

# *The Old Jest*

**JENNIFER JOHNSTON**

Level 5

Retold by Kieran McGovern Series

Editor: Derek Strange

### ***To the teacher:***

In addition to all the language forms of Levels One to Four, which are used again at this level of the series, the main verb forms and tenses used at Level Five are;

- present simple verbs with future meaning, further continuous forms, further passive forms and conditional clauses (using the 'third' or 'unfulfilled past' conditional)
- modal verbs: *may* (to express permission and make requests), *will have*, *must have* and *can't have* (to express assumptions) and *would rather* (to state preferences).

Specific attention is paid to vocabulary development in the Vocabulary Work exercises at the end of the book. These exercises are aimed at training students to enlarge their vocabulary systematically through intelligent reading and effective use of a dictionary.

### ***To the student:***

Dictionary Words:

- As you read this book, you will find that some words are in darker black ink than the others on the page. Look them up in your dictionary, if you do not already know them, or try to guess the meaning of the words first, and then look them up later, to check.

*1 August 1920*

*An extremely important day.*

*The house sits sideways to the sea and faces south, so all the rooms are filled with sun. The sun is shining everywhere, not just here on the east coast but all over Ireland. I have never been to England, but we read in the newspaper that the sun is shining there too.*

*The morning trains from Dublin are filled with people coming to sit on the beach. They stay near the station and don't interfere with us at all. In the evening they all go back to the city.*

*It is my eighteenth birthday.*

*I feel this to be a very important moment in my life. I have left school, and that part of my life is now over. Today I want to start to become a person. My life is in front of me. It is empty like the pages of this book I am writing in. I want to record what is happening for the future. It is so easy to forget. I have noticed that from watching Aunt Mary and especially Grandfather. But he is extremely old and his mind is not what it was.*

*The war goes on and on. Even in this small village many people have died. Some were killed in France and now others are dying in the fighting here. Barney Carney was shot last week coming out of a dancehall, by the new British soldiers they call the 'Black and Tans'. Terrible things are happening, but at least I am alive.*

*Aunt Mary gave me tennis equipment for my birthday. She would like me to be a social success, but she is prepared for disappointment. Bridie, our servant, is giving me a cake, which I'm not supposed to know about. Grandfather is too old to give presents. I got seven cards from old school friends and a box of chocolates from Jimmy the gardener.*

*I have no parents. This makes other people either sad or slightly*

*embarrassed, but I have never had any, so I am used to the situation. Aunt Mary is both mother and father to me, and I am very happy with this arrangement.*

*There are photographs of my mother all over the house. Like Aunt Mary she always seems to be smiling. I sleep in the same bed that she slept in as a girl. She gave me life eighteen years ago and I killed her. Life is not very fair.*

*There has never been any sign of my father in my life. No one ever mentions his name or tells funny stories about him. His face never appears in any photo. Do I look like him? Is he alive or dead? Good or bad? Sad or happy? No one seems to care. Since I was ten years old I have looked for him. I still stare at strange men sometimes, though I know I shouldn't. I am just curious to know what sort of man could disappear so completely.*

*At least I know where my mother is. She is buried beside our church, on a hill above the village. My uncle Gabriel is there too, beside my mother. Grandfather insisted on bringing back what remained of his body from France. My grandmother is up there too, waiting for Grandfather to Join her.*

'I met Harry in the village,' said Aunt Mary, as she walked with Nancy out into the garden. 'I persuaded him to come for lunch. He's in the kitchen now, telling Bridie.'

'Oh,' was all that Nancy could say.

Dear, dear Harry!

Grandfather sat in his wheelchair under a large black and white umbrella, which protected him from the sun. He was holding a pair of **binoculars**. When he stopped speaking, he raised the binoculars and looked down at the railway line, which ran between the house and the sea. Nothing moved on the line or in the field beside it.

'Did you have a nice sleep, dear?'



*Grandfather sat in his wheelchair under a large black and white umbrella, which protected him from the sun.*

Aunt Mary kissed the top of Grandfather's hat. He did not seem to notice.

'Drinks,' she said, her hand resting for a moment on the old man's shoulder. She turned and went into the house. Nancy sat down next to her grandfather.

'There won't be a train for hours. Grandfather.'

He gave a little knowing laugh. 'I see other things than trains,' he said mysteriously.

From down the hill came the sound of a piano. Nancy could see Maeve sitting with her back to the window of her little house. She was playing Chopin.

Aunt Mary and Harry came out of the house. Harry held a bottle of champagne in one hand.

'I understand that you're having a party,' said Harry. 'Wasn't I lucky to meet Mary in the village?'

Harry opened the champagne as Bridie came out from the kitchen. For a moment they all stood, looking at Nancy. Bridie spoke first.

'God is good.' She drank a whole glass. Everyone laughed.

'Happy birthday, Nancy.' Harry came towards her. She bent her head. 'I shall kiss you.'

She turned her face away and the kiss landed on her hot cheek.

'Your face is very hot,' he said innocently. 'What have you been doing?'

She **blushed** even more and lowered her head towards her glass.

'That's Maeve playing the piano, isn't it?' Harry stood very close to Nancy as he asked this question. The sleeve of his shirt touched her bare arm.

Nancy nodded.

'Wonderful,' said Harry.

Grandfather lifted his binoculars to his eyes. On the railway a single engine moved along the line.

‘That’s interesting.’ For a moment his voice was almost young.

‘What is?’ asked Aunt Mary.

Grandfather let the binoculars fall on to his knees. Then he turned to Aunt Mary.

‘I saw Robert on the railway line this morning.’

The music had stopped and his words seemed very loud.

‘Who is Robert?’ asked Harry, slightly interested.

‘No, Father,’ said Aunt Mary, in an annoyed voice.

‘Or maybe it was yesterday.’

‘That’s impossible.’

‘But it’s true,’ said Grandfather. He lifted his hand and pointed to the railway line.

Aunt Mary said nothing, pretending to be interested in a rose.

‘Who’s Robert?’ Harry sat down beside Nancy on the step. She didn’t answer. ‘Nancy?’

She shook her head. ‘I don’t know.’

Robert Gulliver had been her father’s name.

‘Grandfather’s crazy,’ she whispered.

‘Oh, come on, Nancy . . .’

‘He’s always seeing things. It’s very boring. And he sings all these sad **hymns** about death and . . .’

‘He’s old.’

Aunt Mary came towards them across the grass. She waved her empty glass at them as if she had been away a long time. ‘This is a happy day,’ she said.

She looks tired, thought Nancy, and soon she will be old too.

Putting her glass on the table, Aunt Mary touched Grandfather’s shoulder. ‘Robert is dead,’ she said.

For a moment there was silence. Then Maeve began to play the piano again. A fast song.

‘Lunch is ready,’ Bridie’s voice called out through the window.

From the village to the **point** the beach was about two miles long. The movement of the waves meant that there was never silence, even on the calmest day. No one ever walked as far as the point because, although it was beautiful, it was also very lonely.

The **hut** was about half a mile beyond the point. It was probably built by some railway workers many years before. Square in shape and made out of wood, it was cleverly hidden. Nancy had found it on a wild spring day. For two hours she cleared sand from the door until she was finally able to force it open. When she saw inside, she knew that for all those years the hut had been waiting for her. She pushed the door shut again and climbed up on to the railway line. Now she had a secret. She had always found it very difficult to keep secrets. She would have to be careful.

Over the next few weeks she had cleaned the hut and tried to make it comfortable. She had cleaned the floor with sea water and brought old blankets and cushions to sit on, things to eat, books to read. She had even considered painting the walls, but had decided against it.

No one seemed to notice that she had not been spending her school holidays around the house as she had always done before. Aunt Mary was always busy with her own routines; playing tennis, seeing friends, playing cards^ looking after Grandfather and worrying inside herself. She didn’t have much time to think about what Nancy was doing.

Nancy knew what would happen as soon as lunch was over — even if it was her birthday. Aunt Mary would go to her room and read, the old man would fall asleep, and Harry



would desperately try and think of an excuse to go and visit Maeve.

Nancy quietly left the room while they were having coffee. As she made her way down to the beach, she felt a light wind on her face. Soon the weather would change — perhaps not today, but soon. She could smell the sea as she crossed the field. Reaching the railway, she took off her shoes and climbed on to the line.

‘Robert is dead.’

Aunt Mary’s voice had been neither sad nor happy when she had said those words. Who had Grandfather seen? Who had made him remember?

No one. Probably someone he knew a long time ago. Anyway, he was crazy. Why must he be dead? I don’t see it like that.

When she reached the hut, she went for a swim. The sand was burning hot, but the sea was ice-cold. She lay on her towel afterwards to dry in the sun, and it was almost four o’clock when she remembered Bridie’s birthday cake. She stood up and cleaned the sand from her shoulders and her legs.

Suddenly she felt as if someone was watching her.

‘Hello.’

No one was on the railway line or the beach. No one moved. A drop of rain fell on her cheek.

Swearing to herself, she stared angrily at the sky above her, and went up to the hut. She went in and dressed. Several more drops of rain fell on the roof

She shook the towel outside the door.

‘Hello . . . Hello . . .’

A seagull looked sideways at Nancy. It looked too calm for there to be strangers around. Nancy hung the towel on the back of the door. More rain was falling on the roof and

on the sand. She shut the door carefully, climbed up on to the railway line and ran most of the way home.

They were in the living-room finishing their tea when she arrived. Harry was still there.

‘I’m still here,’ he said rather unnecessarily.

‘We haven’t cut the cake yet. We’ve been waiting for you.’

‘Where did you disappear to?’ asked Harry.

‘She’s always disappearing,’ said Aunt Mary. ‘She lives a secret life. But I never ask. Now let’s all have some cake. You cut it, darling. The birthday girl must cut the cake.’

‘And make a wish,’ said Harry.

Nancy picked up the knife and cut the chocolate cake. I wish . . . wish that he doesn’t want us to visit Maeve.

‘It looks wonderful. Bridie is a great cook. You are lucky to have her, Mary.’

‘Cake, Grandfather?’

He didn’t seem to understand, but Nancy cut him a small piece and gave it to him.

‘It’s my birthday. Remember? Eighteen.’

He looked at her for a moment, trying to remember who she was. ‘Ah!’ he said finally. ‘You’re Helen’s daughter,’ A moment later he said, ‘I never eat cake.’

She left the plate beside him, in case he changed his mind.

‘I . . . er . . . thought . . .’ Harry spoke through a mouthful of cake. ‘. . . thought that we could go and see Maeve. Just for a few minutes.’

Nancy walked over to the window and looked out at the rain. She had wasted her wish. It was always so obvious what he was going to do. Maybe that was why she had such a . . . well ... a loving feeling for him. Because there was nothing about him to be afraid of. He might bore you to death? Not if you loved him.

Aunt Mary began clearing the cups and plates away. As she left the room, Harry went over to Nancy.

‘Shall we go down to Macve’s house?’

‘Now?’

‘Yes . . . ah . . . yes . . . Why not?’

‘It’s raining.’

‘You’re wet already.’

She sighed. ‘Let’s go, then.’

As they stepped out into the garden, the old man’s voice followed them. He was singing another sad hymn.

Nancy rushed Harry down the steps.

‘Nancy . . .’

‘Oh, be quiet, Harry. Don’t worry about everything like Aunt Mary does.’

‘Why does the old man sing like that all the time? All the time you were out, he sang and sang. He didn’t seem to notice he was doing it. That hymn is so sad, too.’

‘Oh, I don’t know. For someone so crazy, he’s good at remembering the words.’

She took his arm and he didn’t try to stop her. He was always very polite about such things.

‘Can I ask you something?’

‘Go on.’

‘Did you enjoy being in the war?’

He stopped walking and stood looking at a yellow rose. He bent a little towards the flower, taking a long time to answer the question.

‘Enjoy . . . that’s an odd word, Nancy . . .’

She waited.

‘Well, I suppose I must admit that I enjoyed moments here and there . . . I suppose I didn’t mind it. What’s the name of that rose?’

‘Were you afraid?’

‘I didn’t really notice.’

‘Afraid of killing someone?’

‘Silly child. It was a war.’

‘Of being killed then?’

‘Not really. Oh, from time to time you felt fear. Not for long, though. I can’t think why you want to know. Most of the time I felt tired. That’s what I remember most. The rose?’ he reminded her.

‘I don’t know. You’ll have to ask Aunt Mary. She knows the names of all the flowers and trees. Did you feel like a hero?’

‘Of course not.’ He laughed. ‘There were some heroes, but I certainly wasn’t one. After all, I come from a family of soldiers, not heroes. Soldiers who are good at their job. I didn’t want to continue after the war, though. I suppose times have changed a bit. I think my parents were a little disappointed when I left. Especially my mother. She always saw me as a future captain. You know mothers.’

‘No,’ said Nancy.

He blushed. ‘Oh, Nancy, I am sorry. What a terrible thing to say. I didn’t mean to . . .’

Nancy took his arm again and they continued walking. The grass was wet from the rain.

‘How about being a **stockbroker**? Do you like that job?’

‘You’re so **immature**, Nancy!’

‘What?’ Her voice was angry.

‘What I mean is . . . when you’re older you won’t ask such stupid questions.’

‘But I want to know. How do you find things out if you don’t ask questions?’

He sighed for her.

‘Nobody tells me anything,’ said Nancy. ‘Nobody ever talks to me. My head is full of questions. Do you really want to be a stockbroker?’

‘People have to do something. You’ll find that out one day. They have to build a career, make money, accept responsibility. You know what I mean. Being a stockbroker is as good a way of making money as any other. Anyway, it’s good being a girl. You just wait f(jr a man to give you everything you need.’

She didn’t reply. They walked in silence until they came to Maeve’s gate.

‘What do you want?’ asked Harry.

‘At this moment ... all I want is to understand.’ She laughed. ‘Now you’ll say that I’m immature again. I can see it in your face.’

‘What do you want to understand?’ He was getting a little bored with the conversation and moved quickly towards Maeve’s house. Maeve was not immature.

‘Everything ... I suppose.’

Taking a cigarette from his pocket, he said, ‘It’s all written down somewhere. When you go to college you can look it all up.’ He took out a large box of matches and lit the cigarette.

‘It isn’t what is written down that worries me.’

‘You could become very boring.’

Blue smoke escaped through his nose. She thought it looked wonderful. They reached the gate and she stopped.

‘I’d like to be safe. Things have always been so safe for me. . .’ She looked at him. He wasn’t listening. ‘Harry, you’re not listening. Do you think I’m pretty?’

‘Oh . . . Nancy ... I was thinking ... of something else.’ He looked her up and down. ‘Not too bad. You’ll improve. You’re still a bit. . .’

‘Immature?’

‘You know what I mean.’

She kicked the door open with her right foot and they

went into Maeve Casey's garden. It was full of flowers and was very tidy and organized. The house was built out of red bricks and was about twenty years old. Windows opened on to the grass. There was a sweet smell of flowers.

'Lovely!' said Harry. He liked things to be tidy. 'Very nice.'

Nancy didn't say anything.

'I sometimes think,' he said in a serious voice, 'that you don't like Maeve.'

'Oh, I do. I do.'

Maeve came out to greet them.

'It's great to see you. I'm all alone. Mummy and Daddy have gone to a dinner or something in Dublin.' Her smile was for both of them, but her eyes remained on Harry's face. 'Harry,' she breathed.

'Well . . . ah . . . yes . . . ah . . . isn't it lucky we came? Isn't it, Nancy?'

'Oh, Nancy.'

'Hello,' said Nancy.

Maeve and Harry smiled at each other. They didn't notice the long silence as their smiling faces moved closer and closer together. Nancy began to feel angry at this tidy house and tidy garden. She looked angrily at her big, untidy feet.

'My feet are still growing,' she said aloud. The smiling stopped.

'Pardon?' asked Maeve.

'Oh, nothing really . . . just my big feet. . . nothing . . .'

'It's her birthday,' explained Harry. 'She's eighteen.'

'How lovely!' said Maeve, smiling now at Nancy. 'You don't look eighteen. Does she Harry? I'd have got you a present if I'd known.' She moved forward and kissed Nancy on the cheek. 'Lovely! No more school. Soon she'll be getting married. Won't she, Harry? Come in. It's cold after



*Maeve and Harry smiled at each other. They didn't notice the long silence as their smiling faces moved closer and closer together.*

the rain. I'll get you a present next week, that's a promise. What did you give her, Harry?

Maeve led them into the lounge. It was like the garden, with flowers climbing everywhere. There was a large white piano in the corner of the room.

'Well, actually, nothing yet. I forgot. I'm hopeless about that sort of thing. What would you like, Nancy?'

**Nancy thought for a moment.**

'I'd like to go to the Abbey Theatre in Dublin. Would you take me to see a play?'

'Certainly.'

'What a lovely idea! May I come too? Please may I come?'

'Of course,' said Harry, very happy with the idea.

'You wouldn't mind, would you Nancy?'

'Why should I mind?' Nancy tried to smile.

'Well, now, isn't that lovely? Harry will arrange it all and we'll all have a lovely evening. Lovely!'

'Lovely,' said Nancy.

Maeve left the room to get some drinks to celebrate. Harry went to help her.

**Nancy sat down on the sofa.**

Why did I come?

Because he wanted to come. He would never have come on his own.

They don't want me here.

No. Only until their first smile.

Are they touching hands in the other room?

She stood up.

'I must go home now,' she said to the piano. 'It has been lovely . . . thank you . . .' She moved slowly towards the door, smiling at the chairs and flowers.

When she got to the garden, she ran down the path and out through the gate.



‘Traitor,’ she whispered.

As she walked across the field, the anger died inside her. ‘Happy birthday me,’ she said aloud.

At lunchtime the next day Harry phoned.

‘Oh, hello.’ Nancy tried not to sound too pleased to hear his voice.

‘Where did you go? It was very rude of you to leave like that, Nancy.’

‘Well, you didn’t need me there ... so ... I went home.’

‘But you didn’t say goodbye! Anyway, I stayed for supper.’

‘You see? You didn’t need me.’

‘Anyway, I rang to ask about the theatre trip you asked for.’

‘Oh, yes.’

‘How about tomorrow night? That suits Maeve. Would it suit you?’

‘Yes. Thank you.’

‘Okay. Can you come up to Dublin in the train and meet me at the office? We’ll have something to eat before the play. I’ll bring the car up and I can drive you home.’

‘That sounds lovely.’

When she put the phone down, Nancy stood in the darkness for a moment, listening to the sound of his voice inside her head.

‘Who was that?’ called Aunt Mary from the dining-room

‘Harry.’

Aunt Mary was cleaning the old man’s face with a cloth.

‘He’s taking me to the theatre tomorrow night.’

‘That’ll be nice . . . Do be careful, though . . . with the Black and Tans and . . . trouble.’

‘And Maeve,’ said Nancy.

‘She’s a pretty girl.’ Aunt Mary dropped the cloth on to the table. ‘Though I find her a bit annoying.’

‘It’s a birthday present.’

‘Just take care. I suppose Harry will take care of you.’

‘I think I’m in love with Harry.’

‘What nonsense!’

‘It isn’t nonsense to me.’

‘Maybe not, dear. It’s not love, though. Love is too big for a girl your age. Anyway, Harry wouldn’t be the right sort of person for you.’

The cloud moved away and the sun shone on the floor and wall. Nancy didn’t say a word.

‘I don’t mean he isn’t nice, darling. He really is. . . he’s just not amazing in any way.’

‘He’s beautiful. Amazingly beautiful.’

‘That’s not important. He’s handsome, but . . . there’s nothing else there.’

‘That’s your opinion . . .’

‘What are you going to do this afternoon? Now that the weather’s better?’

‘I think I’ll go for a walk. Swim perhaps.’

As they moved out into the hall, the old man began to sing a hymn.

‘Isn’t that wonderful,’ said Aunt Mary. ‘He’s getting better. Maybe I’ll be able to go to the **horse-racing** tomorrow after all.’

Down at the beach, everything seemed the same as usual. Safe. Without people. But by the hut Nancy found a smoked cigarette. Annoyed, she opened the door and looked into the hut. There was no one there; but someone had been there. Someone had moved and breathed there. Someone had touched her things, threatened her secret. For a moment she

was angry, and then frightened. Above her a seagull moved across the roof. She became calm. She took down some paper and a pencil and began to write a note.

*Dear sir, I would be grateful if you didn't come here again. This is a very private and personal place.*

*Yours sincerely, Nancy Gulliver.*

Leaving the note on top of the books facing the door, she waved to the seagull and went home.

*Dear Miss Gulliver,*

*Thank you for your note. I understand your need to keep this place private, and I am sorry if I have upset you. I feel sure that if you understood the circumstances you would forgive me. I saw you looking **disturbed** and angry as you realized that I was there one afternoon. I will try not to disturb you again. I hope you find everything today as you want it to be.*

*I must also thank you for the books. I am very happy with the ones you have chosen!*

He had not signed his name.

The note was pinned to the door. A funny man, she thought. She opened the door and looked into the hut. There was nobody inside. Nancy left the hut and climbed up on to the railway line. As far as her eyes could see the beach was empty.

‘All right. All right. The joke is over. Come out, wherever you are.’

Her voice was followed by silence.

‘I want to meet you.’

She waited for a moment before climbing back down to the hut. She collected a book and a blanket, and lay down in the sun to read and wait.

‘Miss Nancy Gulliver?’

She hadn't heard him coming. He now stood about four metres behind Nancy, allowing her to inspect him. His feet were bare and looked like the roots of some old tree. He was a small man. His hair was dark, thick and soft and fell down both sides of his thin face. He had pale eyes.

'You don't look well,' she said, after a lot of staring.

'I'm all right.'

'Who are you?'

'The man who wrote the note.'

She shook her head, annoyed. 'I know that. But, who are you?'

'Dear child, don't be angry. 'I'm just a passing stranger. As Shakespeare said . . . What's in a name?'

'I'd just like to know what you are.'

'Why do you need to know?'

She blushed and looked away from him.

'Would you like to sit down?'

It sounded so polite that he smiled for a moment.

'Thank you.'

He moved silently across the sand and sat down beside her on the blanket. They sat in silence, looking at the sea.

'It'll rain again,' he said.

'Yes.'

'I'm afraid the summer is over.'

She took a handful of sand and let it pass slowly through her fingers.

'Are you a criminal? That's really all I want to know.'

'No. I hope you'll believe that.'

'I'll believe whatever you tell me.'

'That's not always wise.'

'I haven't much experience of people telling lies.' -

Her polite voice made him smile again.

'I can see that.'



*Nancy hadn't heard him coming. He now stood about four metres behind Nancy, allowing her to inspect him. His feet were bare.*

She looked straight into his face, offended by the remark.

‘What do you mean by that?’

‘Only, dear child . . . young lady . . . that you are very young . . . I don’t think you have much experience of the dark side of life.’ He sighed. ‘I can never understand why the young dislike being young. It’s the best thing they have. Oh, God, I wish I could see the world again with innocent eyes!’

‘Why did you choose my hut?’

He laughed. ‘I don’t suppose you’ll believe me, but it was my hut long before you were even born. I used to know this place when I was a child.’ He smiled. ‘Even younger than you.’

She looked at him with interest.

‘You come from near here?’

‘In a way. But this coast has changed a lot. And it’s nearly forty years since I first knew this place.’

Nancy was a little disappointed. She wanted to think of the hut as her private place. Her secret.

‘I have to go,’ she said at last, still staring at the sand.

‘So soon? We’ve only just met.’

‘I have to go to Dublin. I’m going to the Abbey Theatre.’

‘That’s nice.’

‘Well . . . yes... in a way.’

‘I suppose you’re going with some lucky young man.’

‘Well . . . I mean he’s not my young man. I . . . well . . . I like him a lot, but . . . She’s coming too . . .’

‘It happens to us all, you know.’

‘Perhaps.’

She smiled at him. For a moment her face looked wonderful. He wanted to touch her, but knew that this would not be wise.

‘Don’t worry about it,’ he said instead.

‘Oh, I don’t. I don’t worry. I do other silly things.’ She

stood up and cleaned the sand from her clothes. ‘You don’t need to hide any more.’

‘Thank you. I’d prefer not to.’

She held out her hand towards him.

‘Goodbye.’

He shook it. There was still sand on his hand.

‘Goodbye, Nancy.’

‘Is there anything you want?’

‘I’m quite good at looking after myself. But don’t tell anybody you saw me.’

‘I won’t.’

She waved at him and ran up on to the railway line. When she looked back, he was sitting on the blanket with his back to her, staring at the sea.

On the train to Dublin that evening, going to see Harry, Nancy thought about the man at the hut. What was he doing now? Was he still sitting on the blanket thinking? Thinking about what? He had a very interesting face. Tired. Interesting. Used. A used face. How old? Fifty something. She always found it hard to tell.

Was he mad, she wondered. No. Just hiding. Perhaps he was a rebel! A lot of the Irish soldiers who had fought with the British were now fighting against them. Or maybe he was a **Communist**. He didn’t look bad, she thought, just sick. I won’t tell anyone about him, Nancy promised herself. Harry was standing on the steps of his office, waiting for her. ‘Hello, Nancy.’ He took off his hat.

‘I hope you haven’t been waiting long!’

‘No. No. Not at all. Well. . .let’s go and get something to eat.’ He put his hat on again and they began to walk along the pavement.

‘You look nice. A new dress?’

She blushed with pleasure. ‘It was Aunt Mary’s idea. She told me to wear something different for a change. Where’s Maeve?’

Please say she is not coming. Never coming again.

‘. . . so she’s meeting us at the theatre,’ he was explaining.

‘Oh . . . ah . . . yes!’ Nancy sighed.

‘Shall we eat at Bewley’s cafe? Something quick?’

She smiled up at him. ‘Anything!’

A lorry full of soldiers went past. It was going towards the river.

‘I suppose they’re going off to shoot someone,’ she suggested in a conversational voice.

Harry looked annoyed, but didn’t say anything. She took his arm.

‘If you hadn’t left the army after the war, you might have been there with them. Going off to shoot someone.’ A **tram** went past, moving slowly like a great ship. ‘How would you have liked that?’ She pulled at his arm for an answer.

‘I hate the rebels.’

He closed his mouth and looked down at his black shoes as they moved on the pavement.

‘Harry . . .?’

‘That’s enough.’

They walked up Grafton Street in silence. As they crossed the rodd to Bewley’s Oriental cafe, a motor car driven by a middle-aged man passed in front of them. Nancy stared at him as he drove slowly past.

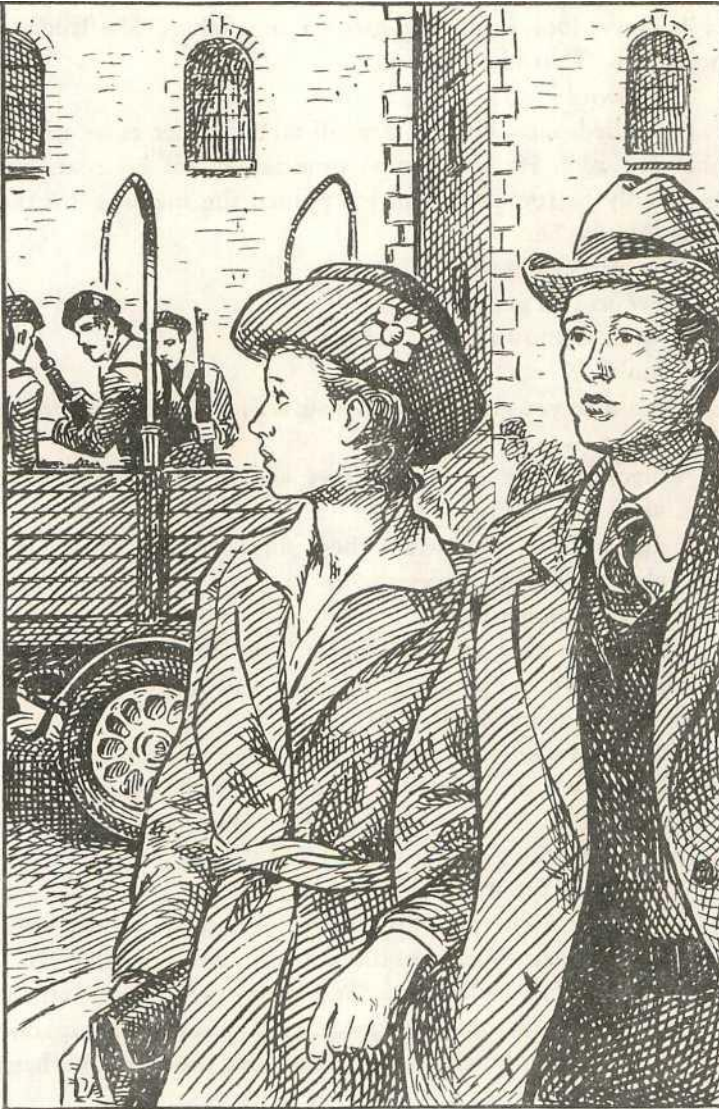
There was a warm smell of coffee as they went into the cafe.

‘Was that my father?’

Harry looked amazed. ‘Who? Where?’

‘That man in the car.’





*A lorry full of soldiers went past. It was going towards the river.*

‘Oh, Nancy!’

‘I always look in passing cars for my father.’ She laughed nervously. ‘That was a joke.’

‘Sit down.’

He pulled out a chair at a small table for her as he spoke. She sat down. He spent some time taking off his coat, but eventually he too sat down. He pushed the menu across the table towards her.

‘Your father’s dead.’

‘How do you know?’

‘Everyone knows that, you silly child.’

‘I don’t.’

‘Of course you do. What do you want to eat? We haven’t much time.’

‘Where is there a bit of paper saying that Mr Robert Gulliver is dead? Where?’

‘I don’t know! Ask Mary these silly questions. She’s the one who knows the answers.’

Nancy shook her head.

‘Just tell me what you want to eat,’ said Harry.

‘I’ll have egg and potatoes,’ she said, ‘and coffee.’

He waved at a waitress.

‘Aunt Mary only thinks he’s dead. She doesn’t know for sure.’

Nancy bent forward to get closer to Harry. ‘My mother’s dead. I know that. I have her things . . . but Robert. . . he . . . my . . .’

‘You should listen to your Aunt Mary.’

‘Sometimes,’ Nancy whispered to herself, as she watched Harry order their food from the waitress, ‘you’re such a fool.’ Around them people ate food and drank coffee. Outside there was a war going on, but everyone here was smiling. Perhaps one or two of these smiling people were helping the rebels. Perhaps they were planning to kill. This was a city of secrets.

The waitress brought the food.  
'I hope that's all right,' said Harry politely.  
'Lovely.'  
Harry began to eat his bacon and sausages.  
'Am I boring, Harry?'  
He looked up from his food and smiled at her.  
'You're a silly child,' he said, 'but you're not boring. Not yet, anyway.'

It was raining the next afternoon when Nancy went down to the hut. The beach was empty. The sky and sea were still grey. She carried with her an old school bag full of food.

He was sitting in the corner, his thin shoulders covered by a blanket. He held a book in his hand. He laid the book on the floor and stood up when she came in.

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'I didn't think that you would come today. It's not a day for the beach.'

'I brought you some food . . . well, not much really ... I didn't know if you had enough to eat.' Nervously she cleaned the rain off her face as she spoke.

'How thoughtful of you, and kind!'

She held out the bag towards him. He took it from her but did not open it.

'You don't have to worry about me, you know. I'm grateful. . . but I have enough food.'

They stood looking at each other for a long moment.

'Did you enjoy the Abbey Theatre?' he asked politely.

'It was very good. Thank you.'

'Shall I go?'

'Oh, no. Please, no. I didn't say a word to anyone.'

He smiled. 'I didn't think you would.'

'You never know with people.'

‘I think you know all right. Or perhaps only when you’re old like I am. Why don’t we sit down?’ He spread the blanket out and politely waited for her to sit down.

‘Well, here we are,’ he said.

‘Yes.’

He took an old cigarette from his pocket.

‘Are you dying?’ she asked suddenly.

He looked very surprised. Taking some matches from his pocket, he lit the cigarette.

‘Not any more than anyone else. Why would I want to come and die here? No, no, Nancy Gulliver, I’m not a romantic hero. I’d prefer to die in a comfortable place, with wine and good food. Not on a windy beach.’

‘Grandfather can’t die. He just sits there waiting and nothing happens. It upsets me.’

‘Tell me about yourself.’

‘There is nothing to tell. I’ve not got any parents.’

‘Nor have I.’

She laughed. ‘Silly! I mean I’ve never had any.’

‘And the grandfather?’

‘I live with him and my aunt, Over there.’ She pointed in the direction of the railway line. ‘I only left school last term. I’m going to Trinity University in the autumn.’

‘To study what?’

‘History. To start with, anyway. Aunt Mary says I’ll probably get bored with it.’

‘And is Aunt Mary usually right?’

‘She really wanted me to go to Oxford, but . . . well . . . we didn’t have enough money for that. She says . . .’ She stopped and looked nervously at him.

‘Well?’

‘She says that if there’s going to be a war with England . . . a real war . . . then it’s better I stay here. After all. . .’

‘And does she think that there’s going to be a real war with England?’ He smiled.

‘She says they’re all so silly that there might be.’

Rain fell loudly on the roof.

‘She’s a good person,’ said Nancy.

‘Ah, yes.’

‘In the photographs my mother looks very much like her. I think she was less organized, though.’

‘Why do you think that?’

‘She had me.’ She bent forward and spoke in a low voice. ‘I think she wasn’t married. That’s what I think, it’s not what people say.’

‘Perhaps it’s better for you to believe what they say.’ ‘Perhaps.’

‘What’s your name?’ she asked after a long, long silence.

‘Haven’t we had this conversation before?’

‘Yes. . . but. . .’

He didn’t say a word.

‘Your name isn’t Robert, is it?’

‘I’ve had so many names in my life.’

‘Was Robert one of them?’

‘I don’t think so. It’s not a very interesting name.’

‘My father was called Robert.’

He laughed loudly. After a moment she laughed too, and their laughter and the wind shook the little hut- ‘Nancy, you don’t think I’m your father?’

‘Why not? Why not you?’

‘How do you know his name was Robert? You said that you don’t believe what they say. . .’

‘I know that. Grandfather talks about Robert sometimes, and he’s too old to lie.’

‘I’m sorry,’ he said gently, ‘but I’m not your father.’

‘Oh, well.’

‘It shouldn’t be so important, you know.’

‘I’d just like to know what’s inside me. What sort of person I’m going to be.’

He shook his head and began saying strange, beautiful things, about being old and God and the meaning of life.

‘I’m sorry for talking so long.’

‘I don’t mind,’ she said. ‘I don’t understand what you’re talking about, but I like listening to you.’

‘The perfect person to have around.’

‘I’ve never had **faith**,’ she said.

‘I expect you will have someday, in something, even yourself It doesn’t have to be in God, you know.’

‘I often wonder if it helps . . . faith in God, I mean. Does it make life easier?’

‘I don’t think so, but I do think that it’s important to feel that you have a reason for being alive.’

‘I’ve always hated caves. Even when I was a child I thought that there might be terrible things waiting for me. I hate being frightened.’

There was a long silence between them. A seagull moved across the roof.

‘And yet,’ he said eventually, ‘you’re not afraid of me.’

‘Should I be?’

‘I’m like a cave. You don’t know what I might have waiting for you.’

He put his hand in his pocket and pulled something out. He held it towards her. It was a gun.

Her heart was **beating** very fast.

‘Well?’

‘Is that all you’re going to say?’

‘What do you want me to say?’ Her voice was angry. May I live, may I live, may I live!

‘Are you going to kill me or . . . something?’

‘Of course not.’ He put the gun back in his pocket.

‘Why . . . why . . .?’

‘I carry a gun. I just suddenly thought you ought to know.’ ‘You . . . have you . . .?’

‘I use it if I have to.’

He put his hand in his pocket again, but this time took out his cigarettes.

‘I’m not sorry if I’ve upset you. The first thing you must learn is that life is not always sweet and nice. It’s full of violence and pain. That’s what you are afraid you will find in caves. The terrible truth.’

‘No,’ she said. ‘No, no . . . oh . . .’

‘A long time ago . . .’ His hand felt again in his pocket, this time for matches. ‘They gave me a lovely uniform and a gun. Then they told me to go and kill the enemies of the people. I did what I was told. I was a very good soldier, Nancy, probably because I don’t really have a fear of dying . . . My fear would be to live for ever, like your grandfather . . . For four years I watched men die . . . I thought at first that we were fighting for freedom, but of course I was wrong.’ He lit his cigarette and Nancy saw the anger in his eyes. ‘Now I know who are the true enemies of the people.’ He laughed suddenly. ‘I suppose you think I’m a little crazy?’

‘You could be.’ She spoke cautiously. ‘A little.’

‘I probably am.’

Smoke began to come out through his nose and mouth. She stared at his thin face. Dying, she thought angrily, I hope you die soon.

‘My war,’ he said the words gently, ‘will never end.’

She stood up. ‘The sooner you leave here the better . . . and I’m not going to bring you any more bananas.’

He sat back against the wall and laughed.

‘There’s nothing to laugh about. Go away. You . . .’

I'm sorry. I just find things funny.'

'Don't you realize that I'll probably go to the police. The army . . . we . . . know officers in the . . .'

'Do that, if you feel you have to. That's all right with me.' She walked across the room and opened the door. Rain and wind came in. Disturbed by her movement, the seagull moved across the roof. She turned and looked back at the man. He was still sitting against the wall, a smile on his face. 'Goodbye.'

'Do you want to take your bananas with you?'

'Shut up! You . . .!'

Aunt Mary was crossing the hall as Nancy came through the door.

'My dear child, you're wet. Where have you been? Go and change or you'll have a cold tomorrow.'

'I'll take a cup of tea up with me.'

'You shouldn't waste time when you're wet like that.' Nancy went into the lounge and poured herself a cup of tea. After cutting a piece of cake, she went back out into the hall. Aunt Mary was still there.

'Oh, Harry phoned.'

'Harry?' Nancy's mouth was full of cake.

'Yes. He and Maeve are expecting you to dinner. Around .seven. Her parents are going up to Dublin and Maeve wants to cook for you and Harry. Something like that.'

'And you said yes. . . Aunt Mary!'

'I thought you'd want to go, dear.'

Nancy kicked angrily at the stairs, spilling her tea from the cup into the saucer.

'He very much wanted you to go . . . Have a nice hot bath, dear. You don't want to catch a cold.'



‘He just needs me there as. . . well, as. . . sort of. .

Aunt Mary went into the room and closed the door behind her.

‘Oh, well!’ said Nancy to the empty hall.

The bathroom smelled of plants and warm, dry towels. Nancy lay in the hot bath and stared at the ceiling.

‘I’ll go to the police,’ she said to her soap. It did not reply.

‘I’m glad after all that he isn’t my father. Can’t be. Extremely glad. He could be. What am I talking about?’

Her pale body shone in the green light.

‘Oh, soap, what would you do?’

A drop of cold water landed on her big toe. She moved her leg sideways.

‘Why am I so confused? Why?’ In a moment of anger she threw the soap across the room. It hit the wall and fell wetly on the floor.

Aunt Mary knocked on the door. ‘Nancy, darling, don’t be too long in the bath. I’d like to come in. I have to brush my teeth.’

With a sigh Nancy stood up and reached for her towel.

‘Are all **informers** bad people?’

Aunt Mary was standing outside the bathroom door, but she did not answer.

‘Well . . . I’ve often wondered about Judas, you know,’ said Nancy. ‘Was he really the worst man in the world?’ There was more silence through the door as Aunt Mary thought about Judas. ‘You see ... maybe he was a hero. I mean, maybe even the greater hero of the two.’

‘Nancy, you can’t say things like that. Come on, hurry up. I want to come in and brush my teeth.’

‘You haven’t answered my question.’

‘It’s an impossible question to answer. Circumstances are

never the same. I suppose in this country the word informer has a rather nasty meaning. Why do you ask such a question anyway

‘I was just wondering about this and that.’

‘Well, wonder about them somewhere else.’

Nancy decided that she would enter Maeve’s house from the front like any other important guest. She walked calmly down the road, wearing her best shoes and her black dress that Aunt Mary said was too old for her. She felt old as she walked . . . well, older anyway. The rain-clouds had gone away and the sky was now blue. Though she was a tall girl, Nancy couldn’t see the sea, but she could smell the salt in the air.

As she moved into Maeve’s garden, she began to feel less confident. Perhaps Aunt Mary had been right about the dress after all. Maybe she just looked silly in it. She walked slowly up the path towards the hall door. She put her finger on the bell. She thought of the man who wasn’t Robert and wondered if he was all right. Had he decided to go? She took her finger off the bell. Someone moved in the hall. She turned and ran down the path.

‘Nancy . . .’ Harry’s voice called out her name.

She ran out of the gate and on to the road.

‘Nancy . . .’

Once she had safely turned the corner on to the road that led to the railway bridge, she stopped running. They would murder her, she thought, but that would be tomorrow. Now it was important to stop him leaving. If he went, he would never come back. He would disappear totally, as he must have done so many times in his life before. Gun or no gun, she didn’t want that.

When she reached the beach, he was sitting with his back to the hut, reading. He looked up from the book as she approached, then he got to his feet and stood there, looking at her.

‘I didn’t expect you back so soon. I was going to leave in the morning.’

She shook her head. ‘I’m sorry. That’s what I came to say. Please don’t go.’

He stared at her in silence for a long time. She felt herself blushing.

‘I haven’t done anything awful.’

‘I was afraid you might have gone. I hurried . . .’

The thousand-year-old seagull flew in from the sea and settled on the roof

‘Please don’t go.’

‘Do you understand what that means?’

‘I’ll try.’

‘I think we should have a drink. You’re not too young to have a whiskey?’

‘I’d love one.’ What would Aunt Mary say?

‘Til get a blanket.’

He went into the hut and came out with a bottle and two cups and the blanket around his shoulders.

‘What a pretty dress!’ he said.

She blushed. ‘Oh ... do you really like it?’

‘I do. It makes you look like a young **witch**. A good witch, of course.’

‘Oh!’

She watched him spread the blanket on the sand.

‘Please, sit down.’

‘I love it when the stars are coming out and the sky is still blue.’

‘So you came all the way back.’

‘Well . . . yes ... I thought that it wasn’t my business anyway and I suppose I’m not really old enough to understand about . . . things. Anyway, I didn’t want to be there all evening being polite and knowing they didn’t really want me. Even in my best clothes I didn’t feel . . . good enough . . .’ She stared up at the stars in the blue sky. ‘I’m jealous. I hate that. I really do.’ She took a quick drink of her whiskey. It was very strong.

‘Do you expect me to understand all that?’

‘Maybe you could just listen. You don’t have to imder-stand.’

He smiled and turned away from her, looking out towards the sea. There were deep lines on his face.

‘When this war is over . . . what will happen then?’

He laughed. ‘There’ll be another one ... I mean the people fighting together now will fight each other. It always happens like that.’

She took another drink from her cup.

‘The winners will take everything and the rest will have nothing. It will be very sad and very little will change. Some people will still have too much to eat and others not enough.’

‘It all seems very pointless. Why do you do it?’

‘Me? I’m not just fighting against the British, I hope I’m fighting for the people. I don’t want power. I want to see fairness for everyone, and I’m prepared to kill anyone who . . .’

Seeing that Nancy was scared by this, he put out a hand and touched her shoulder.

‘I’m sorry.’

‘That’s all right. It’s just all this killing business. I hate it so much.’

‘There are worse things than killing going on in the world. Terrible crimes are committed against people all the time. By

other people.’ He took a deep drink. ‘The only thing to do is fight.’

‘It sounds very peculiar to me.’

‘Yes. I think we’ll talk about something else.’

‘We live up there on the hill.’

He nodded. ‘I know. I told you, I knew this place when I was a child. We used to come down here nearly every day. We came to play on the beach.’

‘We . . .?’

‘Yes. We. The children. Each time I come out of the hut in the morning, I remember it all again. Empty sky and beach. Empty sea. And the drivers waving from the trains as they went by.’ It was becoming dark, and the hills behind the railway line would be black now. ‘That was a long time ago. Before . . .’

‘Before . . .?’

‘Before I became the person I am now.’ He laughed. ‘A dangerous rebel.’

‘Did you know my mother?’

‘She was only a baby. Our world was very small. Even then there wasn’t much future for it. I was born in 1870.’ ‘1870!’ She counted in her head. ‘Grandfather’s eighty something.’

‘I don’t suppose I’ll ever get to that age.’

‘You’re ill? I knew you were ill.’

He laughed. ‘I don’t want to.’

‘I don’t think that Grandfather wants to either. He’s cold, as if he was dead already. A dead hand couldn’t be colder than his. He just sits there covered with blankets and watches the trains go by. He has these binoculars ... he says he saw my father the other day.’

She put the cup to her mouth and carefully watched him over the top of it.

‘Oh!’

‘He’s crazy, really.’

‘He must be. Aren’t you getting cold?’

‘A little.’ She stood up and handed him the cup. ‘I must go home. They’ll be angry with me.’

‘What have you done? I didn’t really understand.’

‘I ran away from Harry and Maeve.’ She grinned. ‘For the second time.’ She held out her hand towards him.

He smiled up at her. ‘So polite!’ He touched her hand with his fingers.

‘Good-night.’

‘Good-night, Miss Gulliver.’

Aunt Mary and Harry were waiting for her when she got back. They were both angry.

‘Apologize, Nancy. You really must do that, you know,’ said Aunt Mary.

‘Poor Maeve,’ said Harry. ‘What is she to think? How can you expect people to treat you nicely?’

When Harry had gone, Nancy sat alone in the kitchen.

‘I really want him to love me,’ she said aloud. ‘I’m crying.’ She touched her cheek with her finger as Aunt Mary’s cat came into the room. ‘If I was really a witch, cat. I’d make him love me. But then that wouldn’t be fair.’

The cat moved slightly and went to sleep. Nancy dried her tears with the sleeve of her black dress and turned out the light as she left the room.

The next day passed very slowly. By twelve it was raining heavily. Aunt Mary had driven off to the horse-racing, dressed in very old-fashioned clothes.

‘You can’t see anything.’

The old man’s voice made Nancy jump. It was the first

thing he had said to anyone since Aunt Mary had left. He was sitting in his chair by the window with a blanket around his legs. His binoculars and his hat were on the table beside him. He had slept and said meaningless things to himself, sometimes lifting binoculars to look at the railway line.

‘There’s nothing to see, Grandfather. Only rain.’

She got up from the sofa where she had been lying reading a book. She went across the room and stood beside him. His white hair was stretched across the top of his head. The fingers around the binoculars looked already dead.

‘There’s never anything to see, Grandfather. Only the field and the railway line.’

‘I see things. I pass my day seeing things. These are very good binoculars. German army binoculars.’

She sat on the floor beside him and they both stared in silence at the rain outside the window.

‘Grandfather,’ she said finally. ‘Do you remember Robert? My . . . well . . . Robert?’

‘I just took them from this Dutch soldier. I stole them, I suppose. He had quite a nice face. If I hadn’t taken them, someone else would have.’ There was a long pause. ‘Wouldn’t they?’

‘I suppose so. But about Robert. . .?’

‘I don’t remember. It is very easy to confuse things.’

‘If you can remember the face of a dead soldier, surely you can remember Robert.’

‘If you kill someone, they leave their face with you. As a sort of present.’

‘You mean you killed the man whose binoculars you took?’

‘I suppose I had to. I don’t remember the exact circumstances. I was, after all, a soldier.’ He sighed. ‘Robert was a comniunist.’

‘Oh, Grandfather, surely not!’

‘Yes. Something terrible like that. I said to him once, I suppose you’ll murder us all in our beds one night. He just laughed. His teeth were brown from cigarettes.’

Talking for so long had exhausted him. His head dropped, his fingers let go of the binoculars and they fell to the floor. Nancy picked them up. The man on the beach didn’t have brown teeth. She was sure of that. Gently she put the binoculars back on his knee.

The rain stopped during the afternoon. The sun came out eventually, making black shadows over the flowers and the grass. At four o’clock Maeve called.

‘Are you feeling better now, Nancy?’

‘Oh, yes. I just didn’t feel well, so ... I went for some fresh air. I’m all right now.’

Nancy felt very embarrassed, but she offered Maeve some tea. After a few minutes, Maeve mentioned that her father wanted to buy Aunt Mary’s house. Nancy was shocked at this news.

‘Didn’t they tell you?’

Nancy began to laugh. When in doubt, laugh.

‘My father thinks this is just the sort of place people will want to **live in. More and more they’re moving out of the city.** You can understand that, with the trouble and everything.’

‘Why didn’t you tell me before?’ Nancy asked Aunt Mary when she came back from the horse-racing.

‘I didn’t want you to worry, darling. And everything will be all right. We’ll get a smaller house somewhere. You can live in Dublin and come out and visit us at weekends.’

*i3 August*

*I wish we could stay in this house, but I know in my heart that Maeve and Harry will live here. She will play her white piano and*



*they will never notice our ghosts hiding in the comers of every room.*

*They will make a lovely couple. I don't think he would ever love someone like me, even if I were five years older. She is so new and perfect. She won't be really kind to him and he'll probably never notice. Oh, God, don't let me be too weak and please help me to stop biting my nails.*

It was very windy during the night, and in the morning the garden was full of broken branches. Nancy went down to the beach and lit a fire about half a mile from the hut. Then she walked along the sea's edge towards the hut. She realized suddenly that she was walking along beside a man's **footprints**. She stopped walking and looked back along the beach. The marks came down from the railway line. They moved off to the right and finally disappeared. She searched around carefully for any more footprints, but found none. As she stood up straight again, she saw that the man from the hut was watching her from beside a rock.

'Lost something?'

'These aren't your footprints.' She pointed back along the beach.

'You don't wear shoes like that.'

'Well done, Sherlock Holmes!'

She blushed. 'There's been someone here?'

He nodded.

'Is there ... is there . . .?'

 She looked around.

'No. Come. It's cold here. Let's go indoors.'

They walked towards the hut in silence.

'Are you angry?' he said as they arrived. He opened the door and held it for her. 'Let's get out of the wind.'

'He left footprints. Right the way along the beach.'

'There are no footprints here.'

‘A man. I didn’t say you could have visitors, i don’t like millions of people coming here to my . . .’

He stood looking at her for a moment and then sat down with his back against the wall. ‘It was someone with a message. That’s all. He didn’t come here. We met out there among the rocks. I have been waiting for him. Are you angry with me?’

Nancy thought for a moment and shook her head. ‘No. But Grandfather probably saw the man who brought the message, you know. He doesn’t miss much that happens on that railway line. He keeps telling us about the people he sees, but nobody listens to him. Sometimes he talks nonsense, sometimes not. Do you have any grandparents?’

‘My dear Nancy, I lost contact with my family many, many years ago. I like to travel alone.’

‘Don’t you get lonely?’

‘I don’t have enough time for such an emotion. Who knows. . . maybe one day.’

‘When you’re old, you can always sit in a chair and think about all the people you’ve killed.’

‘My dear young lady . . .’

‘I’m sorry. I really didn’t mean to say that.’

‘Of course you did. But I feel no guilt about what I do.’

‘It’s the killing . . .’

‘After all,’ he said gently, ‘your grandfather was a killer too, and he wasn’t even fighting his own country. In fact he was doing the opposite. And yet. . .’

‘Oh, dear . . . oh, no . . .’

‘. . . and yet he’s a lovable old man. He sings hymns and will probably die in his own bed, just as every man should. Some people will cry.’

‘I get very confused. Is that hateful?’

He sat back against the wall and began to laugh. As she

watched him, she wondered if he was not as confused as she was.

‘I’m sorry to laugh,’ he said eventually. ‘There’s absolutely nothing hateful about you. Believe that.’

‘Aunt Mary’s going to sell the house.’

‘Oh!’

She watched his face carefully. The smile slowly left his mouth as he thought about the past.

‘Yes, I suppose it had to be like that, sooner or later.’

‘It was a big surprise for me. Aunt Mary is more sensible than I am.’

‘So, my dear, you too will be travelling.’

‘I’d rather not.’

‘Everything has to keep changing. You’re lucky.’

‘I love it here.’

‘You just don’t know anywhere else. The sea is cold, the beach is full of stones, the east wind blows all through the winter. The sooner you get out of it the better. You make me feel very old. I don’t remember much of what it was like when I was eighteen. I hunted at least twice a week, and was too shy to speak to the pretty girls I met at parties in the evenings. Your aunt was one of them.’

‘Was she a pretty girl?’

‘Very. You must stop biting your nails.’

She blushed.

‘It’s what any father would say to his daughter.’

‘Have you any children?’

He shook his head. ‘No. I had a wife once, but she didn’t really like me very much when she got to know me. That was all in my younger days.’

‘Why didn’t she like you?’

‘I suppose when I married her I was a normal person with a name and address. I even had a house in London. She liked

that, and she expected all sorts of lovely things to keep happening. So she moved on to someone who was able to give her a better life. After five years of marriage I had become an embarrassment to her.'

'Was she beautiful?'

'Yes, I suppose so. She had a beautiful face and body.'

She stood up and looked down at him. As always, when she was with him, she was worried by how tired and ill he looked. 'Will there be anyone else coming?' she asked.

'No. He was the only one. I'll be leaving here soon. I've been waiting for him to come.'

She pushed the door open. The sand and little stones were blowing along the beach.

'Is there anything you want?' She spoke with her back to him, staring at the sea.

'Do you ever go into Dublin?'

'I can.'

She turned and looked at him. In the dark hut he seemed like a ghost. Only his eyes shone with life.

'Could you deliver a message for me . . .?'

The afternoon train from Wicklow came past on the railway line above them. She hoped that Grandfather was awake to see it.

'Yes,' she said, when the noise of the train had passed on down the line. 'I can deliver a message.'

'You're sure?'

'Yes.'

Til meet you on the railway line at ten tomorrow morning. Up near the bridge.'

The two Miss Brabazons had been having tea with Aunt Mary and were just leaving when Nancy arrived back at the house.

‘Hullo,’ shouted the tall Miss Brabazon, waving her hand above her head.

The small Miss Brabazon shook Nancy’s hand. ‘You’ve grown, Nancy.’

‘Of course she’s grown,’ said her sister. ‘All girls of her age grow.’

‘Nonsense, some people stop growing when they’re thirteen. You’re as tall as Mary . . . Strange, really, because your mother wasn’t tall . . . she was very small, in fact. Your father was tall, though. A really tall man.’

The small Miss Brabazon danced towards the car.

‘You must come and have dinner some time,’ said Aunt Mary. ‘What about Saturday after the horse-racing?’

‘Perfect.’

Aunt Mary and Nancy watched the Miss Brabazons drive away and then went into the house. Grandfather was singing a hymn.

‘They think they have a little house for us. Isn’t that great? Over near Laragh.’

‘I think I’ll go up to Dublin tomorrow afternoon. Can I get anything for you?’

‘I really didn’t want to have to look for a house. Of course we won’t have the sea, but I expect we’ll get used to that.’

‘I’ll go up on the two o’clock train.’

‘. . . there’ll be no railway either, but Grandfather will just have to find something else to look at. I think it will be really good, don’t you?’

‘Yes. Do you want anything in town?’

‘Perhaps some library books, dear.’

Later that afternoon Harry took Nancy swimming. When they reached the beach Nancy changed into her costume. Harry was already wearing his. He stood waiting for her, looking beautiful and serious. She picked up his hand and kissed it.

‘Come,’ she said, starting to run towards the sea. ‘This is probably the last swim we’ll enjoy together. Tomorrow, I’m starting a life of crime.’

Harry thought that Nancy was joking. He laughed, and they ran together into the sea.

A cloudless day.

At ten o’clock she went down to the railway bridge as he had told her to. She watched him coming along the railway line with quick, confident steps. As he came closer, she saw that he was wearing a suit and a brown hat. He looked like a stockbroker out for a walk. In one hand he held a small suitcase.

‘Good morning.’ He took off his hat and then put it back on his head again.

Down below them on the beach children were throwing sand at each other. He took an envelope out of his pocket and held it out to her. She took it and put it into her pocket without looking at it. That seemed the right thing to do. They stood looking at each other.

It was odd to see him dressed like that. He was wearing what looked like a British Army tie. She wondered where he had kept his clothes over the last week, they looked so clean.

‘I suppose you know Bewley’s Cafe in Grafton Street.’

She nodded.

‘Sit down at the first table on the right inside the door and give the envelope to the young man who will be there. He’ll buy you a cup of coffee.’

‘Okay.’

‘I’m very grateful.’ He took off his hat again. ‘Walk on the beach for a few minutes.’

She climbed down on to the beach and stood on the sand,

watching him walking along the railway line towards the station. When she could no longer see him, she took the envelope out of her pocket and looked at it. There was nothing written on it at all. She felt a little disappointed.

She arrived home as Aunt Mary and her grandfather were having their morning cup of coffee.

‘I saw you,’ said the old man, as she came into the room.

Her heart jumped a little.

‘Yes, darling. He says he saw you talking to a man on the railway line.’

‘I just said good morning. That was all. It was just a man walking along.’

‘He reminded me of someone,’ said Grandfather.

Nancy felt herself blush. ‘Don’t be silly. He was only an old **tramp**. He couldn’t possibly remind you of anyone.’

She went upstairs to change into her good clothes.

Bewley’s Cafe.

At the first table on the right a young man was reading a book. A cup of coffee was on the table. The book lay flat beside it. She pulled out the chair opposite to him and sat down. He continued reading. Perhaps she’d got it wrong, she thought. She looked cautiously around. People were eating cream cakes with tiny silver forks.

‘Hello,’ she said.

He looked across at her. His two top front teeth were rather large, and when he smiled he looked like a friendly dog.

‘Hello.’ He closed the book and pulled it slightly towards him. He had untidy brown hair. ‘Would you like a cup of coffee?’

‘Thank you.’

He nodded and called for the waitress.

Nancy took the letter out of her bag and pushed it across the table to him. He took it quickly from her and put it into the inside top pocket of his coat. Then he called over the waitress and ordered two coffees. He looked a little more comfortable.

‘Thanks.’

She gave him a little nod and wondered if that was all they were going to say to each other.

‘What’s your name?\*

‘Nancy Gulliver.’

He smiled and pushed his hand across the table for her to shake. ‘I’m Joe Mulhare.’

She held his fingers for a moment. She noticed that he too bit his nails.

‘Are you still at school?’

She blushed and then looked angry.

‘Of course you’re not.’ He answered his own question quickly. ‘You just look young.’ He bent towards her and grinned.

‘I’m eighteen,’ she said. ‘It’s a terrible thing to look young. Nobody takes you seriously.’

The waitress came back with two cups of coffee, which she placed on the table.

‘Thank you,’ they both said together, then they laughed.

‘That means you can have a wish,’ said Nancy. ‘We can both have a wish, but we mustn’t tell each other what . . .’

He held out his hand and she took it. They both wished for a moment.

Nancy wished the same wish that she had wished for years, that Harry would one day love her. Then for the first time she regretted wasting a good wish on something that was never going to happen. She wondered what Joe Mulhare had wished.



‘How old are you?’  
‘I’m eighteen too.’  
‘Well, honestly . . .!’  
‘I’m nearly nineteen. I’ve had a very full life.’  
She laughed. He played with the book on the table and then picked it up and put it in his pocket.  
‘What do you do? You know . . . work?’  
‘Well, at the moment I’m fighting for my country.’  
‘Don’t be silly . . .’  
‘What do you mean, don’t be silly? Isn’t that enough for anyone? I bet it’s more than you’re doing.’  
‘Well . . . yes . . . but . . . where do you work is what I meant.’  
‘I don’t. I thought of working on the railway, but I decided against it.’  
‘I thought all boys wanted to be train drivers.’  
‘Not me.’ He tasted the coffee. ‘My father died in prison.’ ‘Oh! How awful! I’m sorry.’  
‘You don’t need to be. He was a good man. I see by your face that you don’t realize that sometimes good men end up in prison.’  
‘I . . .’  
‘I don’t know why I’m telling you, but I am.’  
They both drank their coffee quickly.  
‘He fought for the workers. To make the world a better place. That’s why they put him in prison. I want to try and do something he would have wanted me to do. Not just working on the railways. So . . . do you understand?’  
‘Well . . .’  
‘No,’ he said sadly. ‘I don’t suppose you do.’  
Suddenly she wanted to touch him. To stretch out her hand and touch his arm. She picked up her spoon and moved it around her coffee instead.

‘I’d like to understand. Believe that.’

‘Sometimes people have to fight to get a better life.’

‘And what if you don’t get a better life even if you do fight?’

‘You go on. There’s always someone left to go on.’

‘Oh, dear! Yes, I suppose there is. Perhaps it would be better to work on the railways.’

He grinned. ‘That’s what my mother says. Why are you involved in all this anyway? People like you don’t usually get involved.’

‘I’m doing it for a friend . . . well, not exactly a friend.’

‘No. He doesn’t have what you would call friends.’

‘Do you know him?’

‘No. Not me. I just deliver messages. They say he’s English.’

‘No. I don’t think so.’

‘He’s not one of us, anyway. One of the people.’ ‘Everybody’s one of the people.’

‘That’s not true. You know it’s not true. There are some people who just see a lot of other people as animals, just animals without minds or feelings. There’s dogs in this country which have better lives than a lot of the people.’

He looked at her in silence.

‘I like you. There’s something about you. You’re not one of us, but. . .’

‘I . . .’

‘You aren’t. But you could be for us. That’s what matters. Drink up your coffee and we’ll go for a ride on a tram.’ He called again for a waitress. ‘Or maybe you don’t like trams. Maybe you’ve got things to do?’

She shook her head. ‘I love trams. I have to catch the quarter to six train home, though.’

‘We’ll go out to Dalkey on the tram and you can get your train from there.’

She gathered up her bag and the library books for Aunt Mary, and they left the cafe. A tram came round the corner from College Green.

‘Run,’ said Joe.

They ran along the narrow pavement, Joe pulling her along by the hand, and climbed on to the tram.

‘Nancy!’

Shocked at hearing her name called, she nearly dropped the library books. She looked round. The tram moved forward. Harry was standing on the pavement.

‘Nancy . . .’ He took his hat off.

‘Oh, hello.’

‘What on earth . . .!’

‘Up, up, up.’ Joe pushed her towards the stairs.

The tram pulled away. Harry stood, hat in hand, looking after them. They climbed the stairs and moved up to the front seat.

‘Oh, dear!’ said Nancy, as the tram turned the corner.

She settled herself into the seat and Joe sat down beside her.

‘That man?’

‘He’ll ask all sorts of stupid questions. Who are you? Where were we going? Why this? Why that? He’ll probably tell Aunt Mary.’

‘What’ll you say?’

‘I’ll think of something.’ She smiled. ‘I’m very good at inventing things. I have to be. Everyone wants to know what I’m doing.’

The journey took nearly an hour. In Kingstown a couple of soldiers came up the stairs and walked along between the seats, looking at the passengers. Nancy tried not to think of the envelope in Joe’s pocket. No one looked at the two men, who both had guns in their hands. No one spoke until

they had climbed down again and stepped on to the road.

‘I don’t suppose we’ll ever meet again,’ said Joe when they were almost at the end of their journey. He spoke suddenly, his voice low.

‘You never know.’

He took off his hat and looked inside it for a moment. ‘I’d like to meet you again.’ He put the hat back on his head and looked at her. ‘I don’t mean tomorrow. Not now, but in the future . . . when . . .’

‘When what?’

‘When we know a little more. When . . .’

‘Yes. I’d like to as well,’ said Nancy.

He smiled. ‘Then it will happen. Remember that.’

The tram stopped and everyone had to get off. Nancy and Joe were the only passengers left on top. They went down the stairs. The driver was standing at the bottom, reading his newspaper.

‘Do you know the way to the station?’ Joe asked her, as they stepped down on to the road.

She nodded.

‘I’ll go back on the tram, so . . . if you’re all right.’

‘Of course I’m all right. It’s been . . . I’m fine.’

He took hold of her arm just above the elbow. He pulled her very close to him.

‘Will you be seeing him?’

She nodded.

‘Well, tell him . . . not to go today.’

Nancy nodded.

‘I’ll see you again, Nancy. Look after yourself.’

He stepped up on to the tram. They stood looking at each other. She wished she had something to give him.

‘*Au revoir.*’

‘Nancy,’ was all he said, before running up the stairs.



*They stood looking at each other. She wished she had something to give him. 'Nancy,' was all he said, before running up the stairs.*

Harry was on the train. She moved quickly to another part of the train, but when they arrived he was waiting at the bottom of the railway bridge.

‘Nancy.’

‘Oh, hello there.’

‘What on earth were you doing this afternoon?’

The sun was sideways and warm on their faces. A cool wind blew from the sea. She watched the train moving along the railway line towards the point.

‘I wasn’t doing anything.’

‘Who was that fellow you were with?’

Nancy didn’t answer.

‘He looked awful. . . well, Nancy?’

‘Oh, I just met him in the library. He was changing books for his mother.’

‘He didn’t look like someone whose mother would be getting books from the library. Where were you going in the tram?’

‘I like trams,’ she said truthfully.

‘That’s not an answer to my question.’

She didn’t say anything. The train had almost reached the point. Smoke blew back towards them.

‘It’s really not your business,’ she said finally.

‘I think perhaps I shall speak to Mary.’

‘Why don’t you do something with your own life instead of interfering in mine? What good is being a stockbroker? Getting the train to work every morning. Coming home on the same train in the evening. How completely boring!’

‘You don’t realize how lucky I was to get such a good job. After the war there were hundreds of fellows like me looking for work.’

I'm sure Maeve's father would find you something.'

'You're a horrible little . . .'

'Little what?'

'I'm sorry. I didn't mean that.'

'Of course you did, and you're probably right.'

His face was very angry. 'I want a normal life. That's all. All you seem to want is trouble. When you grow up, you'll see what I mean.'

She sighed.

'Anyway, who was that boy?'

'I've told you.'

They had reached the gates. Nancy stopped.

'He didn't look the right sort of person,' said Harry. 'I hope . . .'

'Oh, no, we didn't arrange to meet again or anything like that. We just said goodbye.' She laughed and moved towards him. 'Here we are.'

'Yes.'

'Is that all right, then?'

'I suppose so.'

She smiled at him. She wanted to touch his face, but she didn't dare. She smiled even harder at him. At last he smiled back.

'You'll come up and have a drink? Aunt Mary will be angry if you don't.'

'I don't think I'll ever understand you, Nancy.'

She took his arm and they walked up the road to the house in silence.

Aunt Mary was sitting on the garden wall, waiting for them.

'You've been a long time. I thought you must have missed the train.'

'We've been having a lovely row,' said Nancy.

‘Poor Harry! He’ll need a drink.’

‘I’ll just go and change,’ said Nancy. ‘I’ll be back in a minute.’

She went into the house and ran upstairs.

‘Mary,’ the old man’s voice was calling. ‘Mary, Mary, Mary.’

She closed her bedroom door carefully. She could hear Aunt Mary talking in the garden. Harry laughed. That was good, anyway. She took her diary from the drawer and opened it at a clean page. *Joe Mulhare*, she wrote, *joe mulhare*. **JOE MULHARE**. *joe*. *Joe joe*. *Joe Mulhare*.

He was lying on the beach when she arrived at the hut the next afternoon. He had taken off his shirt, and she could see that a long scar ran all down his body. It went from just below his neck, down the left-hand side of his chest, and disappeared inside his trousers.

‘Hello, Nancy.’

He didn’t move, just spoke the words up towards the clouds.

‘How did you know it was me?’

‘I’m afraid you make too much noise to surprise anyone.’

He stared at the clouds and she stared at the sea.

‘How did you get that scar?’

She turned and looked at him. He had a slight smile on his face.

‘In the war. At the battle of Ypres. The boy I was with was killed. I still don’t know which one of us was lucky.’

‘It’s horrible!’

He put out his hand and took hers. He ran her fingers all the way down the scar.

‘Horrible!’ she said again. She looked down at her fingers.



which had never touched anything like that before. She buried her fingers in the sand. The top part was warm and dry, but underneath it was cold and wet and rough.

‘So everything went according to plan yesterday?’

She nodded. ‘Joe . . .’

‘I don’t want to hear any names.’

‘I liked him. He said to tell you that . . . they think you ought to move on.’

‘I see!’ He sat up and dusted the sand from his shoulders.

‘I suppose this means you’ll go away?’

He nodded. ‘In a day or two.’

‘Where will you go?’

‘Away.’

‘You never answer my questions.’

‘You always ask the wrong ones.’

‘Will you come back?’

‘Not here.’

‘So I’ll never see you again?’

‘Probably not.’

‘I don’t like that.’

‘You’ll be all right.’

‘I wish you didn’t have to kill people.’

‘Somebody has to.’

‘I really don’t understand why.’

‘You will one day.’

She moved up right beside him.

‘May a daughter kiss her father goodbye?’

He put his arms around her and held her close to him. One heart seemed to beat in both their bodies. His cheek against hers was as rough as the sand had been.

‘You won’t let them catch you, will you?’

‘I intend to die in my bed, child, with my bottle of good wine.’

He let go of her and looked carefully at her face.

‘I must be getting old. For the first time in many years I regret having to say goodbye.’

‘What a lovely thing to say to me!’

‘It won’t be the last time that men say that sort of thing to you.’

He held out his hand to her. She shook it very politely.

‘Goodbye.’

‘Goodbye, Nancy. Oh, and . . .’

‘Yes?’

‘Joe Mulhare is a good young man. Remember that if you meet him again.’

‘Yes.’

She climbed up on to the railway line, and then turned and looked back. He was sitting as he had sat before, staring out to sea. He didn’t move.

The Daimler drove away from the house about midday. In it were the three ladies in hats and gloves, food for a picnic and a bottle of whiskey. The wind was soft, and it looked like it was going to rain. The sun, though, was shining brightly.

It was very late that evening when the Daimler came back around the corner leading to the house.

‘You’re very late,’ said Nancy, as the three ladies climbed out of the car. ‘Bridie is going a little crazy.’ She looked at their faces. ‘What’s the matter? What’s happened?’

Aunt Mary was pale and old. The small Miss Brabazon, as usual, offered her hand. ‘We’ve had the most terrible time!’ The old man opened his eyes as they **came** into the room. ‘Ah, Mary!’ He said nothing to the visitors. ‘My blanket has fallen.’

Aunt Mary kissed his cheek and bent to pick up his

blanket. 'Celia, dear, get everyone a drink, will you? There, darling, that will make you warm again. Have you had a good day?'

'There were soldiers in the field. I saw them.'

'That must have been interesting'. Something new to look at.'

Aunt Mary and Miss George Brabazon settled themselves by the fire. Miss Celia Brabazon walked around the room, spilling whiskey from her glass.

'The most awful thing happened . . .' began Aunt Mary.

'It was just after the third race.'

'And it was starting to rain.'

'And I thought,' said Aunt Mary, as if neither of the others had spoken, 'that I'd better go and get my coat from the car.' 'And so did I,' said Miss George. 'Celia stayed behind talking to Freddy Hennessy . . .'

'We took a few minutes to get to the car.'

'This man ... a soldier and a young girl passed us. . . They were hurrying, they didn't want to get wet. Laughing . . .' 'What happened?' asked Nancy.

Grandfather appeared to be listening. His eyes moved from one speaker to the other. 'A soldier,' he said.

'Well, we got to the car and I was standing there while George was opening the door. A man came out from behind the car. He must have been waiting there.'

'I saw him walking. He had something in his hand ... I didn't see. I wasn't really looking.'

'I was searching for my umbrella.'

'And then there was this bang and the soldier was lying on the ground, just like that. I didn't really know what had happened.'

'I said, "What's that bang, Mary?"' and she didn't answer. Then the girl suddenly began to scream.'

‘It was all very peculiar. I can’t explain. We ran over to them. There was no sign of the man. Only the girl screaming the the . . .’

‘Dead.’

‘Dead. Oh, how terrible!’

‘I put my coat over him to keep him warm.’

‘My dear Mary. He didn’t need it. He was dead,’ said Celia.

‘I had to do something. Then suddenly there were hundreds of people all around us and the poor girl was screaming.’

‘Then there were other shots . . . People were saying very silly things.’

‘Other shots? . . . Were they . . .?’

‘Twelve soldiers dead. They must have been following each one of them. No one was caught.’

‘Then the police interviewed us for a long time.’

‘Dinner is ready,’ said Bridie. ‘And it won’t wait.’

‘Thank you, Bridie. We’re coming now. We’ve had a terrible day.’

‘I heard. Jimmy heard in the village and he came out to tell me. That’s twelve less English soldiers to attack our poor boys.’

‘That’s your opinion, Bridie, just your opinion.’

‘And it’s my opinion,’ said Nancy to her own surprise.

‘My dear Nancy, you know nothing about it at all.’

‘I’m learning.’

‘Don’t be rude to your aunt,’ said Bridie. ‘She’s had a hard day. Now come and get your dinner.’

She turned and walked slowly back to the kitchen.

No one wanted to talk during dinner. The three women’s faces were lonely and unhappy.

‘I suppose,’ said Aunt Mary, ‘you shouldn’t really say things like that, Nancy. You are too young to understand these things.’

‘I don’t think you understand them very well, either.’ Nancy blushed after she had spoken.

Miss Celia Brabazon put her spoon and fork together on her plate. ‘Ireland under the British will never have peace,’ she said.

‘Gabriel wore that uniform. I thought of him when I saw that poor young man lying there.’

‘Gabriel died fighting someone else’s war.’

‘But this isn’t a war.’

‘Of course it’s a war, Mary dear. One day you’re going to have to decide whether you support the British or the Republicans. Nancy seems to have made her decision.’

The small Miss Brabazon stood up. ‘It’s time to go home, Celia. We’re all tired and upset. I don’t want to talk about war and death and decisions. I’m sure Mary doesn’t either.’

The doorbell rang.

They listened in silence to Bridie walking down the hall. She opened the door and they could hear low voices coming closer. Bridie opened the dining-room door.

‘Yes Bridie, who is it?’

‘Them.’

Bridie’s voice was low and very serious. Nancy wanted to laugh.

Standing in front of them was a British Army officer.

‘Miss Dwyer?’ He looked around the table.

‘Come in. What can I do for you?’ said Aunt Mary.

‘My fellows are outside having a look round. I just wanted a word with you. Captain Rankin is my name.’

‘Good evening. Captain. Miss Celia Brabazon, Miss Georgina Brabazon, my father General Dwyer and my niece Nancy.’

The old man had stopped singing and was looking the soldier up and down.

‘Mary . .

‘Yes, darling?’

‘What’s that fellow doing here?’

‘He’s just come to ask a few questions.’ She turned to the young man. ‘I’m sorry my father is not quite . . .’

‘I told you I saw soldiers today.’

‘I expect you’ve heard about today’s tragedy, Miss Dwyer?’

The tall Miss Brabazon stood up and walked across the room towards him. She held out her hand. ‘We are all very sad about what happened.’

He took her hand and held it for a moment.

‘Now we really must go. We’ve had a terrible day.’

‘I’ll come to the door,’ said Aunt Mary, getting up. ‘Please excuse me for a moment.’

The three women left the room. Nancy stared out of the window. The soldier stood quite still just inside the door.

‘Gabriel. What happened to Gabriel?’

Nancy wondered if the old man wanted a reply.

Aunt Mary came back into the room. ‘I’m sorry. There are soldiers outside, Bridie says.’

‘They’re my men. We’re just having a look round. You see, we’re looking for this man. You see, he could be . . . dangerous.’

Nancy stood up. ‘I think I’ll go to bed.’

‘I’d rather you stayed. I’ve a few questions to ask. Only a minute or two.’

‘Yes, dear. You must stay. You’re looking for a man, you say?’

He took a photograph out of his pocket and handed it to her. ‘This is the man. Have you seen him around here? We believe that he’s in this neighbourhood. We’ve been looking for him for a very long time.’

There was a long silence while Aunt Mary studied the picture. Nancy pushed her hands into her pockets. She hoped they wouldn't still be shaking when they passed the photograph to her.

Aunt Mary shook her head slowly. 'It's strange. The face does seem familiar. Oh, very far away. No, I haven't seen that man. No.'

'Are you sure? It's very important.'

'I'm sure. It could be a face from the very distant past. Or not. I'm not sure.'

'General . . . ' Captain Rankin approached the old man with the picture in his hand.

'He never goes out. Never beyond the garden. He can't answer questions. He spends most of the time asleep.'

Grandfather's head had fallen forward on to his chest. His eyes were half open, but they saw nothing.

'Miss. . . er . . . Nancy?'

Nancy didn't take her hands out of her pockets. She looked down without moving at the photograph that the soldier had put on the table beside her. It was him. He was dressed in an officer's uniform and was standing in the door of an old house. The sun was shining. He looked young and healthy.

'No.'

'He wouldn't be dressed like that. Not now.'

She shook her head. 'No.'

He put the photo back into his top pocket. 'If you see any stranger around the area, tell us or the police. It's very important.'

'Is he a very dangerous man?' asked Aunt Mary.

'He's an organizer. An extremely violent rebel.'

'Oh!'

His face went red. 'You must help us. In every way. We strongly suspect he planned what happened this afternoon.'

‘We’ll do wliat we can. Captain Rankin. I’m sorry we haven’t been able to help you more.’

‘I won’t keep you any longer. Good-night.’

‘I saw a man on the railway line.’

As Grandfather spoke, Nancy watched the soldier turn and move back to the old man.

‘Sir’

‘A man on tbe railway line.’

‘Oh, Father dear, don’t be silly!’

‘When was this, sir?’

Nancy watched him take the photograph from his pocket. The old man shook his head. ‘I don’t remember.’

‘In the last few days? Today perhaps? Here, could this be the man?’

He pushed the picture into the old man’s hands. Grandfather stared at it for a long time. ‘That’s not my son,’ he said. ‘That’s not Gabriel.’

‘Darling, of course it’s not Gabriel.’

Aunt Mary crossed the room and took the picture from his fingers. She handed it back to the soldier.

‘I told you, he secs nothing except what he imagines. You mustn’t upset him. Please go now.’

‘Ask Nancy,’ said the old man. ‘She was talking to him.’ Nancy turned back towards them. ‘That was only a tramp. I told you that. It was Old Forty Coats. He’s always there.’

‘On the railway line?’

‘Well, yes. Anywhere. He comes and goes.’

‘He’s been walking around here since I was a child,’ said Aunt Mary. ‘He doesn’t cause any problems for anybody.’ ‘That’s who Grandfather saw me talking to.’

‘Is that correct, sir?’

‘Correct? Mary?’

‘It must have been, darling.’



‘Very well.’ He waved the soldier away.

The young officer nodded to Aunt Mary and then to Nancy.

‘Nancy, will you see Captain Rankin to the door? I must put Father to bed.’

They crossed the hall without saying a word. She opened the door. He stepped out and put his hat on. Away beyond the railway, the moon shone on the sea.

‘Good-night,’ he said.

‘Good-night.’

When she went back into the dining-room. Aunt Mary and Grandfather had gone. She switched off the light and pressed her hot face against the window. Eight or ten soldiers moved in line down the road leading from the house. Her head ached with fear. I suppose I’ve helped to kill twelve men, she thought. God forgive me for that.

Aunt Mary came over and stood beside her. The moon lit their faces. The soldiers were gone.

‘I think it’s a good thing we’re leaving here. I don’t want you to live with my ghosts.’

There was a long silence.

‘It wasn’t Old Forty Coats, was it?’

‘No.’ She was glad she had said it.

‘He hasn’t been around this area for a long time. I hope you’re not doing anything you’ll regret.’

‘How do you ever know?’

Aunt Mary sighed. ‘You don’t.’

‘The man in the picture? Who was he?’

‘Perhaps I’m not right about him. His face is just one of the shadows in my mind. They used to live over near the Cherry Orchard. Barry was their name. A long time ago . . . they sort of died out. Except Angus, the man in the picture. We used to call him “Angoose”.’ She smiled. ‘I thought that he

was probably dead too. Killed like . . . well, so many. I'm glad to think he's still alive, even if. . . Anyway, we'd better go to bed.'

'Yes.'

'We used to go to such lovely parties, and everyone seemed happy.'

'I don't suppose they were.'

'You don't want to tell me anything, do you, Nancy?'

'No.'

'Good-night, then.'

She ran across the fields and over the railway line and then down to the sand. If they were watching the railway line, she thought . . . oh, God, if they were watching the line! She ran straight down to the sea.

There was no sign of life at the hut. The old seagull sat on the roof. As she approached the door, she prayed that he would be gone, but he was there. He was lying in the corner, covered by the blanket. She left the door open behind her, and the silver moonlight followed her into the darkness.

'I thought I told you not to come back.'

He sat up slowly and looked at her.

'You must leave. I think they'll be here in the morning. They've been everywhere asking questions, searching. Grandfather told them he saw a man on the railway line. He didn't mean any . . .'

'That's all right, Nancy. I was going to go in the morning, now I'll go a bit earlier.'

He got up. He then bent down and picked up the blanket. There was a small bag beside the wall.

'Where will you go?'

'Away. I can't say more. I'm afraid I'm a very secret person.'

‘The soldier said you were dangerous.’

He laughed. ‘Good. I like them to think I’m dangerous.’ ‘Those twelve . . .’

He moved towards her. ‘I’m sorry, Nancy. They were dangerous too. Twelve new dangerous men. They had to be stopped. We have to win, Nancy. The people have to win. That’s very important.’

‘You make it sound important.’

Suddenly above them the seagull on the roof awoke. Slowly it stretched its wings and took off, flying away towards the sea.

‘I think you should go.’

‘Yes.’ He picked up his bag.

‘Are you Angus Barry?’

‘Do you ever give up, young lady? Whatever I was, I certainly am no longer.’

‘But could I think of you as that person?’

‘If it gives you pleasure.’

He picked up her right hand and kissed it.

‘So with an Angus Barry kiss I leave you. I’ll be all right. I have a place to go where I’ll be safe.’

She nodded.

‘Will you stay here a little while after I’ve gone?’

She smiled at him. ‘I’ll clean up for you.’

They moved to the door and stood close together, looking out at the world.

‘It’s cold,’ she said.

‘It’s always cold at this time of night.’

Somewhere up the beach a stone fell.

‘Go.’

‘Yes. I hope I haven’t done you too much harm.’

‘Just go.’

He stepped out of the hut and began to walk towards the sea.

‘Stop!’

A line of men came out of the darkness, stretching from the railway right down to the edge of the sea. He walked on. His feet moved through the little white waves.

‘Stop!’

If he swam, he might get away. She ran down the sand towards him.

‘Run! They’re here! Run! Swim! Please!’

‘There is no use in running or swimming. Major Barry,’ an officer’s voice called from the darkness.

He stopped walking and turned. The water was covering his good leather shoes.

‘Go back, Nancy,’ he said. ‘Go back now. This minute.’

‘They’re here,’ was all she could reply.

‘Throw your bag and gun down on the sand. Major Barry. Don’t do anything foolish. We’ll shoot both you and the girl if you do anything stupid.’

The man stood quite still.

‘The girl knows nothing about this. She’s a child. She brought me a few bits of food. She knows nothing. Let her out of here safely. Then I promise, you can take me.’

‘Oh, no!’

‘Gun and bag on the sand.’

‘When you let the girl out. I’m not telling you a lie.’

‘All right. The girl can go.’

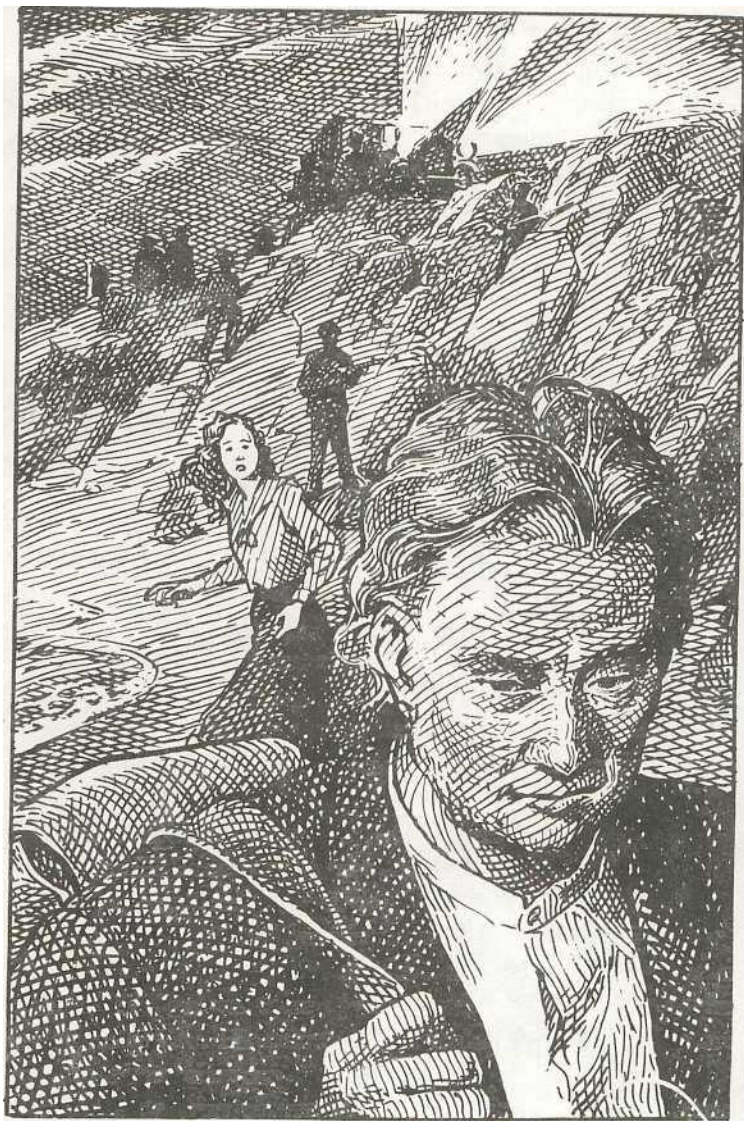
She looked at him across the few feet between them. He smiled at her.

‘Go now, Nancy. Just walk through them and keep on walking until you get home.’

‘What will happen?’

‘Nothing will happen. They’ll take me to prison. That’s all. Turn round and walk.’

She turned round and faced the soldiers.



*She ran down the sand towards him.  
'Run! They're here! Run! Swim! Please!'*

‘Goodbye.’

‘*All reuoir.*’

‘Thank you,’ she said, and started to walk.

She walked through the soldiers and up towards the railway line, then she stopped and looked back. He had thrown his bag on to the sand and was searching in his pocket for the gun. He took it out and looked at it for a moment, and then threw it down beside the bag. Then they shot him. Two. Three shots. She started running.

‘No, no, no!’

Four. Five. Six. Making sure.

Running towards him.

They caught her just before she reached the body, touched now by the gentle sea.

‘No!’

Two men were bent over him.

‘Please,’ she said to one of the men. ‘Please let me help him.’

He laughed. ‘That poor fellow doesn’t need help any more.’

**‘Why? He said you’d put him in prison. Why?’**

‘Don’t ask me, lady. We only obey orders.’

‘Take that girl home, one of you. Back where she came from.’

‘I can go home alone. I don’t need anyone to take me.’

‘Corporal Tweedie, take the girl home. And tell her parents from us that she should keep out of trouble.’

The engine of a boat sounded in the distance.

‘Come along with me. Miss.’ Corporal Tweedie’s voice was kind.

Her face was wet with tears that she hadn’t noticed pouring from her eyes. Corporal Twee’die gave her a gentle push in the direction of the railway line. She started to walk. He followed her.

Up on the line she looked back. Two soldiers were lifting the body into the boat.

‘What will they do with him?’ She asked the question quietly.

He didn’t answer, and afterwards they walked in silence.

At the gate she turned to him. ‘I go up here. It’s all right. You can leave me now.’

‘But I’ve got orders to take you to the house.’

‘I’ll go straight there. I promise.’

‘All right. You go home to bed. And don’t tell anyone what you saw or you’ll be in serious trouble.’

‘I’d really like to know why they did that.’

‘They make the decisions, we do what we’re told. That’s life.’

‘I don’t think he saw it like that.’

‘That’s why they wanted him dead. Go home now. Miss.’

He turned and walked away.

She awoke the next morning as usual to the sound of Aunt Mary preparing her bath. I must get up, she thought, and then she remembered what had happened in the night! Or perhaps it had been a dream? If she went down to the hut, he would still be there, sitting with his back to the wall, reading. Had he, in fact, existed? She felt so full of sadness.

There were no papers on Sunday, so Aunt Mary was reading a book when Nancy went into the dining-room. ‘Good morning, dear. I hope you slept well.’

Nancy kissed her aunt.

‘I wonder if they found the man they were looking for. I do hope it isn’t poor Angoose . . . Harry and Maeve are coming to lunch. I hope you’ll behave well.’

‘I will. Honestly.’

‘That’s good, dear. In a way I hope they don’t find him. I’d hate to think of anything terrible happening to him.’ She closed her book. ‘It really hasn’t been a very happy few days.’ ‘No.’

‘I hear that Harry and Maeve are going to get married. Does that upset you?’

Nancy thought about it.

‘No. Not a bit. Isn’t that funny?’

‘That’s all right, then. I wouldn’t like you to be upset.’ Nancy began to collect the dirty plates from the table. I ought to cry, but I can’t. Anger and pain.

The great thing is that you can always choose. You’ve no one to blame but yourself.



## EXERCISES

### Vocabulary Work

Look again at the 'Dictionary Words' in this book. Check that you understand the meaning of all the words,

1 Choose the right word to go with each definition below.

*witch*                      *faith*                      *communist*                      *stockbroker*  
*beat* (verbi              *tram*                      *point*                      *hymn*

a A religious song.

b A narrow bit of land going into the sea. c Someone who works in the money markets, d Someone who believes in a society where people would be equal.

e An electric bus.

f Belief in God, or in a person or an idea, g To make a regular movement or sound, h A woman who uses magic.

2 Put each group of words into a sentence which shows you know the meaning of them. You can use the words in any order you like.

a footprints/beach/tramp b

hut/seagull c

police/traitor/informer d

immature/blushed e

binoculars/horse racing

### Comprehension

*Pages 7-(top of) 21*

- 1 What do we know about Nancy's family?
- 2 Why does Nancy like going to the hut on the beach?

*Pages 21-31*

- 3 What is mysterious about the man on the beach?
- 4 What does Nancy think of the soldiers?

*Pages 31—45*

- 5 What is Aunt Mary afraid might happen?
- 6 Why are Aunt Mary and Harry angry with Nancy?

*Pages 45-56*

- 7 What does 'the stranger' ask Nancy to do?
- 8 What does Joe Mulhare want to do with his life?

*Pages 58-76*

- 9 What do the Miss Brabazons see on their day out?
- 10 Why does the captain want to find 'the stranger'?
- 11 What does Nancy find out about the man on the beach the first time she meets him?
- 12 Why does the man on the beach later show Nancy his gun?
- 13 Nancy tells the man on the beach that Grandfather 'doesn't miss much that happens on that railway line' (p. 46). What does Grandfather see, and why is it important in the story?
- 14 'You're not one of us . . . Joe says to Nancy (p. 54). He says the same thing about the man on the beach. What does he mean?
- 15 What do these people think about each other:
  - a Nancy and Harry?
  - b Nancy and Maeve?
  - c Harry and Maeve?
  - d Joe and Nancy?

Discussion

- 1 Read page 35 again. What do you think about the stranger's opinion of war?
- 2 At the time this book was set. 1920, Ireland was struggling for

Home Rule. Whose side would you be on in this story, the side of the rebels or the side of the soldiers? Why?

- 3 'There are worse things than killing going on in the world . ' the man on the beach says to Nancy. What does he mean? Do you agree? Is it true today as well as then?

### Writing

- 1 Soon after Nancy gives the letter to Joe, the British soldiers are killed. In about 50 words, write what you think was in the letter.
- 2 Pretend you are Nancy. Write your diary entry for your 19th birthday, a year after the events of this book. Write your thoughts, feelings and memories as well as the facts (250 words).

### Review

- 1 At the beginning of the book, Nancy writes in her diary: 'My life is in front of me . . .' (p. 7). How has she changed by the end of the book? What has she learned about herself or about other people, and the world beyond her home?
- 2 What sort of story is *The Old Jest*? A love story? An adventure story? A war story? A story about growing up? Give reasons for your description of it.