

A Tea Party

The baby smells of the milk that Mum leaves on the windowsill to go sour for making scones. Mum takes the nappy to the bucket in the bathroom, scrapes the poo into the toilet with a knife then sticks it in to soak. Sometimes I stir the nappies around with the big wooden tongs that Mum uses to lift the washing from the twin tub. Deeter Doh-er, Deeter Doh-er, clunking and chunking, Deeter Doh-er, then she lifts the steaming nappies into the sink to rinse off the bubbles, and then into the spin drier. It starts slow then screeches faster and faster, like a rocket ship taking off, and the twin tub dances across the floor, clunk-a, clunk-a. Mum lifts the lid and the clothes are pinned to the side like the people on that ride when the funfair came to Epsom Downs. They're turning slower now. I want to put my hand in and feel what the clothes are feeling, dizzy, but I mustn't stick my fingers in or I'll end up like that man in the corner shop who has a finger that stops halfway. We must pray for him, like when I prayed to get a kitten. Praying doesn't always get what you want, but you have to do it just in case, or horrible things might happen, like dying with a sin on your soul. That's why babies have to be baptised, to get rid of Original Sin. The priest washes it off with holy water. It's like washing poo off the nappies, except you can't put a baby in the washing machine, so the priest has to do it. He makes the sign of the cross on the baby's forehead with his thumb. That puts God in. God is in the priest's thumb.

Babies can't swim, so they only have the water on their head. I can nearly swim. I've been going to Epsom Baths with the school. We walk there in a crocodile, two by two, holding hands, and I'm always paired with Susan Saunders. There are four Susans in my class and five Catherines, but they are all called something different: two Cathys, One Kate, one Katie and a Catherine.

Uncle Michael doesn't live with us any more, now the new baby is here, as there isn't room. He's in digs now. Digs is where a lady cooks you breakfast and dinner, but you're not allowed to watch telly with her, only go in the kitchen for meals, and you have to pay her so much a week, and you get a bedroom. Sometimes all to yourself and sometimes with other men who might be friends or you might not even know them. Uncle Michael doesn't like it in digs. He meets Dad in the White Horse after work, and they stay there all evening, so he doesn't have to go back too early. Dad hardly ever comes home for his dinner these days; he goes straight to the pub. He doesn't say prayers with us either, as he's not there at bedtime, though sometimes he does and he brings back crisps and lemonade from the White Horse and bars of Cadbury's Dairy Milk that Charlie keeps behind the bar for when we play in the pub garden. There's something in the 'Our Father' about crisps: *give us our crisps as we forgive them that trespass against us*. It's the prayer that makes our father give us crisps, so Maggie and me keep saying it, even though Dad isn't there to help us.

Sometimes I wait and wait for Dad's donkey jacket to be on its hook in the hall and it's not there when I go to bed, and it's not there when I get up in the morning 'cause he's already gone to work.

Uncle Michael was funny when he first came over – that's what they call it when someone comes on the boat from Ireland, coming over. He came back with us when we'd been 'home' on holiday – that's what Mum calls it, going home. His mouth was hanging open when we got off the train at Euston, and he was staring. You don't get that many people in one place where he lived, in Ennistymon. Mum told him

to stop catching flies, and did he want people to think he was bog Irish? Some people think Irish people aren't very clever, and you mustn't give them any ammunition.

He used to say hello to everyone in the street, like they do in Ireland, but Mum told him people don't do that in England, and he'd end up in West Park, which is the loony bin where she used to work before having us.

Uncle Michael gave me a tea set for my birthday. It has pink and blue flowers on it. There are little slots in the cardboard box for the saucers, and they stand upright, but slanting forwards, and there are round holes to put the cups in. There aren't any spoons. It's the best present I've ever had, but I didn't get to keep it nice for long. I got called to dinner, and left the tea set on the floor, and Brendan broke a cup. He cried, as he'd cut his finger on a sharp bit, then I cried when I saw what he'd done, and Mum got cross and told me to stop making such a racket as I'd set the baby off, and didn't she have enough to worry about without an old teacup. It wasn't old at all. Brendan didn't even get smacked, as he's only two, and I have to make allowances for him. I had a pain in my tummy when Mum threw the broken bits in the bin. I hate Brendan. I pinched him hard when no one was looking, then Mum got cross with him when he cried too long and set the baby off again. Crying just makes grown-ups angry; it never seems to be all right to cry.

I have tea parties with Maggie, and sometimes with Sindy and my teddies. I pretend to be Mum, and Maggie is Auntie Joan, and we talk like they do when Mum gets the Maxwell House out of the cupboard: about the other mums and aunties, and what Dr Evans has to say about Auntie Joan's trouble downstairs. I don't always understand what they're talking about, but if I ask I get sent out to play. I like listening to grown-up ladies, and seeing their bosoms when they've got babies with them. Bosom is a funny word. It sounds like it feels, all squashy and soft and smelling of talcum powder, like Mum's. The baby sucks it, and I get to see it when it's just us, or Auntie Pam and Auntie Joan, but not when Dad's around, or Uncle Bill or Uncle Dave. Men don't get to see bosoms, only ladies, children and babies.

Auntie Pam has a baby, but Auntie Joan doesn't have any, even though she's married. You can't have babies until you get married, God doesn't let you. Some people have lots of babies, and some have none at all, even though they like them a lot. I don't know why God won't let Auntie Joan have a baby. She holds Brendan really tight sometimes, and cuddles the new baby. Mum doesn't look very happy if she holds them for too long.

Mum doesn't cuddle me much these days; she's too busy. Auntie Joan doesn't cuddle me either – she prefers boys and tiny babies. I like girls best 'cause they don't break things. On the night the lady brought the baby, the fat lady with the clock on her bosom, Maggie and me were arguing about whether she'd brought a boy or a girl. She looked like a shadow puppet, standing in the doorway of our bedroom with the hall light behind her, and she told us to be quiet 'cause Mum was resting. Auntie Joan came in the morning and she asked the fat lady what kind of baby it was, and she said a girl, and Auntie Joan said, 'Never mind.' Auntie Joan did the ironing when Mum was resting. She held Brendan's shorts up to her face, and smelled them and rubbed them against her cheek. Her eyes were red, and her face looked like a scrunched-up paper bag.

When Maggie had her first Holy Communion, she had a new white dress with a skirt underneath made of scratchy stuff to make the dress stick out. The dress was silky with sewing on it, so you could feel the flowers and leaves that are stitched onto it. I

closed my eyes and traced the flowers with my fingertips. I had to wash my hands first.

She had a hair band with pretend pink flowers on it, and white hairgrips to hold the veil in place. Mum said the outfit cost a fortune, but it will do for me when I have my first Holy Communion. Uncle Michael gave Maggie a white prayer book, but it's not as good as the tea set he gave me. A prayer book is only for one person – it's not for sharing – and you can't play with a prayer book.

I wore one of Maggie's old dresses, the one with stamps from all over the world printed on it. Dad prodded my tummy and said I looked like a parcel. I do like that dress, but it would have been nice to have a new one. Brendan gets new clothes all the time 'cause Kieran's clothes are too big to hand down, and Auntie Joan buys him bits and bobs too.

I held Dad's hand as we walked down the aisle, and I sat next to him, just me, as he was at the end of the row. He was wearing a suit, light grey, and a maroon tie that Mum had chosen at Burton's. Mum said that he couldn't go to a first Holy Communion in his work clothes, looking like he'd been dressed from the ragbag.

He'd been moaning about the baby before we left, saying couldn't Mum shut her up. Mum said he was keen enough to make them, but didn't want to know afterwards. He went quiet and they were staring at each other, him standing at the door, her at the sink, then Maggie walked into the kitchen in her dress and his face went soft again, and Brendan went charging at her, clinging onto her legs. It was like when you're waiting for a train and the gap between the platforms makes you feel dizzy, then trains come from different directions, and when they stop, the space doesn't feel so scary; you're just caught up in the excitement of where you're going.

The day of Maggie's first Holy Communion was the first time I'd seen Dad all week. The Sunday before, I'd had him all to myself at 11 o'clock Mass, as Maggie and Kieran had been to the 8 o'clock, and Brendan was playing up so he stayed home with Mum and the baby. The leaves were piled up in the park on the way to church, and Dad lifted me high so that I could kick the top of the hills of leaves and feel like I was walking on them, like when Jesus walked on water. Mum doesn't let me kick the leaves in my good shoes; I'm surprised she lets me walk in them at all.

After Mass he took me to Stebbings. I chose a pink sugar mouse and he said not to tell the others, it's our secret. I sucked the sugar until all that was left was the string tail, and then Dad wiped my mouth with his my hankie.

Mrs Roberts caught up with us – she had been to the 11 o'clock too. We walked her home, even though it was out of our way. She laughed every time Dad spoke, like she'd heard a funny joke.

'You'll come in for a cuppa and a slice of cake,' she said as we reached her gate. She offered me Victoria sponge, fondant fancies and iced fairy cakes with little silver balls on top. Her long red fingernails curled round the plate as she held it out to me, and as she leant over I could see the line where her bosoms meet. I chose a fairy cake, but the silver balls were too hard to crunch, so I spat them out onto the plate. There was no silver then, just white.

She let me play tea parties with her big teapot and cups and saucers: her best china. She said I could play with what I liked as long as I didn't tell anyone that we'd been there. 'Is it a deal?' she said; I couldn't speak because I had cake in my mouth.

Dad and Mrs Roberts went away to talk about grown-up things. It was a bit funny as men and ladies don't usually talk together; the men talk to the men and the ladies talk to the ladies, especially after they get married. I think they talk and hold hands before they get married, but all that stops after they get babies.

Mrs Roberts came back into the kitchen, smiling with her bright red lips. She looked at me and laughed. 'We can't send you home like that,' she said, and she wiped my face with a tea towel, her face close to mine. Her mouth is too red. I can see it when I close my eyes. It's like the felt pen that Brendan got on the living room carpet that wouldn't come out.

Auntie Pam said something that Mum didn't like. She said that you shouldn't refuse your husband, as 'they seem to need it more than we do and they'll go elsewhere if they don't get it from us.' I think it's because Dad didn't come home for his dinner yesterday. Mum left his plate on top of a saucepan of hot water with another plate on top, upside down; it looked like a flying saucer. No donkey jacket in the hall at bedtime, and lamb chops, mashed potatoes, gravy and peas, all thick and gooey, scraped into the bin. Today, Mum didn't make him dinner. He could have gone to Uncle Michael's digs to eat, I suppose, but I don't think Mum likes the idea of another lady cooking for Dad.

I was woken up by voices and banging. Mum said, 'There's no point talking to you when you're three sheets to the wind,' and I couldn't understand what Dad said. I climbed into bed with Maggie and cuddled to her back. Then the baby started crying. Dad said something about the bloody baby, and then it sounded like something was knocked over, and Mum said, 'Eejit, you'll wake up all the children,' and he said, 'There's no peace in this house since that baby.' His voice sounded like Maggie's talking doll when the battery ran out.

I wanted to tell Maggie that I had cake at Mrs Roberts's, but I couldn't because it's a secret, and anyway she was tied up with her precious prayer book. So I took out the tea set and sat Sindy, Big Ted and Little Ted on the floor. I pretended to pour from the teapot, and I used the spare saucer to serve up cake. I made Victoria sponge and fondant fancies out of plasticine, though I couldn't get the colour right, as it's all been rolled into one brown ball.

'Will you have a cup of tea, Jack?' Sindy said. She leaned over so Big Ted could see where I'd pulled down her top to show the line where her bosoms meet. 'And some orange squash for the little one.' She poured a drink for little Ted. 'Would you like Victoria sponge, fondant fancies or iced fairy cakes with little silver balls on top?' Little Ted took a fairy cake. 'And now we must go and talk about grown-up things. Come on Jack.'

'Thank you, Mrs Roberts,' Big Ted said. I lifted Sindy and Big Ted onto the bed. Little Ted dropped his fairy cake on the carpet.

Mum stood in the doorway with the baby on her hip. She didn't say anything; she just stood there.

Later, she cooked Birds Eye Cod in Batter, boiled potatoes, peas and carrots. She made a flying saucer with Dad's dinner plate, and set it on a pan of water. She didn't do the washing-up; she slid down in an armchair in front of the telly. We watched Coronation Street, then World in Action, and it was only when Brendan fell asleep on the floor that she remembered to send us to bed. I said the 'Our Father' with Maggie, and I prayed in my head that Dad would come home for his Birds Eye Cod in Batter, and not go to another lady's house for dinner. I lay in bed until I heard the click of his key and his boot against the door; it sticks unless you push it hard. I heard his footsteps in the hall, and waited for Mum to say something, but all was quiet except for his breathing as he passed our bedroom door.

There was a pub smell on the stairs. I trod carefully, missing the creaky step, and stood by the living room door, which was almost shut. I pressed my face to the gap. There was a black and white film on the telly; a lady and a man were kissing. Mum was staring at the fire; the coal had gone grey with tiny bits of orange trying to shine through.

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