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MARY HOPED that the rotted front tire would not burst. As it was, the tube had a slow puncture, and twice she had to stop and use the pump, maddening, because the pump had no connection and had to be jammed on over the corner of a handkerchief. For as long as she could remember she had been pumping bicycles, carting turf, cleaning outhouses, doing a man's work. Her father and her two brothers worked for the forestry, so that she and her mother had to do all the odd jobs—there were three children to care for, and fowl and pigs and churning. Theirs was a mountain farm in Ireland, and life was hard.

But this cold evening in early November she was free. She rode along the mountain road, between the bare thorn hedges, thinking pleasantly about the party. Although she was seventeen this was her first party. The invitation had come only that morning from Mrs. Rodgers of the Commercial Hotel. The postman brought word that Mrs. Rodgers wanted her down that evening, without fail. At first, her mother did not wish Mary to go, there was too
much to be done, gruel to be made, and one of the twins had an earache, and was likely to cry in the night. Mary slept with the year-old twins, and, sometimes she was afraid that she might lie on them or smother them, the bed was so small. She begged to be let go.

“What use would it be?” her mother said. To her mother all outings were unsettling—they gave you a taste of something you couldn’t have. But finally she weakened, mainly because Mrs. Rodgers, as owner of the Commercial Hotel, was an important woman, and not to be insulted.

“You can go, so long as you’re back in time for the milking in the morning; and mind you don’t lose your head,” her mother warned. Mary was to stay overnight in the village with Mrs. Rodgers. She plaited her hair, and later when she combed it it fell in dark crinkled waves over her shoulders. She was allowed to wear the black lace dress that had come from America years ago and belonged to no one in particular. Her mother had sprinkled her with Holy Water, conveyed her to the top of the lane, and warned her never to touch alcohol.

Mary felt happy as she rode along slowly, avoiding the potholes that were thinly iced over. The frost had never lifted that day. The ground was hard. If it went on like that, the cattle would have to be brought into the shed and given hay.

The road turned and looped and rose; she turned and looped with it, climbing little hills and descending again toward the next hill. At the descent of the Big Hill she got off the bicycle—the brakes were unreliable—and looked back, out of habit, at her own house. It was the only house back there on the mountain, small, whitewashed, with a
few trees around it, and a patch at the back which they called a kitchen garden. There was a rhubarb bed, and shrubs over which they emptied tea leaves, and a stretch of grass where in the summer they had a chicken run, moving it from one patch to the next, every other day. She looked away. She was now free to think of John Roland. He came to their district two years before, riding a motorcycle at a ferocious speed; raising dust on the milk clothes spread on the hedge to dry. He stopped to ask the way. He was staying with Mrs. Rodgers in the Commercial Hotel and had come up to see the lake, which was noted for its colors. It changed color rapidly—it was blue and green and black, all within an hour. At sunset it was often a strange—burgundy, not like a lake at all, but like wine.

"Down there," she said to the stranger, pointing to the lake below, with the small island in the middle of it. He had taken a wrong turning.

Hills and tiny cornfields descended steeply toward the water. The misery of the hills was clear, from all the boulders. The cornfields were turning, it was midsummer; the ditches throbbing with the blood-red of fuchsia; the milk sour five hours after it had been put in the tanker. He said how exotic it was. She had no interest in views herself. She just looked up at the high sky and saw that a hawk had halted in the air above them. It was like a pause in her life, the hawk above them, perfectly still; and just then her mother came out to see who the stranger was. He took off his helmet and said "Hello," very courteously. He introduced himself as John Roland, an English painter, who lived in Italy.
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She did not remember exactly how it happened, but after a while he walked into their kitchen with them and sat down to tea.

Two long years since; but she had never given up hoping—perhaps this evening. The mail-car man said that someone special in the Commercial Hotel expected her. She felt such happiness. She spoke to her bicycle, and it seemed to her that her happiness somehow glowed in the pearliness of the cold sky, in the frosted fields going blue in the dusk, in the cottage windows she passed. Her father and mother were rich and cheerful; the twin had no earache; the kitchen fire did not smoke. Now and then, she smiled at the thought of how she would appear to him—taller and with breasts now, and a dress that could be worn anywhere. She forgot about the rotted tire, got up and cycled.

The five street lights were on when she pedaled into the village. There had been a cattle fair that day, and the main street was covered with dung. The townspeople had their windows protected with wooden half-shutters and makeshift arrangements of planks and barrels. Some were out scrubbing their own piece of footpath with bucket and brush. There were cattle wandering around, mooing, the way cattle do when they are in a strange street, and drunken farmers with sticks were trying to identify their own cattle in dark corners.

Beyond the shop window of the Commercial Hotel, Mary heard loud conversation, and men singing. It was opaque glass so that she could not identify any of them, she could just see their heads moving about, inside. It was
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a shabby hotel; the yellow-washed walls needed a coat of paint, as they hadn’t been done since the time De Valera came to that village during the election campaign five years before. De Valera went upstairs that time, and sat in the parlor and wrote his name with a penny pen in an autograph book, and sympathized with Mrs. Rodgers on the recent death of her husband.

Mary thought of resting her bicycle against the porter barrels under the shop window, and then of climbing the three stone steps that led to the hall door, but suddenly the latch of the shop door clicked and she ran in terror up the alley by the side of the shop, afraid it might be someone who knew her father and would say he saw her going in through the public bar. She wheeled her bicycle into a shed and approached the back door. It was open, but she did not enter without knocking.

Two townsgirls rushed to answer it. One was Doris O’Beirne, the daughter of the harnessmaker. She was the only Doris in the whole village, and she was famous for that, as well as for the fact that one of her eyes was blue and the other a dark brown. She learnt shorthand and typing at the local technical school, and later she meant to be a secretary to some famous man or other in the Government, in Dublin.

"God, I thought it was someone important," she said when she saw Mary standing there, blushing, pretty, and with a bottle of cream in her hand. Another girl! Girls were two a penny in that neighborhood. People said that it had something to do with the lime water that so many girls were born. Girls with pink skins, and matching eyes, and girls like Mary with long, wavy hair and good figures.

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“Come in, or stay out,” said Eithne Duggan, the second girl, to Mary. It was supposed to be a joke but neither of them liked her. They hated mountainy people.

Mary came in carrying the cream, which her mother had sent to Mrs. Rodgers, as a present. She put it on the dresser and took off her coat. The girls nudged each other when they saw her dress. In the kitchen was a smell of cow dung and fried onions.

“Where's Mrs. Rogers?” Mary asked.

“Serving,” Doris said in a saucy voice, as if any fool ought to know. Two old men sat at the table eating.

“I can’t chew, I have no teeth,” said one of the men, to Doris. “'Tis like leather,” he said, holding the plate of burnt steak toward her. He had watery eyes and he blinked childishly. Was it so, Mary wondered, that eyes got paler with age, like bluebells in a jar?

“You're not going to charge me for that,” the old man was saying to Doris. Tea and steak cost five shillings at the Commercial.

"Tis good for you, chewing is," Eithne Duggan said, teasing him.

“I can’t chew with my gums,” he said again, and the two girls began to giggle. The old man looked pleased that he had made them laugh, and he closed his mouth and munched once or twice on a piece of fresh shop bread. Eithne Duggan laughed so much that she had to put a dishcloth between her teeth. Mary took off her coat and went through to the shop.

Mrs. Rodgers came from the counter for a moment to speak to her.

“Mary, I'm glad you came, that pair in there are no use
at all, always giggling. Now first thing we have to do is
to get the parlor upstairs straightened out. Everything has
to come out of it except the piano. We’re going to have
dancing and everything.”

Quickly, Mary realized that she was being given work
to do, and she blushed with shock and disappointment.

“Pitch everything into the back bedroom, the whole
shootin’ lot,” Mrs. Rodgers was saying as Mary thought of
her good lace dress, and of how her mother wouldn’t even
let her wear it to Mass on Sundays.

“And we have to stuff a goose too and get it on,” Mrs.
Rodgers said, and went on to explain that the party was in
honor of the local Customs and Excise Officer who was
retiring because his wife won some money in the Sweep.
Two thousand pounds. His wife lived thirty miles away at
the far side of Limerick and he lodged in the Commercial
Hotel from Monday to Friday, going home for the week-
ends.

“There’s someone here expecting me,” Mary said,
trembling with the pleasure of being about to hear his
name pronounced by someone else. She wondered which
room was his, and if he was likely to be in at that moment.
Already in imagination she had climbed the rickety stairs
and knocked on the door, and heard him move around
inside.

“Expecting you!” Mrs. Rodgers said, and looked puzz-
led for a minute. “Oh, that lad from the slate quarry was
inquiring about you, he said he saw you at a dance once.
He’s as odd as two left shoes.”

“What lad?” Mary said, as she felt the joy leaking out
of her heart.

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“Oh, what’s he mean
to the men with water?”

“Oh, all right, Mary.
Upstairs Don’t get
heavy pieces of wood
across the landing
leam. She was
the other two.
pon purpose: the more
she caught the more
worried she became;
one of the lar
porter boy that
in the morning. To
what not, and
with no hand.
They smelled.

“Hound the wag
the dog and the
iture in the

“Ar
Eithne began.

“Okay,
ment of the-
ink, pin
her head.

She made a
flight to
squeeze in
put on.

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"Oh, what's his name?" Mrs. Rodgers said, and then to the men with empty glasses who were shouting for her. "Oh, all right, I'm coming."

Upstairs Doris and Eithne helped Mary move the heavy pieces of furniture. They dragged the sideboard across the landing and one of the castors tore the linoleum. She was expiring, because she had the heaviest end, the other two being at the same side. She felt that it was on purpose: they ate sweets without offering her one, and she caught them making faces at her dress. The dress worried her too, in case anything should happen to it. If one of the lace threads caught in a splinter of wood, or on a porter barrel, she would have no business going home in the morning. They carried out a varnished bamboo whatnot, a small table, knickknacks, and a chamberpot with no handle which held some withered hydrangeas. They smelt awful.

"How much is the doggie in the window, the one with the waggledy tail?" Doris O'Beirne sang to a white china dog and swore that there wasn't ten pounds' worth of furniture in the whole shibeen.

"Are you leaving your curlers in, Dot, till it starts?" Eithne Duggan asked her friend.

"Oh def.," Doris O'Beirne said. She wore an assortment of curlers—white pipe cleaners, metal clips, and pink, plastic rollers. Eithne had just taken hers out and her hair, dyed blonde, stood out, all frizzed and alarming. She reminded Mary of a moulting hen about to attempt flight. She was, God bless her, an unfortunate girl with a squint, jumbled teeth, and almost no lips; like something put together hurriedly. That was the luck of the draw.
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"Take these," Doris O'Beirne said, handing Mary bunches of yellowed bills crammed on skewers.

Do this! Do that! They ordered her around like a maid. She dusted the piano, top and sides, and the yellow and black keys; then the surround, and the wainscoting. The dust, thick on everything, had settled into a hard film because of the damp in that room. A party! She'd have been as well off at home, at least it was clean dirt attending to calves and pigs and the like.

Doris and Eithne amused themselves, hitting notes on the piano at random and wandering from one mirror to the next. There were two mirrors in the parlor and one side of the folding fire screen was a blotchy mirror too. The other two sides were of water lilies painted on black cloth, but like everything else in the room it was old.

"What's that?" Doris and Eithne asked each other, as they heard a hullabaloo downstairs. They rushed out to see what it was and Mary followed. Over the banisters they saw that a young bullock had got in the hall door and was slithering over the tiled floor, trying to find his way out again.

"Don't excite her, don't excite her, I tell ye," said the old, toothless man to the young boy who tried to drive the black bullock out. Two more boys were having a bet as to whether or not the bullock would do something on the floor when Mrs. Rodgers came out and dropped a glass of porter. The beast backed out the way he'd come, shaking his head from side to side.

Eithne and Doris clasped each other in laughter and then Doris drew back so that none of the boys would see her in her curling pins and call her names. Mary had gone
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back to the room, downcast. Wearily she pushed the chairs back against the wall and swept the linoleumed floor where they were later to dance.

“She’s bawling in there,” Eithne Duggan told her friend Doris. They had locked themselves into the bathroom with a bottle of cider.

“God, she’s a right-looking eejit in the dress,” Doris said. “And the length of it!”

“It’s her mother’s,” Eithne said. She had admired the dress before that, when Doris was out of the room, and had asked Mary where she bought it.

“What’s she crying about?” Doris wondered, aloud.

“She thought some lad would be here. Do you remember that lad stayed here the summer before last and had a motorcycle?”

“He was a Jew,” Doris said. “You could tell by his nose. God, she’d shake him in that dress, he’d think she was a scarecrow.” She squeezed a blackhead on her chin, tightened a curling pin which had come loose and said, “Her hair isn’t natural either, you can see it’s curled.”

“I hate that kind of black hair, it’s like a gypsy’s,” Eithne said, drinking the last of the cider. They hid the bottle under the scoured-bath.

“Have a cachou, take the smell off your breath,” Doris said as she hawed on the bathroom mirror and wondered if she would get off with that fellow O'Toole, from the slate quarry, who was coming to the party.

In the front room Mary polished glasses. Tears ran down her cheeks so she did not put on the light. She foresaw how the party would be; they would all stand around and consume the goose, which was now simmering in the
turf range. The men would be drunk, the girls giggling. Having eaten, they would dance, and sing, and tell ghost stories, and in the morning she would have to get up early and be home in time to milk. She moved toward the dark pane of window with a glass in her hand and looked out at the dirtied streets, remembering how once she had danced with John on the upper road to no music at all, just their hearts beating, and the sound of happiness.

He came into their house for tea that summer’s day and on her father’s suggestion he lodged with them for four days, helping with the hay and oiling all the farm machinery for her father. He understood machinery. He put back doorknobs that had fallen off. Mary made his bed in the daytime and carried up a ewer of water from the rain barrel every evening, so that he could wash. She washed the check shirt he wore, and that day, his bare back peeled in the sun. She put milk on it. It was his last day with them. After supper he proposed giving each of the grown-up children a ride on the motorcycle. Her turn came last, she felt that he had planned it that way, but it may have been that her brothers were more persistent about being first. She would never forget that ride. She warmed from head to foot in wonder and joy. He praised her as a good balancer and at odd moments he took one hand off the handlebar and gave her clasped hands a comforting pat. The sun went down, and the gorse flowers blazed yellow. They did not talk for miles; she had his stomach encased in the delicate and frantic grasp of a girl in love and no matter how far they rode they seemed always to be riding into a golden haze. He saw the lake at its most glorious. They got off at the bridge five miles
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away, and sat on the limestone wall that was cushioned by moss and lichen. She took a tick out of his neck and touched the spot where the tick had drawn one pinprick of blood; it was then they danced. A sound of larks and running water. The hay in the fields was lying green and ungathered, and the air was sweet with the smell of it. They danced.

"Sweet Mary," he said, looking earnestly into her eyes. Her eyes were—a greenish-brown. He confessed that he could not love her, because he already loved his wife and children, and anyhow he said, "You are too young and too innocent."

Next day, as he was leaving, he asked if he might send her something in the post, and it came eleven days later: a black-and-white drawing of her, very like her, except that the girl in the drawing was uglier.

"A fat lot of good, that is," said her mother, who had been expecting a gold bracelet or a brooch. "That wouldn't take you far."

They hung it on a nail in the kitchen for a while and then one day it fell down and someone (probably her mother) used it to sweep dust on to, ever since it was used for that purpose. Mary had wanted to keep it, to put it away in a trunk, but she was ashamed to. They were hard people, and it was only when someone died that they could give in to sentiment or crying.

"Sweet Mary," he had said. He never wrote. Two summers passed, devil's pokers flowered for two seasons, and thistle seed blew in the wind, the trees in the forestry were a foot higher. She had a feeling that he would come back, and a gnawing fear that he might not.

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"OH it ain't gonna rain no more, no more,
it ain't gonna rain no more;
How in the hell can the old folks say
it ain't gonna rain no more."

So sang Brogan, whose party it was, in the upstairs room of the Commercial Hotel. Unbuttoning his brown waistcoat, he sat back and said what a fine spread it was. They had carried the goose up on a platter and it lay in the center of the mahogany table with potato stuffing spilling out of it. There were sausages also and polished glasses rim downward, and plates and forks for everyone.

"A fork supper" was how Mrs. Rodgers described it. She had read about it in the paper; it was all the rage now in posh houses in Dublin, this fork supper where you stood up for your food and ate with a fork only. Mary had brought knives in case anyone got into difficulties.

"'Tis America at home," Hickey said, putting turf on the smoking fire.

The pub door was bolted downstairs, the shutters across, as the eight guests upstairs watched Mrs. Rodgers carve the goose and then tear the loose pieces away with her fingers. Every so often she wiped her fingers on a tea towel.

"Here you are, Mary, give this to Mr. Brogan, as he's the guest of honor." Mr. Brogan got a lot of breast and some crispy skin as well.

"Don't forget the sausages, Mary," Mrs. Rodgers said. Mary had to do everything, pass the food around, serve
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the stuffing, ask people whether they wanted paper plates or china ones. Mrs. Rodgers had bought paper plates, thinking they were sophisticated.

"I could eat a young child," Hickey said.

Mary was surprised that people in towns were so coarse and outspoken. When he squeezed her finger she did not smile at all. She wished that she were at home—she knew what they were doing at home; the boys at their lessons; her mother baking a cake of wholemeal bread, because there was never enough time during the day to bake; her father rolling cigarettes and talking to himself. John had taught him how to roll cigarettes, and every night since he rolled four and smoked four. He was a good man, her father, but dour. In another hour they'd be saying the Rosary in her house and going up to bed: the rhythm of their lives never changed, the fresh bread was always cool by morning.

"Ten o'clock," Doris said, listening to the chimes of the landing clock.

The party began late; the men were late getting back from the dogs in Limerick. They killed a pig on the way in their anxiety to get back quickly. The pig had been wandering around the road and the car came round the corner; it got run over instantly.

"Never heard such a roarin' in all me born days," Hickey said, reaching for a wing of goose, the choicest bit.

"We should have brought it with us," O'Toole said. O'Toole worked in the slate quarry and knew nothing about pigs or farming; he was tall and thin and jagged. He had bright green eyes and a face like a greyhound; his hair was so gold that it looked dyed, but in fact it was
bleached by the weather. No one had offered him any food.

"A nice way to treat a man," he said.

"God bless us, Mary, didn't you give Mr. O'Toole anything to eat yet?" Mrs. Rodgers said as she thumped Mary on the back to hurry her up. Mary brought him a large helping on a paper plate and he thanked her and said that they would dance later. To him she looked far prettier than those good-for-nothing townsgirls—she was tall and thin like himself; she had long black hair that some people might think streelish, but not him, he liked long hair and simple-minded girls; maybe later on he'd get her to go into one of the other rooms where they could do it. She had funny eyes when you looked into them, brown and deep, like a bloody bog hole.

"Have a wish," he said to her as he held the wishbone up. She wished that she were going to America on an airplane and on second thought she wished that she would win a lot of money and could buy her mother and father a house near the main road.

"Is that your brother the Bishop?" Eithne Duggan, who knew well that it was, asked Mrs. Rodgers, concerning the flaccid-faced cleric over the fireplace. Unknown to herself Mary had traced the letter J on the dust of the picture mirror, earlier on, and now they all seemed to be looking at it, knowing how it came to be there.

"That's him, poor Charlie," Mrs. Rodgers said proudly, and was about to elaborate, but Brogan began to sing, unexpectedly.

"Let the man sing, can't you," O'Toole said, hushing two of the girls who were having a joke about the arm-
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chair they shared; the springs were hanging down underneath and the girls said that any minute the whole thing would collapse.

Mary shivered in her lace dress. The air was cold and damp even though Hickey had got up a good fire. There hadn't been a fire in that room since the day De Valera signed the autograph book. Steam issued from everything.

O'Toole asked if any of the ladies would care to sing. There were five ladies in all—Mrs. Rodgers, Mary, Doris, Eithne, and Crystal the local hairdresser, who had a new red rinse in her hair and who insisted that the food was a little heavy for her. The goose was greasy and undercooked, she did not like its raw, pink color. She liked dainty things, little bits of cold chicken breast with sweet pickles. Her real name was Carmel, but when she started up as a hairdresser she changed to Crystal and dyed her brown hair red.

"I bet you can sing," O'Toole said to Mary.

"Where she comes from they can hardly talk," Doris said.

Mary felt the blood rushing to her sallow cheeks. She would not tell them, but her father's name had been in the paper once, because he had seen a pine marten in the forestry plantation; and they ate with a knife and fork at home and had oil cloth on the kitchen table, and kept a tin of coffee in case strangers called. She would not tell them anything. She just hung her head, making clear that she was not about to sing.

In honor of the Bishop, O'Toole put "Far Away in Australia" on the horn gramophone. Mrs. Rodgers had asked for it. The sound issued forth with rasps and scratch-
ings and Brogan said he could do better than that himself.

"Christ, lads, we forgot the soup!" Mrs. Rodgers said suddenly, as she threw down the fork and went toward the door. There had been soup scheduled to begin with.

"I'll help you," Doris O'Beirne said, stirring herself for the first time that night, and they both went down to get the pot of dark giblet soup which had been simmering all that day.

"Now we need two pounds from each of the gents," said O'Toole, taking the opportunity while Mrs. Rodgers was away to mention the delicate matter of money. The men had agreed to pay two pounds each, to cover the cost of the drink; the ladies did not have to pay anything, but were invited so as to lend a pleasant and decorative atmosphere to the party, and, of course, to help.

O'Toole went around with his cap held out, and Brogan said that as it was his party he ought to give a fiver.

"I ought to give a fiver, but I suppose ye wouldn't hear of that," Brogan said, and handed up two pound notes. Hickey paid up too, and O'Toole himself and Long John Salmon—who was silent up to then. O'Toole gave it to Mrs. Rodgers when she returned and told her to clock it up against the damages.

"Sure that's too kind altogether," she said, as she put it behind the stuffed owl on the mantelpiece, under the Bishop's watchful eye.

She served the soup in cups and Mary was asked to pass the cups around. The grease floated like drops of molten gold on the surface of each cup.

"See you later, alligator," Hickey said, as she gave him
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his; then he asked her for a piece of bread because he wasn’t used to soup without bread.

“Tell us, Brogan,” said Hickey to his rich friend, “what’ll you do, now that you’re a rich man?”

“Oh go on, tell us,” said Doris O’Beirne.

“Well,” said Brogan, thinking for a minute, “we’re going to make some changes at home.” None of them had ever visited Brogan’s home because it was situated in Adare, thirty miles away, at the far side of Limerick. None of them had ever seen his wife either, who it seems lived there and kept bees.

“What sort of changes?” someone said.

“We’re going to do up the drawing room, and we’re going to have flower beds,” Brogan told them.

“And what else?” Crystal asked, thinking of all the lovely clothes she could buy with that money, clothes and jewelry.

“Well,” said Brogan, thinking again, “we might even go to Lourdes. I’m not sure yet, it all depends.”

“I’d give my two eyes to go to Lourdes,” Mrs. Rodgers said.

“And you’d get ’em back when you arrived there,” Hickey said, but no one paid any attention to him.

O’Toole filled out four half-tumblers of whisky and then stood back to examine the glasses to see that each one had the same amount. There was always great anxiety among the men, about being fair with drink. Then O’Toole stood bottles of stout in little groups of six and told each man which group was his. The ladies had gin and orange.

“Orange for me,” Mary said, but O’Toole told her not
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to be such a goody, and when her back was turned he put
gin in her orange.

They drank a toast to Brogan.
“To Lourdes,” Mrs. Rogers said.
“To Brogan,” O’Toole said.
“To myself,” Hickey said.
“Mud in your eye,” said Doris O’Beirne, who was
already unsteady from tippling cider.

“Well we’re not sure about Lourdes,” Brogan said.
“But we’ll get the drawing room done up anyhow, and
the flower beds put in.”

“We’ve a drawing room here,” Mrs. Rodgers said, “and
no one ever sets foot in it.”

“Come into the drawing room, Doris,” said O’Toole
to Mary, who was serving the jelly from the big enamel
basin. They’d had no china bowl to put it in. It was red
jelly with whipped egg white in it, but something went
wrong because it hadn’t set properly. She served it in
saucers, and thought to herself what a rough-and-ready
party it was. There wasn’t a proper cloth on the table
either, just a plastic one, and no napkins, and that big
basin with the jelly in it. Maybe people washed in that
basin, downstairs.

“Well, someone tell us a bloomin’ joke,” said Hickey,
who was getting fed up with talk about drawing rooms
and flower beds.

“I’ll tell you a joke,” said Long John Salmon, erupting
out of his silence.

“Good,” said Brogan, as he sipped from his whisky
glass and his stout glass alternately. It was the only way
to drink enjoyably. That was why, in pubs, he was much
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happier if he could buy his own drink and not rely on anyone else's meanness.

"Is it a funny joke?" Hickey asked of Long John Salmon.

"It's about my brother," said Long John Salmon, "my brother Patrick."

"Oh no, don't tell us that old rambling thing again," said Hickey and O'Toole, together.

"Oh let him tell it," said Mrs. Rodgers, who'd never heard the story before.

Long John Salmon began, "I had this brother Patrick and he died; the heart wasn't too good."

"Holy Christ, not this again," said Brogan, recollecting which story it was.

But Long John Salmon went on, undeterred by the abuse from the three men:

"One day I was standing in the shed, about a month after he was buried, and I saw him coming out of the wall, walking across the yard."

"Oh what would you do if you saw a thing like that," Doris said to Eithne.

"Let him tell it," Mrs. Rodgers said. "Go on, Long John."

"Well it was walking toward me, and I said to myself, 'What do I do now?'; 'twas raining heavy, so I said to my brother Patrick, 'Stand in out of the wet or you'll get drenched.'"

"And then?" said one of the girls anxiously.

"He vanished," said Long John Salmon.

"Ah God, let us have a bit of music," said Hickey, who had heard that story nine or ten times. It had neither a
beginning, a middle, or an end. They put a record on, and O'Toole asked Mary to dance. He did a lot of fancy steps and capering; and now and then he let out a mad "Yippee." Brogan and Mrs. Rodgers were dancing too and Crystal said that she'd dance if anyone asked her.

"Come on, knees up, Mother Brown," O'Toole said to Mary, as he jumped around the room, kicking the legs of chairs as he moved. She felt funny: her head was swaying round and round, and in the pit of her stomach there was a nice, ticklish feeling that made her want to lie back and stretch her legs. A new feeling that frightened her.

"Come into the drawing room, Doris," he said, dancing her right out of the room and into the cold passage where he kissed her clumsily.

Inside, Crystal O'Meara had begun to cry. That was how drink affected her; either she cried or talked in a foreign accent and said, "Why am I talking in a foreign accent?" This time she cried.

"Hickey, there is no joy in life," she said at the table with her head laid in her arms and her blouse slipping up out of her skirtband.

"What joy?" said Hickey, who had all the drink he needed, and a pound note which he slipped from behind the owl when no one was looking.

Doris and Eithne sat on either side of Long John Salmon, asking if they could go out next year when the sugar plums were ripe. Long John Salmon lived by himself, way up the country, and he had a big orchard. He was odd and silent in himself; he took a swim every day, winter and summer, in the river, at the back of his house.

"Two old married people," Brogan said, as he put his
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arm round Mrs. Rodgers and urged her to sit down because he was out of breath from dancing. He said he'd go away with happy memories of them all, and sitting down he drew her on to his lap. She was a heavy woman, with straggly brown hair that had once been a nut color.

"There is no joy in life," Crystal sobbed, as the gramophone made crackling noises and Mary ran in from the landing, away from O'Toole.

"I mean business," O'Toole said, and winked.

O'TOOLE was the first to get quarrelsome.

"Now ladies, now gentlemen, a little laughing sketch, are we ready?" he asked.

"Fire ahead," Hickey told him.

"Well, there was these three lads, Paddy th' Irishman, Paddy th' Englishman, and Paddy the Scotsman, and they were badly in need of a . . ."

"Now, no smut," Mrs. Rodgers snapped, before he had uttered a wrong word at all.

"What smut?" said O'Toole, getting offended. "Smut!" And he asked her to explain an accusation like that.

"Think of the girls," Mrs. Rodgers said.

"Girls," O'Toole sneered, as he picked up the bottle of cream—which they'd forgotten to use with the jelly—and poured it into the carcass of the ravaged goose.

"Christ's sake, man," Hickey said, taking the bottle of cream out of O'Toole's hand.

Mrs. Rodgers said that it was high time everyone went to bed, as the party seemed to be over.

The guests would spend the night in the Commercial. It was too late for them to go home anyhow, and also
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Mrs. Rodgers did not want them to be observed staggering out of the house at that hour. The police watched her like hawks and she didn't want any trouble, until Christmas was over at least. The sleeping arrangements had been decided earlier on—there were three bedrooms vacant. One was Brogan's, the room he always slept in. The other three men were to pitch in together in the second big bedroom, and the girls were to share the back room with Mrs. Rodgers herself.

"Come on, everyone, blanket street," Mrs. Rodgers said, as she put a guard in front of the dying fire and took the money from behind the owl.

"Sugar you," O'Toole said, pouring stout now into the carcass of the goose, and Long John Salmon wished that he had never come. He thought of daylight and of his swim in the mountain river at the back of his gray stone house.

"Ablution," he said, aloud, taking pleasure in the word and in thought of the cold water touching him. He could do without people, people were waste. He remembered catkins on a tree outside his window, catkins in February as white as snow; who needed people?

"Crystal, stir yourself," Hickey said, as he put on her shoes and patted the calves of her legs.

Brogan kissed the four girls and saw them across the landing to the bedroom. Mary was glad to escape without O'Toole noticing; he was very obstreperous and Hickey was trying to control him.

In the bedroom she sighed; she had forgotten all about the furniture being pitched in there. Wearily they began to unload the things. The room was so crammed that they
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could hardly move in it. Mary suddenly felt alert and frightened, because O'Toole could be heard yelling and singing out on the landing. There had been gin in her orangeade, she knew now, because she breathed closely onto the palm of her hand and smelled her own breath. She had broken her Confirmation pledge, broken her promise; it would bring her bad luck.

Mrs. Rodgers came in and said that five of them would be too crushed in the bed, so that she herself would sleep on the sofa for one night.

"Two of you at the top and two at the bottom," she said, as she warned them not to break any of the ornaments, and not to stay talking all night.

"Night and God Bless," she said, as she shut the door behind her.

"Nice thing," said Doris O'Beirne, "bungen us all in here; I wonder where she's off to?"

"Will you loan me curlers?" Crystal asked. To Crystal, hair was the most important thing on earth. She would never get married because you couldn't wear curlers in bed then. Eithne Duggan said she wouldn't put curlers in now if she got five million for doing it, she was that jaded. She threw herself down on the quilt and spread her arms out. She was a noisy, sweaty girl but Mary liked her better than the other two.

"Ah me old segotums," O'Toole said, pushing their door in. The girls exclaimed and asked him to go out at once as they were preparing for bed.

"Come into the drawing room, Doris," he said to Mary, and curled his forefinger at her. He was drunk and
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couldn’t focus her properly but he knew that she was standing there somewhere.

"Go to bed, you’re drunk," Doris O’Beirne said, and he stood very upright for an instant and asked her to speak for herself.

"Go to bed, Michael, you’re tired," Mary said to him. She tried to sound calm because he looked so wild.

"Come into the drawing room, I tell you," he said, as he caught her wrist and dragged her toward the door. She let out a cry, and Eithne Duggan said she’d brain him if he didn’t leave the girl alone.

"Give me that flower pot, Doris," Eithne Duggan called, and then Mary began to cry in case there might be a scene. She hated scenes. Once she heard her father and a neighbor having a row about boundary rights and she’d never forgotten it; they both had been a bit drunk, after a fair.

"Are you cracked or are you mad?" O’Toole said when he perceived that she was crying.

"I’ll give you two seconds," Eithne warned, as she held the flower pot high, ready to throw it at O’Toole’s stupefied face.

"You’re a nice bunch of hard-faced aul crows, crows," he said. "Wouldn’t give a man a squeeze," and he went out cursing each one of them. They shut the door very quickly and dragged the sideboard in front of the door so that he could not break in when they were asleep.

They got into bed in their underwear; Mary and Eithne at one end with Crystal’s feet between their faces.

"You have lovely hair," Eithne whispered to Mary. It was the nicest thing she could think of to say. They each
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said their prayers, and shook hands under the covers and settled down to sleep.

"Hey," Doris O'Beirne said a few seconds later, "I never went to the lav."

"You can't go now," Eithne said, "the sideboard's in front of the door."

"I'll die if I don't go," Doris O'Beirne said.

"And me, too, after all that orange we drank," Crystal said. Mary was shocked that they could talk like that. At home you never spoke of such a thing, you just went out behind the hedge and that was that. Once a workman saw her squatting down and from that day she never talked to him, or acknowledged that she knew him.

"Maybe we could use that old pot," Doris O'Beirne said, and Eithne Duggan sat up and said that if anyone used a pot in that room she wasn't going to sleep there.

"We have to use something," Doris said. By now she had got up and had switched on the light. She held the pot up to the naked bulb and saw what looked to be a hole in it.

"Try it," Crystal said, giggling.

They heard feet on the landing and then the sound of choking and coughing, and later O'Toole cursing and swearing and hitting the wall with his fist. Mary curled down under the clothes, thankful for the company of the girls. They stopped talking.

"I was at a party. Now I know what parties are like," Mary said to herself, as she tried to force herself asleep. She heard a sound as of water running, but it did not seem to be raining outside. Later, she dozed, but at daybreak she heard the hall door bang, and she sat up in bed
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abruptly. She had to be home early to milk, so she got up, took her shoes and her lace dress, and let herself out by dragging the sideboard forward, and opening the door slightly.

There were newspapers spread on the landing floor and in the lavatory, and a heavy smell pervaded. Downstairs, porter had flowed out of the bar into the hall. It was probably O'Toole who had turned on the taps of the five porter barrels, and the stone-floored bar and sunken passage outside was swimming with black porter. Mrs. Rodgers would kill somebody. Mary put on her high-heeled shoes and picked her steps carefully across the room to the door. She left without even making a cup of tea.

SHE wheeled her bicycle down the alley and into the street. The front tire was dead flat. She pumped for half an hour but it remained flat.

The frost lay like a spell upon the street, upon the sleeping windows, and the slate roofs of the narrow houses. It had magically made the dugged street white and clean. She did not feel tired, but relieved to be out, and stunned by lack of sleep she inhaled the beauty of the morning. She walked briskly, sometimes looking back to see the track which her bicycle and her feet made on the white road.

Mrs. Rodgers wakened at eight and stumbled out in her big nightgown from Brogan's warm bed. She smelt disaster instantly and hurried downstairs to find the porter in the bar and the hall; then she ran to call the others.

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"Porter all over the place; every drop of drink in the house is on the floor—Mary Mother of God help me in my tribulation! Get up, get up." She rapped on their door and called the girls by name.

The girls rubbed their sleepy eyes, yawned, and sat up.

"She's gone," Eithne said, looking at the place on the pillow where Mary's head had been.

"Oh, a sneaky country one," Doris said, as she got into her taffeta dress and went down to see the flood. "If I have to clean that, in my good clothes, I'll die," she said. But Mrs. Rodgers had already brought brushes and pails and got to work. They opened the door and began to bail the porter into the street. Dogs came to lap it up, and Hickey, who had by then come down, stood and said what a crying shame it was, to waste all that drink. Outside it washed away an area of frost and revealed the dung of yesterday's fair day. O'Toole the culprit had fled since the night; Long John Salmon was gone for his swim, and upstairs in bed Brogan snuggled down for a last-minute heat and deliberated on the joys that he would miss when he left the Commercial for good.

"And where's my lady with the lace dress?" Hickey asked, recalling very little of Mary's face, but distinctly remembering the sleeves of her black dress which dipped into the plates.

"Sneaked off, before we were up," Doris said. They all agreed that Mary was no bloody use and should never have been asked.

"And 'twas she set O'Toole mad, egging him on and then disappointing him," Doris said, and Mrs. Rodgers
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swore that O'Toole, or Mary's father, or someone, would pay dear for the wasted drink.

"I suppose she's home by now," Hickey said, as he rooted in his pocket for a butt. He had a new packet, but if he produced that they'd all be puffing away at his expense.

Mary was half a mile from home, sitting on a bank.

If only I had a sweetheart, something to hold on to, she thought, as she cracked some ice with her high heel and watched the crazy splintered pattern it made. The poor birds could get no food, as the ground was frozen hard. Frost was general all over Ireland; frost like a weird blossom on the branches, on the riverbank from which Long John Salmon leaped in his great, hairy nakedness, on the ploughs left out all winter; frost on the stony fields, and on all the slime and ugliness of the world.

Walking again she wondered if and what she would tell her mother and her brothers about it, and if all parties were as bad. She was at the top of the hill now, and could see her own house, like a little white box at the end of the world, waiting to receive her.