

Baby Mice

*There's a hole in my bucket, dear Liza, dear Liza,
 There's a hole in my bucket, dear Liza, a hole.
 Then fix it, dear Henry, dear Henry, dear Henry,
 Oh fix it, dear Henry, dear Henry, fix it.*

THE SMALL GIRL, STANDING IN FRONT OF THE BLACKBOARD, arms akimbo, curly head prettily tilted, mouth round and pink, clearly enunciating each open vowel and delicate consonant, is only getting started.

I know this song; I've heard this song before. This is a song about nothing happening. This is a song about an empty bucket.

I can't read the singing girl's name badge, but I can see her blue T-strap sandals. Those are her indoor shoes. I didn't see her outdoor shoes yet, or her ballet shoes, or her plimsolls. Those other shoes are hanging in her shoe bag, in the cloakroom. Just like mine.

*With what shall I fix it, dear Liza, dear Liza?
 With what shall I fix it, dear Liza, with what?*

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We listen, seated. Low Babies, we are called. We are in Low Babies. Next year we will be in High Babies. We are small, grey, low-baby mice in roomy grey pullovers. The low-baby boys wear grey flannel shorts, the low-baby girls grey pleated skirts, both gathered over knees bruised from summer. We sit two by two, our indoor shoes neatly held together under the rectangular desks, four small soles, as clean and unsullied as our own, still, unmoved by the music.

Sister Celestine tells us to listen, and we do.

‘Éistigí!’ she says. ‘Listen!’

I say ‘we’ cautiously, because ‘we’ don’t exist yet. We are yet to become a class, a society, one obedient, punishable, entity.

For now, we are a spillage, a collection of four-year-old girls and boys, on the first day of school, whose mothers maybe, but most probably whose fathers (as they are the ones who make the important decisions), have singled us out for a private education. An exclusive education, in the great big red-bricked convent school that sits like a dowager’s hat or, in certain lights, a bishop’s mitre on top of our brand-new parish.

Some of us, the sharper knives in our midst, those among us who have chosen seats quickly (instead of lingering by the door wondering whether it was safe to cross the sea of parquet flooring, whether we might ever relinquish our grip on the creamy frame and push out into this polished ocean), those of us with a bit of wit and savvy, those of us who already know how to tie our shoelaces and straighten our Alice bands, those of us who dared to stare straight back at Sister Celestine when she

asked our name, pen poised in bone-thin finger (rather than look down at the scrubbed wooden desk and walk our small fingers around the open hole for the inkwell), those warriors, those surefooted Indians, who know instinctively to put their hand up before talking, those squaws, those braves, are probably aged five already.

Five. Half of your fingers. Five. At four and four months, I am not one of the advancing posse. I am not yet a sharpened knife.

The shoe bag hanging in the cloakroom, beyond the classroom door, is a worry. What if it's not there at the end of the day? When is the end of the day? How will we recognize it?

In my school bag I have diluted MiWadi orange in a washed-out glass bottle, and in my lunch box two jam sandwiches and two buttered Marietta biscuits. Lunch box: another unwieldy possession. Low Babies have lots of possessions. Lists of necessary accoutrements came in the post, things that we now must recognize and know, things that we own. Our possessions have our names sewn or clearly written on them. My proper name is written on the badge that the nun pinned to my sweater, a name I always fail to recognize as my own. Here I won't be called Billy, my better name. If my name tag said Billy, they'd think I was a boy.

Yesterday we Low Babies owned nothing. Yesterday we just had things. Found and familiar things, friendly things: a hair slide, a kilt pin, a matchbox filled with cotton wool (a bed for the ladybird who died in its sleep), a crocheted hat, two Liquorice Allsorts, a doll's pram with earwigs gathering under the spokes of the red hood.

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'Earwigs are drawn to red,' my mother says, eyes on the mirror above her dressing table, rimming her mouth with carmine, in preparation for her walk to the butcher's shop.

'Eahwigs ah dwhan to hed,' she says, the crayon going around and around her open mouth as she watches herself in the mottled glass for any sign of weakness.

Today we Low Babies are stunned by responsibility. We are shellshocked. We have shirts and ties – real ties – and gym slips and pinafores and winter vests and summer vests and pants and kneesocks and long ribbed tights and school bags called *málas*, where we are to keep our copybooks and our sharpened pencils and ink pens with refills and our book of mathematical tables. The book of mathematical tables hisses at me when I lift a corner of its cover. I put it into my new bag slowly, slowly, slowly, so as not to wake up the numbers inside.

And shoes, so many shoes. Shoes with buckles and laces and straps. And a gabardine in winter, and a blazer in spring, and a grey beret, embroidered with the school crest, to be worn regardless of the season.

The boys wear a grey cap.

There are fewer boys than girls in Low Babies. They are a dying breed; we know already that their presence is finite. At the age of six, after first Holy Communion, they will be sent to a different school. At the age of six it will no longer be deemed desirable that we share a classroom.

Everybody knows that the boys have to be shown to the priests before they are seven, so that the priests can look inside and show the world the man.

Anyway, we will be doing knitting, and boys don't knit.

'You have responsibilities,' Sister Celestine tells us, but

I'm not sure if I have. There are none in my pencil case; I hope she won't be cross.

'There are three facts about nuns,' the curly-haired singing girl tells us at little break, spreading her skirt out over her bench and brushing crumbs from her concertinaed pleats.

I squeeze my Marietta biscuits together, make the butter wriggle out of the perforated holes like curious worms.

The singing girl takes a breath, fortifies herself with milk from her Tupperware beaker. She is having a busy morning. There are verses and verses of Liza and Henry to go after break. And now facts as well, nun facts.

'Three important facts,' she says, a little moustache of milk snowcapping her industrious mouth.

The boys stay down the back of the classroom, hands in the pockets of their shorts, eyeing each other like fighters, staking out their territory around the bare nature table. Sister Celestine has gone to the staffroom for her cup of tea. We are marooned. Unsupervised, tears tap on the glass, asking if they can fall.

'Three very important facts. Fact one: nuns are married to God. Fact two: nuns are bald.'

The curly girl is using all her expressions in one go, like Shirley Temple in a candy store. She is too busy with her face to feel frightened. She shakes her head from side to side in astonishment, nods it up and down for maximum veracity, and, once she has drawn all the tiny girl mice into her narrative, folds her dimpled fingers under her sweetheart chin and begins doling out fact three.

'Fact three . . .'

A girl sits beside me, offering a bite of her banana;

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her breathing sounds like a faraway train. I decline the banana. The girl is full of objects: pink metal clips hold her blue Alice band in place, two pink bobbins divide her dark-brown hair into short ponytails. Her grey eyes are wide awake but circled with sleeplessness, or maybe with the effort of driving her breath. She looks like a decorative raccoon.

‘Fact three: nuns go to bed at eight o’clock and don’t get any Christmas presents except a bar of soap and a holy picture. This makes them miserable when they are alive, but when they die they actually get married to God, properly, in heaven, and have wedding dresses and actual hair and lace veils and a tiara, and they really cheer up, and that’s called sacrifice. And people who get married on earth are just souls when they die, and they have no bodies and they can’t eat, because they have no mouths and they just float around God like clouds.’

‘Do nuns have bodies when they’re dead?’

My voice sounds like it’s hiding under a stone.

‘Of course they have bodies. They have wedding dresses and they go to the pictures, they have to have bodies.’

The raccoon girl smiles at me with her moon-ringed eyes, and shrugs her delicate shoulders. I bite into my biscuit.

No one else volunteers to sing, so, after little break, we carry on with Liza’s long walk to where she had started from. Precisely nowhere, and with a permanent hole in her bucket.

With what shall I fix it, dear Henry, dear Henry? With what shall I fix it, dear Henry, with what?

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It transpires that responsibilities are things we absolutely have to do. One of our new responsibilities is to hang up our gabardines on the correct hook. My hook has a picture of two yellow fishes on it. I would prefer a picture of a dog, but the dog hook has gone to a boy with a harelip and a famous father.

It is also our responsibility, Sister Celestine tells us, to wear the right shoes, at the right time, on the right day, in the right place.

The long, polished corridors in the convent school, which run between the classrooms and the lunch room, the assembly hall and the convent chapel, are tiled in blue and white and black. We are to walk on the black tiles when we are wearing our outdoor shoes, on the blue tiles when we wear our indoor shoes, and when we are shod in our plimsolls or our ballet shoes the white tiles are our reward.

This is a rule. Fact one: a rule is not for measurement. Fact two: a rule is unbreakable. Fact three: there are more rules than facts.

Another rule is never to speak in the toilet and to always wash your hands carefully and then dry them on the single communal towel.

There must be a pattern to the tiles, or maybe the pattern has to give way to the shape of the polished corridors. Blue tile, black shoe; black tile, blue shoe; white tile, canvas shoe. Walking becomes geometric, squared, rooted. Sometimes the tiles swerve and dissolve, rearrange themselves underfoot to swoop and fall. Sometimes the tiles startle. A sudden blast of the Angelus bells or a loud hymn summoning you to the chapel altar and, flock-like,

the tiles take off, landing you in front of an alcove and a plaster saint.

In every alcove, at every turn on those chequered convent streets, a plinth bears a statue. Usually the painted plaster statue is Mary. Mary is the Mother of God. She is also the nuns' Mother, and our Mother.

Even though we have a human mother, Mary is an extra mother, a holy mother, not the same kind of mother as your mother at home in front of the dressing table. The human, lipstick mother cooks fish fingers and draws a beauty spot on her face with her eyebrow pencil and whips off one bulbous earring when she answers the telephone, pressing her ear into the receiver, willing it to spit out the bad news.

Mary, Mother of God, has no make-up, but she does have various aliases. She is variously known as Holy Mary, Hail Mary, and sometimes as the Virgin Mary.

Sister Celestine says that Mary was 'no more than a child' when she was tasked with being the Mother of God. Mary is easily hurt, she says, and that is the main thing about her. Even though she isn't actually alive, she is often hurt by our thoughts and by our deeds.

Mary, whiplashed by selfishness and lies and vanity and talking in the toilets, is bruised if we walk on the wrong tiles, pinched and prodded if our fingers fall from our lips at quiet time.

Poor sore Mary. We are the fruit in her womb.

The Virgin Mary/Holy Mary/Hail-Mary-full-of-grace is often found, on her plinth, holding the baby Jesus in the crook of her arm. The baby Jesus is also just called Jesus, and every now and then Jesus is called the Lamb of God.

Which is a whole other ball game in the deity hierarchy, and remains unexplained by Sister Celestine.

The main thing about Jesus, it seems, besides dying for our sins, curing lepers, turning water into wine and loaves into fishes (loads and loads of loaves into fishes), is that he has a father called Our Father. And Our Father forgives trespasses.

Baby Jesus, sitting there swaddled in the crook of his mother's sculpted elbow, impenetrable and omnipotent as a judge, looks like a small man. An all-knowing, on-top-of-his-game, in-the-driving-seat, ahead-of-the-pack man.

The baby Jesus also has eyebrows on his plaster face, which I want to rub out with my India rubber. Arched, sceptical eyebrows, almost as if the statue artist didn't think that Baby Jesus could take the weight of the world on his small shoulders without them.

Mary, Mary, quite contrary. Holy Mary is an awful worrier, you don't need Sister Celestine to tell you that. Mary, Mary, Mother of God, sighing and weeping and gazing at the ceiling and beseeching and beseeching. And the weight of that plaster baby-man in her child's frail arms, with the weight of the world on the baby-man's shoulders. Tasked with holding him and the world there all night and day and day and night, and where is God when you need him? God, who could have sent a cloud to carry him.

Little break is long over, the song interminable. Henry has just told Liza to fix the bucket with straw.

'Straaaw?' says Raccoon Girl, who has changed places and is now sitting beside me.

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'Straaaw?' I say back, because that's what you do when you are friends.

Predictably, the straw is too long to fix the bucket, and has to be cut. But now the knife is blunt, and the stone is dry, and to sharpen the knife the stone must be wet.

'Wehhht?'

'Wehhht?'

I look to the ceiling and beseech God to make the curly-haired girl stop singing about this useless bucket that will leak for all eternity. I don't like Henry, or Liza. I don't like the way they taunt each other with polite questions. Henry and Liza haaate each other, plain as day.

With what shall I? With what shall I? With what shall I?

All the time ignoring the axe. We've all forgotten the axe. Of course.

With an axe, said Henry, said Henry, said Henry.

With an axe, said Henry, said Henry, with an axe.

That puts a stop to their gallop.

But there's still a hole in the bucket. Forever.

Sister Celestine claps. Small hands, brush, brush. We clap. We are 'we' now.

Outside it is September. Yellow. Sea mist and late sun smudged around the edges of the day.

'We will go on our first nature walk tomorrow,' Sister Celestine says. 'Tomorrow we will walk around the convent grounds in our outdoor shoes.'

The girl who sang the endless song might be called

Claudette or maybe Bernadette. Claudette, if that's her name (which would be exciting, because everyone else is called Mary or Siobhan or Margaret, although some people are called Susan, which is a sunny name), has two kittens. Two.

She tells Sister Celestine that when she goes home she's going to put a nylon housecoat on over her brand-new uniform, to protect it from scratches and stains, and clean out the kittens' box. Sister Celestine is impressed with the housecoat; I am impressed with the litter.

Raccoon Girl has a picture of a piglet over her gabardine. Her name is Norhannah, which also isn't Mary.

'My name is Norhannah, but you can call me Norah.'

I tell her my name is Billy, but she has to call me by my written-down name because that is the name on the big school form.

Sister Celestine tells us that God can see us everywhere, and then Mary Harper with the holes in her earlobes asks if he can even see us when we are in the toilet, and Sister Celestine looks terribly disappointed by the question, and whispers: 'Yes, Mary, yes, if you insist.'

On that first day, when I get home from school, I run into the coal shed in our back garden, where even the walls are black with soot, and where bodiless arms sometimes wriggle out between the coal nuggets to drag you down down down. I run in there and shut the door, even though I am more frightened than I've ever been.

'What are you doing?' asks my mother, lighting a cigarette in the back stoop, the tip between her glossy lips, the

brown filter ringed with the red imprint of her mouth. 'Ot are ou oeing?'

'Can he see me?' I whisper through the warped wooden coal-shed door. 'Can God see me in here? Can he?'

'Of course he bloody can't,' says my mother, and goes to pick an earwig out of the dahlias.

'Our Father forgives us our trespasses,' I tell my own father, who has a tangerine shirt and a sports jacket with elbow patches.

'Terrific. Do you think he could get the starter to turn over?'

We are late again. My gabardine is letting the fish hook down.



IN 1966, WHICH IS AS NEAR TO THE BEGINNING AS BEGINNINGS ever are, there is the road we live on, a suburban road, long and straight, semi-detached houses sitting two by two along both sides, each two-storey house dressed in identical brick skirts and pebbledashed cardigans, each twosome knitted together at the seams by black guttering.

Between each house a low garden wall separates two identical front gardens, each with mirrored puddles of grass and a tarmacadam pocket on which to park the family car. Each house is accessorized by a flat-roofed garage at its opposite elbow, a practical addition in which to store mousetraps and paraffin and broken things and tins of baked beans and picnic salmon in case the world ends.

There are six of us in my family. My father, with blue

eyes and suede shoes and untipped cigarettes and a waterproof wristwatch that tells him where he is really supposed to be. My mother, with red lipstick and a piano that she stands beside, singing notes and scales. The sounds drift out of her glowing mouth like small fishes trapped in bubbles; the notes float up to the low ceiling and hang there, unheard, until they dry up and fall on to the floor.

Also in my house are my siblings, three of them. Sibling is a difficult word to fully understand. My siblings are each other's brother and sisters. I'm not altogether sure if, or how, they are related to me. They are older than me. As much as a whole decade older. They wear bellbottom jeans and listen to the Beatles.

My siblings amount to two smoky-eyed older sisters, Louise and Anna. Louise is eleven months older than Anna, which makes them fifteen and fourteen. They sleep in twin beds in the same darkened room, and use the telephone a lot, and they iron each other's long wavy hair to make it dead straight.

I also have a boy sibling, my brother, John, who is thirteen months younger than Anna, and who has brown eyes and curly dark hair, and who I frequently meet under the dining-room table for meetings.

My siblings painted the walls inside of the garage lime-green and pink. Sometimes they sit in there, on old car seats and a broken stepladder, to talk in whispers about important things. I am not allowed to join them. Anyway, I really only ever go into the garage to look at the three glass jars of baby beetroot on the garage shelves. They stand next to the remaining tins of Batchelors beans, most of which were eaten when Russia and America stopped

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shouting at each other about Cuba. (Now they are just muttering under their breath.) The baby beetroots look festive under the stretched fluorescent garage light, purple bauble on purple bauble. You could nearly look forward to Armageddon, John says.

I usually look forward to Christmas, but I'll ask Norah what Armageddon is, and then maybe I can look forward to that too.

I am the youngest. By a long shot. I don't know of what.

I am two things, depending on who you are talking to or who the person talking about you is talking to. Mainly I am 'the Baby', but I am also 'the Mistake'.

Each house on our road has a sheltered porch and a front door featuring a playful fan of bubbled glass, and a knocker like a cheap buckle, and an electric bell and a provocative slit, low down, for the postman, who doesn't have a bad back, yet, to post the tax demands through.

My father collects the post in the mornings, bending down to pick up the brown envelopes, then running his thumb over the dry manila and putting the offending bills in his pocket.

I like our porch. Our porch is a castle and a dungeon and an aeroplane. Our porch is Australia and France and a car. It is a swimming pool and a department store and sometimes, if we are feeling brave, it is a lunatic asylum that Norah and I incarcerate all the lunatics in, and then throw away the key. We run then, fast down to the bottom of our road, so as not to hear the crazy people scream. We run and run, and then I turn to see if Norah is at my back, and see her holding on to a neighbour's pillar,

smiling, bent forwards, waving down her breath, asking it to fill her lungs again.

I don't like scary games, I don't like when we people the porch with big imaginings. I like when Norah and I sit on the porch, dressed in bedsheets after a satisfying game of emperors, to discuss Protestants. Norah has heard that they have black marks on their souls, and maybe we should look for those as a test.

The porch, in reality the size of two spread-out handkerchiefs, is also where the woman from the caravans sometimes sits to drink the tea my mother carries out to her, tea from a pastel-coloured teacup on a pastel-coloured saucer.

'Sugar?' my mother enquires, her painted-on eyebrow prettily arching.

'Yes, ma'am,' the woman replies. 'God be good to you.'

God hasn't been particularly good to my mother, but then God has been even worse to the caravan woman, whose face is bruised by sun and fist and wind, and whose mottled legs grow out of ankle-socks that should be worn by a man and shouldn't be worn with broken sling-back sandals.

But we don't know any of that yet. In the beginning, we are unaware of God's plan.

'What's wrong with the caravan woman?' I ask my mother. 'Where is her house? Why does she drink her tea on the porch? Why doesn't she come inside?'

'She doesn't like the inside,' says my mother. 'She lives on the road.'

'Is she drawn to roads?'

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In the summery autumn of 1966, in that newly built suburb, north of Dublin town, days are dawning fresh as a daisy under a blameless sun. The angel-blue sky, carefully coloured in right up to the edges. Clouds sail by puffy and white, scarred by the occasional jet stream, which causes us children, lying now on our backs in the stubbled grass of our back garden, to look up.

'That aeroplane is from America.' Norah exhales, bees buzzing in her chest. She sits up to cough.

'Maybe it's from Paris,' I reply.

'Paris,' my mother sighs, unpegging her good black slip and my father's tangerine shirt, hanging out Louise and Anna's nylon night-and-day dresses. 'Paris. Christ.'

She lifts the sky-blue plastic washing basket from the dry grass, mounts the three steep steps to the back door, basket on her hip. 'Paris.'

My mother sounds as if the Henry in the Liza-and-Henry song has stepped out of his long dirge to fix the bucket, axe out her insides and fill her full of straw. I watch until even her shadow disappears inside the house.

'Parisians have very complicated underwear,' Norah says, exhaling slowly, catching her breath train. 'And they eat raw mince and feed their little dogs under the table, and then lick their own fingers.'

It's Saturday. My mother is frying bread and eggs and mushrooms and tomatoes and bacon in a pan on the electric cooker. My father is propping up his forehead with his hands, elbows resting on the yellow Formica table.

'I have news,' she says. 'I'm joining the Red Cross Hospital Chorus. I'm going to sing again. It's a wonderful

organization, lovely people, singers who want to sing. Sing to the sick. Folk songs. Light opera. Modern classics.'

She flips the egg, breaks into the opening bars of Gilbert and Sullivan's 'Three Little Maids from School', which makes Liza and Henry's sad ballad sound positively groovy. My father winces in slow motion, like the sound hurts.

'I'm hoping to bring a little bit of Judy Collins to the table.'

'Who is Judy Collins?' my father mouths to me.

'She's a singer lady on the radio who turns turns turns. Turns and turns and turns. Turns and turns and turns and turns.'

'Right. Right.' His eyes are pink, the air around him smells like metal.

'We will travel to hospitals and homes the length and breadth of the country to sing to the sick and the clinically insane.'

'Actual lunatics?' I ask.

'Possibly. Although I don't think they're called that any more.'

'That should be a barrel of laughs,' says my father, eyes watering, little nests of spittle forming at the corners of his mouth.

His blue, pink-rimmed eyes close. He fails entirely to notice the fried egg torpedoing from the frying pan, glancing off the Styrofoam ceiling board, hovering like an alien craft above his head. He does not see the two slices of fried bread boomerang around the sunny kitchen, the slivers of airborne back bacon crash-land by his new suede shoes, the fried tomatoes falling heavily like wrinkled

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missiles, the mushrooms raining bullet-like over the shiny Saturday table.

Outside our forest-green, bubble-glass front door is our newly built road, the gleaming pavement beyond our gate neatly punctuated by evenly planted saplings. Delicate, hopeful little trees, clutching at the sandy dry soil, wondering if this new earth would hold them.

Outside our forest-green, bubble-glass front door, neighbours sweep their porches, wash important cars, walk purposefully up to the newsagent at the top of the road for a packet of Sweet Afton and an inky newspaper. They pop into the grocer's for a bunch of bananas and a tin of mushy peas, visit the long pale butcher in his cold white shop for six pork chops, the tips of their polished shoes pushing into the blood-speckled sawdust that covers his morgue-like floor. They remember, too, to drop into the chemist's shop and pick up a tin of Alka-Seltzer and a packet of barley sweets from the grim, beetroot-coloured pharmacist in his wire-framed glasses, the sweet packet, when he pushes it across the wooden countertop, dwarfed by his great big pharmaceutical fist. They might pause then to nod at his silent wife, captive behind the wooden counter, a mouse-like child by her feet.

Our next-door neighbour has loads of babies. Girl babies. One after the other, baby girls tumbled out of their smiling mother like spongy acrobats. Those babies have no eyebrows, just big solemn eyes. Ensconced in their shared pram, the babies watch, from over the low back-garden wall, my mother peg up the washing. Stilled by the sight of her long red nails snapping open the dry pegs,

the girl babies sit unblinking in the pale sun, eyebrow-less spectators, in their bleached, dry-grass back garden.

‘Which one is that?’ my mother says, a wooden clothes peg between her white teeth, my father’s pocket handkerchiefs frothy pennants trying to take off in the breeze.

‘Whikoneistaht?’

In the kitchen, my mother, small and perfectly formed, her painted eyebrows and cuticle-creamed fingertips minor players in the orchestra of her beauty, pours out a cup of tea for the caravan woman, who has come knocking on the Saturday door and is sitting now on our gleaming porch, waiting for refreshments, unaware of the breakfast casualties scattered, limb-torn, across the kitchen floor. My mother, carefully avoiding stepping on to the beached egg, places four Marietta biscuits on a lemon-yellow side plate, next to the cup and saucer, pours milk from the bottle into the pale-blue jug, refills the sugar from its paper packet into the pale-pink bowl. Stepping over the sunken tomato missiles, the blunted mushroom bullets, the broken back rashers, she smooths down her Crimplene skirt, pats her back-comb, picks up the neatly set tray and, as she taxis down the narrow hall towards the front porch – where the caravan woman still sits, waiting patiently, biding her time, taking the weight off her bare, broken-veined legs – smilingly acknowledges herself in the sun-shaped hallway mirror, its golden spokes radiating out from its glass orb, her own lovely face at its epicentre, its point of fusion.

‘Join me in a cup, ma’am, and I’ll read the leaves for you.’

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My mother hesitates.

'Sure, what harm could it do you, ma'am, to glance into the future?'

What harm could it do me, thinks my mother, turning on her pretty heel to fetch herself a nice clean cup. Probably no harm at all, because what happens happens, and what doesn't happen doesn't happen, and we're really none the wiser anyway.