'd left the Ballinasloe fair a day early. Mary had sent word to her sister, who'd married a man whose brother had married a tinker, settled her in a house near Tuam, but could not get her to abandon her tinker ways.

Dermot Ward didn't mention any of this to the four men who entered the camp. He never liked the idea of Julia's women's work when it brought her down certain roads as opposed to others. They had set up lovely in Ballinasloe, showing their beautiful piebalds to the world, visiting everyone they knew and hadn't seen since the last horse fair. There were ponies to be swapped, marriages to be arranged, fabric to be traded for tools, tools traded for swag. Then, out of the blue, Mary's sister's husband's brother's wife had come knocking. Helping conceive a child was one thing, but this – country people didn't know the value of a child, and now their clans were scattering all over the world. Dermot felt that just because Julia knew more about babies than anyone – making them and otherwise – didn't mean she had to go running. Not for money. Not for all the tea in China. Julia saw it differently.