

Buried Deep in Shallow Ground

Leaving Childhood Behind



Honor Harlow

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I wish to dedicate this book to all the people who had to leave their homes in Ireland. It is especially dedicated to all the girls and women who packed the little they had, boarded a train that took them to boat that carried them away from all that was familiar. They departed, not knowing what awaited them in the strange land they were going to.

I admire and salute these women for their strength and resilience.

I wish to acknowledge all the help my daughter has given me. Without her, this book would never have been written.

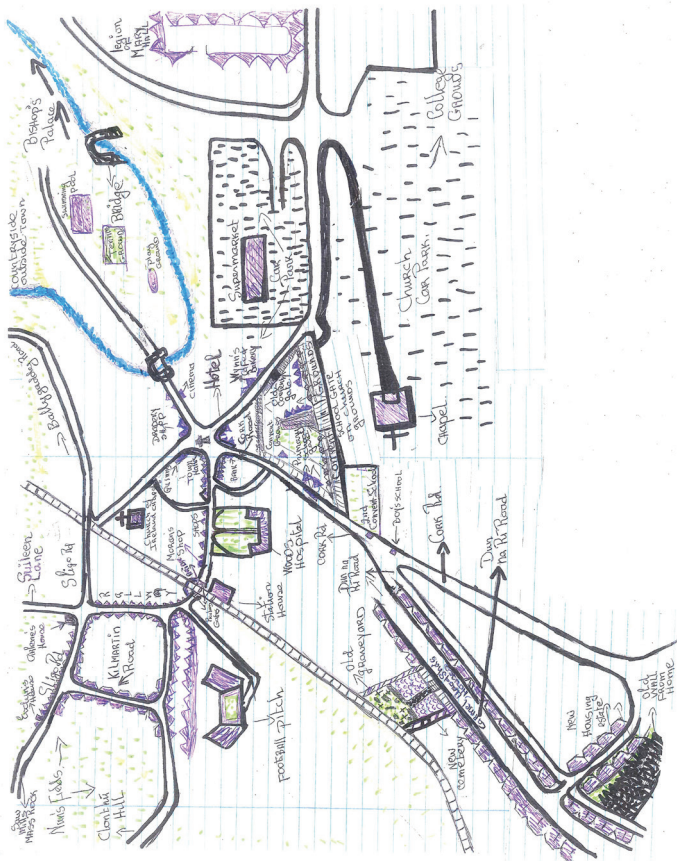
Contents

Prologue	ix
Secondary School	1
We Were Changing	16
1967	24
Jackie Kennedy's Visit to Dublin	28
Second Year 1967-68	33
The Paper Round	40
The Cinema	43
Mass On Sunday	51
Study Time	62
The Wake	65
1968	72
The Youth Club	88
Getting the Hall Ready	95
We Meet At Mass	104
Friday 13 th	122
Summer Ends	136
1969-1972	141
September 1969	156
Fifth Year	163
First Love	175
The Bones in the Home	183
The Art Studio	195

Contents Cont.

Driving Lessons	200
Evelyn and Ricky	211
People in Wheelchairs	225
My Own Car	237
News for Kait	242
The Blonde Blake	250
The Next Day	255
Letters	266
Please Review	271
About the Author	272

Town Map of Drumbron



Prologue

Everyone in Drumbron thought the Mother & Baby Home closed because Hurricane Debbie blew the slates off the roof, but I knew that was not true. Nan Gormley and Nanny Ward told my friends and me the real reason.

“The inspector took it into his head to pay a surprise visit and that is what got it shut down,” Nan said.

“And don’t forget the other two men he dragged along with him, Mary,” Nanny reminded her.

This made me say, “The inspector was big like Cú Chulainn if he was able to drag two men along with him.”

“*A grá mo croí*, it’s a way of saying he got them to go there against their will. What Moll is saying is that he fooled them into going to the Home unbeknownst to the nuns.”

“What did it matter if the nuns knew the men were coming or not?” I wanted to know.

“They didn’t have time to hide away them children that weren’t right, like the other times.

“What other times?”

“The visits when they were told the inspectors were coming and the nuns hid the sick cratures out of the way.”

“Sick cratures?”

“The cratureens that weren’t normal, even though they came into the world as right as rain.”

I didn’t know those children, only the ones who came to our class. I asked Nan and Nanny where our Home Babies would live if the Home was closed. They told me not to worry

as the children from Drumbron would be sent to other Homes around the country.

I didn't like that because it meant I wouldn't be able to see Brigid or Liam if they went to a different Home. I had *grá* on the two of them.

Brigid was tall and a bit like me, only her hair was blonde and not black like mine but the dimple on her chin was the same as my one and my daddy's.

Liam was skinny and miserable-looking and wore a *geansai* knitted with lines of different coloured wool. It had snots on the cuffs of the sleeves, but I didn't care.

I wanted Liam as my brother because my own brother was in Limbo. My daddy buried him in a shoebox one night near the Mass Rock. Úna told me that was where they put the babies with no names.

Úna is one my three best friends. The other two are Kait and Evelyn. I am glad they are my pals, and we are starting secondary school together.

Secondary School

On the first day of secondary school, I waited for Úna, Kait and Evelyn outside the gate on Church Street. Looking at the dark and gloomy grey wall surrounding the narrow, metal doorway I shivered and wished I was outside the bright, lacy railings and wide gates that were the entrance to the primary school or even at the gate of the nun's residence near Chapel Lane, which was normal and not scary thanks to Joe Daly. After the Vatican Council, he knocked down the nun's high, creepy wall and put in a normal gate and railings. I liked trailing my hand along the twisty bits stuck between the bars of the railings, imagining they were metal cobwebs.

We could easily have used that bright entrance but because the nun's bedroom windows overlooked the tarmac driveway, we were told to use the gate on Church Street instead. It seems the auld nuns complained that noisy girls were galloping past their windows, not letting them say their prayers in peace. So, because of that, I was in front of this grim, grey wall with the life frightened out of me.

I stared at the gate, hidden deep inside the menacing bulging wall of craggy-bellied stones plastered with cement, darken by years, and shuddered. The breath of the wall was so wide that it needed two lines of spiked glass on top, vigilant and ready to rip flesh, if anyone was stupid enough to try to climb over it. It looked like a fortress, a prison you went into and never came out of, like the nuns who spent their lives there. Even when they died, they were buried in their own graveyard, with no one from town going to their funerals.

I stood quivering, convincing myself my friends would never show. Only when I saw Kait and Ev coming out of Wynn's shop across the road wearing the school uniform did the fearfulness leave me. I waved at them and then Úna appeared, walking real fast, as though trying to leave her uniform behind her. We hugged, delighted to see each other. Then Evelyn stood back and took charge shooting orders at us.

"Get in quick before any of the boys come along and start mocking us when they see in these clothes."

I hesitated, still in two minds about going in, but the sugary bun Evelyn had bought in Wynn's and eaten crossing the street, propelled her into action. She pushed open the heavy gate that shrieked on its hinges, letting us know it was not welcoming in the light from the street or us. She shoved me through the narrow gap. Against my will, I was on the other side of the wall that wore a crown of prickly glass. The others tiptoed in behind me shielded by my height. Once we knew there were no monsters lurking behind the door, our bodies lost the tenseness and Ev was able to say what was really worrying her.

"When the boys see us in this uniform, they are going to slag us no end."

"How are they going to see us, Ev?" Kait asked, sweeping her eyes around the cement ground where not even a weed dared to grow.

"The College is just up the road and the lads from the Brothers come down to Wynn's at midday as well," she who knew these things informed us, looking both ways to see if any of the boys had gotten into the fortified enclosure of purity and chastity.

"Who cares about what the boys say? Let them mock us if they want," I replied but it didn't help Ev.

Tugging at the beige blouse that was part of the school uniform, she said, "God, to think I'll have to wear this shitty colour for the next five years is giving me the willies."

"At least the pinafore is brown," Kait said trying to console Ev.

"Ya! A darker shade of shite, like when you are constipated, so shut up, Kait. Let's see what this place is like," Ev commanded and led us further in. We followed her to the small cobblestone courtyard where we saw a small crowd of girls standing looking lost and frightened.

We edged our way towards the forlorn girls, slithering silently so as not to draw the attention of the bigger ones, who were strutting around the yard or flying over to a girl, yapping non-stop as they wrapped their arms around them. We gazed open-mouthed and dumbstruck at these seemingly grown-up girls talking loudly and laughing with no nun around to put a halt to their fun. Just as we were becoming used to the strangeness of it, the bigger girls started drifting towards the wooden door lodged in the square structure standing to the side of the courtyard. As they disappeared through the weighty door of a hundred cracks, so too did the rigidness holding us stiff. Our necks could once again move in different directions allowing us to gawk at the craggy two-storey, flat-roofed building the big girls had vanished into. The long, narrow glass panes of the white windows that were only missing iron grids to make it a jail window, left us intrigued.

As though to answer our curiosity about what was in this place, a nun appeared at the entrance, beckoning us to follow her. We trailed behind her up wide, wooden, dipping steps of stairs to a small landing. She crossed it, opened the first door

of the two facing us. We followed her into a big hall with long, old-fashioned, sash windows of many squares at each end of it. The hall was full of desks, half of them turned towards one of the windows and the other lot looked at the window on the opposite wall of the long room.

The nun walked towards one window, stood on a podium and made a coughing sound. When all heads were looking at her, she explained there were two classes A and B. From the list in her hands, she called out the names of the girls who were in the A class and told them to stand in a group. Most were boarders, while the day girls, who were the town and country girls, were on the B class list.

After the name-calling, the nun showed two boarders how to pull a panel that went from the floor to the ceiling across the middle of the hall. It became two classrooms with windows and doors of their own. We sat down.

Our first day at secondary school had begun.

The class-dividing nun told us to where to sit and left. We sat still, ears listening to the sound of legs pushing against cloth coming up the stairs, our eyes stayed glued to the door until the owner of the skirt, a small, thin nun, stood on the threshold. She walked in and stood in front of the blackboard and disappeared except for her pink face, white bib and the band on her head. We stood up as we were used to doing all our lives.

She told us to sit down and explained in Irish that she was the Irish teacher, and her name was Sister Agatha. She called the roll and before we knew it, she was leaving. Evelyn made the most of this time we were on our own whispering she hoped 'Miss Marple' wouldn't be a good detective and find out what we were up to. All of us were fans of Agatha Christie, so we were laughing when the next nun came in.

Leaving Childhood Behind

It was a Sister Beatriz, who was our Botany and Art teacher. She asked our names and little else before the bell rang. As the nun left, Evelyn christened her Beetroot behind her hand to us. We heard the desks in other classrooms being rattled and girls shuffling down the stairs, so we did likewise as we supposed it was playtime. We moved slowly down the stairs one after the other, like we had done in primary school, thinking any minute now a nun will order us to make a line, but no one was watching over us.

In the yard, we were left to our own devices. We were trusted not to fight or pull each other's hair. Stupefied, wandering around, we bumped into some older town-girls we knew.

We asked why we didn't make a line to go out for playtime in awed voices. They laughed, saying it was 'the break' and not playtime. Then we told them about the nuns coming in and out of the classroom and about the two brand-new nuns we had never seen before. They explained we'd have a teacher for every subject. Then they told us the girls in Class A were doing Latin instead of Art, as they came from posh families, and if they wanted to become doctors or lawyers, they needed Latin.

Break finished. We climbed the stairs slowly while the older girls ran, shouted and pushed each other. We looked at them with wide eyes, surprised at how daring they were.

Back in class, our eyes became even bigger and nearly shot out of our heads when the next teacher came into the room. She was a woman, wearing a grey suit and a dark blouse and had shoes with a little heel. She introduced herself as Miss Prior and told us she was the English teacher. Later on, we had another lay teacher, Miss Grey, who wore make-up and taught History and Geography. During the day, we got to know the rest

of the teachers, like Sister Peter, the Domestic teacher. Evelyn didn't give her a nickname. However, Sister Dorothy, the Maths teacher, became Dots.

During the first days, we stood awkward and perplexed in this new and strange world. We town-girls had the advantage over the boarders and country-girls in at least knowing lots of the girls, as we had been at school together in Drumbron since Low Babies. For most of the other girls, the beginning of first year was like Christopher Columbus' journey to the Indies in that all was new.

We discovered exotic girls from far-away places such as Corofin or Dundearg miles outside Drumbron. They cycled in and out to school every day, even if it was raining. There was a small, foxy haired country girl called Catherine who lived near the Sandy Hills. She sat behind Úna and me. Fionnuala, or Nuala as she wanted to be called, the Drumbron girl who was good at drawing, sat beside her. Their desk was in front of Kait and Evelyn, so they were in between us like the butter on a sandwich.

As the months went on, Nuala and Catherine sort of became half members of our gang. When me or Úna wanted to say something to Kait or Evelyn, we got them to pass on the message. Catherine was shy and not bold like us. Nuala lived in the same kind of house as Kait's and Úna, so they considered her a neighbour because the street where she lived, Tobair Benin Road, was around the corner from Dun na Rí, Úna's street.

There were boarders in our class from other counties miles away. We looked at them as though they were from another planet because I was the only one out of our gang who had gone outside County Galway to Sligo and Cavan.

When we talked to the country girls and the boarders, we town girls realised we were the luckiest ones of all. We had our dinner at home with our mummies while the country girls ate sandwiches and had nothing hot until they cycled out to their houses. The boarders didn't even see their mummies, daddies, brothers and sisters in the evening. They had to wait until the holidays.

The newness of everything kept us in our place at first. However, as the months went by, we became bolder. As soon as one teacher left the classroom to go to another room, we talked instead of brushing up on the lesson for the next class, as we had done at first.

The breaks between classes became chatty affairs but never enough time to say what we wanted. So, instead of sitting cowed or in awe of the teacher, we talked behind our hands or dropped something on the floor so we could turn around and talk to the girl behind.

There was so much to talk about, like the films we had seen or trashing out the merits of *Lovely Leitrim* versus the Beatles' *Day Tripper*. Frank Sinatra's songs, like *Strangers in the Night*, were never talked about because the old people liked him, so he couldn't be hip. Even the most important news had to be doled out because time was scarce, so the time Úna was dying, it took her the whole morning to tell us. Getting the details of her sickness was more nerve-racking than the Saturday matinee film sequels we saw in the Odeon, where every week, the good guy was in terrible danger. We'd have to wait until the following Saturday to see if the train would run over his body tied on the tracks or if he would manage not to fall to his death below as he clung onto the cliff edge by his fingertips. Úna did her best

to tell us all the story of her dying, and it wasn't her fault we heard it in snatches. She started telling us the first part on *An Lár*, where we met every morning to walk to school together. When she saw me and Kait waiting, she rushed over, saying she had something very important to tell us, but she couldn't start until Evelyn arrived, which she did after what seemed like ages. We gathered close around Úna as we walked, and she told us how she was dying.

"Yesterday evening about the time the Angelus was ringing, I felt a tickling between my legs." Us three looked at her wondering what that had to do with dying.

"Why didn't you check to see what it was?" Ev asked as we thought there was no big deal about being itchy.

"I was at study, like ye were, so I couldn't. Janey Macs, the itch was driving me crazy."

"Maybe you wet yourself?" Kait said and we stopped and smiled at Úna to let her know that even if she had, we were still her friends.

"I was thinking that too and that the wee was trickling down, causing the wet feeling between my legs."

"It would be terrible if you did wet yourself."

"I know, so that is why I said to Sr Beatriz, '*An bhfuil cead agam dul amach?*'"

"That was the best thing to do." By now we had reached the classroom and she continued telling us in a low voice.

"Well, as soon as I got inside the toilet, I bolted the door so no one could walk in on me. Then I touched my gígeen," Úna said.

"You didn't!" Evelyn roared in shock, without realising she was shouting. Sister Agatha was down at our desk.

“An bhfuil siad ag caint?”

“Nilimid,” we all said at the same time, but the nun stayed standing by our desk and because of that, it wasn’t until the break that we heard the full story.

On the way down the stairs Evelyn said, “I betchya there was an earwig stuck in her knickers and that was what was causing the itch.”

Sometimes when our mummies took in the washing from the line, there would be an earwig among the clothes, but Kait had a different idea.

“Twasn’t. It was a hair, so it was,” she said blushing. Me and Evelyn looked at her wondering why she had gone so red.

“What would a rib of hair be doing down there?” I asked in a mocking tone, not believing Kait could be such a silly goose thinking a rib of hair could fall into your knickers.

Kait got even redder and said in a low voice, “Cos they grow around your gigeen too.”

“They don’t,” I said but Úna who was walking slowly behind us nodded her head, agreeing with Kait.

“You’re coddling! Hair only grows on your head, you silly goose.”

Úna told me to shut up because what had happened to her was important and we had to know about it. Sitting on her haunches and us huddling around her in a corner of the yard, she whispered the rest of the story wanting only us to know and no one else, not even Nuala McCabe who had started to sort of hang around with us.

“When I took my hand away, the tips of my fingers were red with blood. I washed them but I was shaking with fright thinking all the blood in my body was spilling out through my gigeen.”

"You poor thing," Kait said. "What did you do?"

"I went back to the study hall. Sr Beatriz was sitting on the high podium in the middle where she watches us study."

"Did ya tell her?"

"I didn't, just said I didn't feel well and was going home."

"But you were bleeding."

"I know I was, but my heart was in my mouth thinking I was going to die. I wanted to see Mammy before I died, so that's why I left and didn't tell the nun."

"You were right. Did your mother send for the doctor?" Ev asked.

"She didn't. She gave me a clatter across the head and told me to keep quiet in front of the small ones when I started screaming, 'Mammy, Mammy, I'm going to die! There's blood coming out of me!'"

"A clatter?" we all asked at once, this piece of the story being more surprising than what happens at the Matinee.

Úna shushed us by saying, "Yeah, a clatter." Then she continued. "She told me..."

"Why did she give you a clatter?" Ev insisted. She was still puzzled as to why any mother would hit you if you were dying.

"Because for some reason or other she was really cross and said to me, 'Get into that room there and wait until I am finished washing the spuds and have them on to boil, then I'll deal with you.'"

Being told to go into the room made Úna go out of her mind with worry because when any of the family were sick enough for the doctor to come, they were put into the downstairs bedroom to wait for him. She was in the sick room, but at the same time, she thought she couldn't be very bad if her mother had

given her a wallop. Úna waited, biting her nails until the door was pushed open, and her mother told Úna what was wrong with her.

“What did she say?” Kait asked and we all gathered closed to Úna to hear if our friend was dying.

“That I was a woman.”

“A woman? You’re a girl,” Ev said disappointed with that piece of news.

“She said I was a woman now and I had to be careful not to go too near a man.”

“Not to stain him with the blood, is it?” I asked, thinking it had to be that but wanting to be sure.

“I don’t know but she said the blood was normal and all women get it.”

“I don’t want to be a woman,” I wailed.

“When you grow more, you’ll be one too, whether you like it or not.”

“I won’t!” I insisted.

“Shut up, Arlene. Let Úna finish or we’ll all be dead before we hear the rest of what happened.”

“Mam gave me a piece of a thick towel and told me to put into my knickers. She said when she had money, she would buy a belt thing to hold the towel thing up.”

“A belt?” I said thinking of the belts Daddy wears around his trousers and the ones Mammy has for her dresses which had buckles.

Kait asked, “A big towel?”

“No, small like a face towel but it had loops at each end.”

“Will you have blood every day?”

“No, Mam said it would stop after a few days but come back every now and then.”

"Are you wearing the towel now?"

"Ya, that's why I'm walking slow, so it won't fall off."

"Is it full of blood."

"No, there only a spot or two. Mam gave me an auld towel that's no use and showed me how to make pads from it."

"Pads?" We all echoed in a surprised tone.

"Ya, to fit between my legs."

"Did you make any?"

"I made three last night because Mammy said I have to change them every day and soak them in cold water, so they are easier to wash."

"Wash the blood out, you mean?"

"Ya and I have to put the basin in the coal house."

"Why in the coal house?"

"So the young ones won't see them and ask questions."

For the next few weeks we spent every free minute wondering why girls bled and became women. Bleeding and sanitary towels was the theme of our conversations when we'd meet in *An Lár*, at break, as well as before and after study periods.

Did old women bleed too?

Did boys and men know girls bleed?

If you didn't stop bleeding, would you die?

We wondered about all of these questions and also wondered if nuns, who spoke like women but didn't have hair, had periods?

Talking so much about blood coming out of the gigeen made us remember what Kait had said about hair growing on her gigeen. We wondered if she had told us the truth or was it just a story. Me and Ev asked her if it was really true hair grew on her gigeen.

"It does, so it does," she said and got red.

"I don't believe you. Come on, show us."

Kait got redder than the heart on the Sacred Heart. Her face bursting into flames was normal for us, so we kept on asking, even though she was nearly on fire.

"Oh shut up you two! Janey Macs, yer worse than Baby Patrick. Here, I'll show you mine," Úna said. It was ginger like the hair on her head. It stunned us into silence, although later we wondered if you had to comb it every morning for school.

Then at the beginning of second year, as though to teach me a lesson for not believing Kait, black hair started to grow under my armpits and around my gigeen.

The other two got their periods shortly after Úna's. Mine didn't come until a few months later. I wasn't frightened like Úna had been but at the same time I didn't tell Mammy I knew about periods because she would give me a lecture about 'nice girls not talking about certain things.' So I said, "Mammy, I'm bleeding. Will we go to Dr Kelly to see if I'm sick?"

"No, Mary. What is happening to you is that you are becoming a woman."

"A woman?"

"Yes, and it is important you say three Hail Marys night and morning for holy purity."

"Will holy purity stop the bleeding?"

"Mary! Don't be impertinent. Nice girls must be pure, so if you say your prayers, Our Lady will keep you safe."

"Alright, Mammy," was all I said, but I saw she was better than Úna's mammy because she bought sanity towels in the chemist for me. They were twelve pads of cotton wool inside gauzy material in a plastic bag. Mammy told me if I ever had to

buy them myself, I had to wait until there was no man about to ask for them. She also said to wrap them in newspaper when I took them off. It was important they were hidden at the bottom of the rubbish bin, so no one would see them.

“Mammy, if everyone gets periods why do we have to be ashamed of them?”

“Mary, it’s vulgar to talk about certain things. Modesty is a virtue and I want you to behave like a nice girl. Do you hear me?”

“A course I do,” I said and walked out the door before she could say more.

The Terrible Twos

I was sick of listening to her and the other mothers complaining about us because we were teenagers. They said it was the terrible twos over again, only this time they couldn’t pick up the cheeky, pimply smart-alec and carry us home. I told the girls what the coffee morning women had been saying about us.

“Pimply? No way!” Evelyn uttered in mock amazement.

We fell on the floor giggling because the pimple bit was true. Our flawless skin was plagued every so often by a pimple that left us in despair. The pimples would never appear in an out-of-the way place but smash bang on our nose, chin or forehead. We’d look in the mirror a hundred times to see if the ugly spot had shrunken and moan to each other how we were ashamed to leave the house with the enormous lump disfiguring our face.

Despite the pimples and not having white sets of perfect teeth like the Americans, who came with their parents to see the place where their grandparents had been born, we grew up in a time that was a great time to be a teenager in Ireland even

though Mammy and Mr Delaney said the country was going to the dogs and that the young people should be reined in. They raged about pop music on the radio and having to listen to the Irish showbands really annoyed Mr Delaney.

“As if it isn’t bad enough having a dance in the parish hall, now we hear them awful songs on the radio every day of our lives.”

“I said to William things are getting out of hand. The priest letting them bring in an accordion or banjo player for social dances every now and again was fine, but now there’s a dance there every Thursday night.”

Mammy gave Daddy the blunt of her tongue for helping Fr Mannion and Miss Walsh in the dance hall that was on Barrack Street, a bit up from the Woods hospital. Still, it didn’t surprise me because she liked nothing and especially not me going to the Odeon on Saturday nights to watch Sandra Dee and Troy Donohue or Doris Day and Rock Hudson. When I was small, I would have tried to please Mammy and not make her sick. Now I was beginning to think she was stupid. My pals thought the same about their parents too. Now that we were big, we knew better about things.

We Were Changing

Reading Bunty or Judy comics used to be wonderful. We waited every week to buy them and see what was happening to our friends 'The Four Marys.' The other girls on the pages of Bunty and Judy who went horse-riding looked so happy and we longed to go too, as well as do ballet like the girls with their tulle skirts and hair pulled back tight. Our lives revolved the next issue, wondering what would happen to such-and-such a girl. Now we thought them childish and predictable, even the new one called Mandy that had come out. We'd rather spend our money on magazines that had pictures and stories about The Monkees and Sandie Shaw. Sandie, with her hair swinging and her toes showing, was always on Top of the Pops.

Jimmy Saville was the best and we loved listening to him on the radio. We kept our fingers crossed we'd meet him in person one day. We imagined the fun we would have when we were with him and how the other girls would be jealous of us talking to him and getting his autograph. We listened to Terry Wogan on the radio but as he looked and sounded like all the men around about, we didn't care if we never met him.

The matinees with the good guy hanging off a cliff weren't as breath-taking as waiting to see if Sandra Dee would kiss Troy Donahue. The Tom and Gerry cartoons were so stupid, not half as funny as the Carry-On films. Lesley Philips only had to move a muscle in his face, and we were doubled over, falling off our seats with laughter.

The river got to be a dirty, messy and boring place to spend time. Sitting on the riverbank making daisy chains was alright

for Úna's little brothers and sisters but now we thought it was childish and boring. We found it hard to think that we used to do such a horrible, disgusting thing as putting worms on a hook. Getting a lift from Kait's uncle and going to Salthill was better fun. Walking up and down the strand, sharing a candy-floss we had bought in one of the little colourful stands near the beach, was smashing. We'd tell the boys sitting on the wall we wouldn't give them any of our candyfloss, which usually made them come after us begging for a bite and talking to us.

Mammy loved watching television and tried to make me stay at home to watch *The Late Show* so I could learn to speak like Gay Byrne. She and Mr Delaney said Gay had a lovely accent and a very nice way of saying things. My mother was beginning to imitate how he spoke. It annoyed her when I didn't pronounce my words like Gay did.

At least I was not the only one who could not stand Gay Byrne. Mr McNulty, Úna's father, said Gay Byrne was a prissy mouth. I agreed and knew there was no way I would talk like him, in spite of Mammy insisting that I did. Then out of the blue, Mammy and Mr Delaney got upset with prissy-mouth.

"What happened, Mammy? Why are you so annoyed with Gay Byrne?"

"It's not Gay I am annoyed with. It's the woman giving the answer who is scandalous."

"What did she say?"

"What no decent woman should say."

Mr Delaney looked disgusted, saying no man had a right to ask a woman a question like that, even if he was Gay Byrne.

"But what did he ask?"

"Mary!" Mammy said crossly. "The less you know about this sort of thing the better."

"I want to know what they both said," I demanded, stamping my foot like when I was small.

"That's enough out of you. Get up those stairs to bed."

I went to my room but on Sunday I found out what they were angry about because Mr Delaney arrived at our house waving a newspaper. "Look, Dervla, the bishop agrees with us."

"About what, John?" Daddy, who was having breakfast at the table, enquired.

"About Gay asking that woman what she was wearing on her wedding night."

"John, please," Mammy said turning her eyes in my direction, "we mustn't talk about certain things."

"Dervla is right, John. Take it easy and let's have our breakfast in peace," Dad said, stabbing the sausage with his fork.

"Dervla has to know the bishop is as scandalised as we are."

"John, I'm having my rashers and eggs, and I don't want any bishop with them," objected Dad in his Garda voice.-

Mammy got up and went outside with Mr Delaney. I laughed and I was sorry Mrs McLoughlin didn't come on Sunday because she'd have shaken the mop at Mr Delaney and told him it was the nearest to Holy Water she could find.

The next day I was in the kitchen and heard Mammy telling Daddy about the bishop's outrage at a nightdress a woman didn't wear. Daddy nodded his head but didn't take his eyes from the newspaper.

Úna told us her father, Mr McNulty, was livid with the bishop. "A nice one to be talking, with him and all the other bishops going around wearing dresses."

Mr Kenny, Kait's father, was funny and made me and Ev laugh when he said, "McQuaid, the bollocks, is behind all this."

Kait's father used expressions that would have shocked Mammy, but they tickled me inside and made me want to laugh. Ev picked them up and was delighted to use them but when saying Mr Delaney was a right bollocks, she changed it to *boilg*, the Irish for stomach.

Me and Ev spent half the time in the Kenny house because the two of us lived nearby. Evelyn lived on Sligo Road, the street around the corner from Kilmartin Road, and it was no bother for her to pop up to Kait's house whenever she felt like it. For Úna it was more difficult as she lived a good bit away. When she was minding her baby brother, she wheeled the big pram through the town to be with us. Other days we took the short-cut up the tracks to her road, so the four of us were always together playing. For me, it was great not being in my house listening to Mammy and Mr Delaney talking and praising the town councillor who said, "The Late was a dirty programme that should be abolished altogether."

Blackboard Art

A few months after we started in First Year, two older girls came into our classroom and told us it was Sr Agatha's feast day and we had to decorate the blackboard.

"Who is the best at art?" they asked.

"Mary Blake and Nuala McCabe," everyone shouted back.

"Come here," they said. We got up slowly and walked towards the board where they were standing. "Write Happy Feast Day and use your imagination to decorate the board as though it was a birthday card," they said handing us a box of coloured chalk and then walked out the door.

Not having a clue what to do, I was looking at Nuala and she was looking at me when Ev piped up, “Happy Feast Day, my foot. It has to be in Irish so it will be *Lá Fhéile* something or other.”

Ev and her idea were all we needed. Nuala started writing *Lá Breithe Shona* using the letters of the old Irish script, making it look like a page from the Book of Kells. As we worked, we seemed to read each other minds and knew exactly what we were doing. When we stood back, we found it hard to believe we had created such a wonderful work of art.

The whole board look like a book opened in the centre. The two middle pages, with the writing, were resting on the top of the other pages of the book, sloping down like the thinnest of steps until the borders of the brown cover showed.

The letter at the beginning of each sentence was curved and twisted like an animal or a snake, similar to how the monks in the monasteries had decorated the medieval manuscripts.

When Sr Agatha walked into room, we saw by the look on her face that she was amazed. It stayed on the board all day. As the other teachers wouldn't write on the board, it meant we didn't have to copy anything into our copybooks and had nearly a free day with no lessons.

Then the bell sounded for break, and we left the classroom. When we came back, the Reverend Mother and other nuns from the residence were admiring our artwork. Sr Agatha had left a bag of sweets on our desk for us with a note saying, ‘*Go raibh maith agaibh.*’

A week later, it was Sr Beatriz' feast day. We wrote ‘*Happy Feast Day St Beatriz*’ in fat, curvy letters and drew flowers and plants, birds and bumblebees as she was the Botany teacher. It

turned out absolutely beautiful. When we rushed out for break, Ev stayed behind to tie her shoe. When we all came back, we noticed one of the flowers had been turned into a beetroot. We looked at Evelyn.

“It’s only a bit of craic,” Eve said using the word Ricky used for saying *spraoi*.

On the way home, Kait got pensive and asked, “I wonder do the boys in the Brothers wish their teachers a happy feast day?”

“I can’t imagine them writing nice things about any of the Brothers.”

“Tomorrow, when we slope off to Wynn Shop to buy a Chester cake, I’ll ask the lads from the Brothers if they do,” Ev volunteered, only too delighted to have an excuse to talk to the lads.

As the months of the school year went by, we had become more daring and didn’t stay in the yard during the first break. The convent gate was on Church Street, so we hopped across the street to Wynn’s shop. Knowing Úna and Kait didn’t get any pocket money, Ev and I pooled ours together to buy one large square of the rich, moist, current-y Chester cake, the same as the one Mammy bought for Daddy and Mr Delaney ate. We passed it around, holding the lardy, flaky pastry on the bottom and icing on the top by one finger and thumb.

“A few bites would fill an elephant,” Ev would say. “I always get a desperate longing for it just before my periods.” Which happened to us all. Our periods seemed to bring out the sweet tooth in us all.

The day after our chat wondering whether the boys decorated the board for the Brothers, we ran over to Wynn’s and told Ev to find out if the tough boys wished their teachers a happy

feast day. As we stuffed ourselves with buns, Ev went over to where the boys were to question them. When we looked over, we saw her taking a few pulls of one of the lad's cigarettes. The boys who hung around Wynn's were more into smoking than eating. She came back laughing. "They said the only thing they wished on any of the Brothers was to die roaring."

We had heard the older girls use the word 'crush.' We supposed that we were starting to get crushes on the boys too. We laughed and smiled over at the boys and wondered how the same boys, who not so long ago had been a pain in the neck, had become gorgeous and interesting. Now we spent hours talking about them. Kait was always sighing and writing Jim Smith's name on her arm and looking at it, touching it tenderly with her finger as though it were Jim himself.

"I feel a twitching in my mouth like a butterfly moving its wings when Jim Smith looks at me," Kait said.

"Everyone says Jim Smith is an awful yoke but he's as good as gold when he's near you, Kait, isn't he?"

"He is, so he is," said Kait. Moving airily like the fluff from a dandelion and gazing with her enormous green eyes, she knocked the wind out of all the boys. Their male gale-force toughness turned into a gentle breeze when they spoke to her. Jim Smith was no exception and we all thought he was in love with Kait. Evelyn had a crush on the stupid Ricky Martin with his big head full of himself.

"Well, I get the butterflies in my knees when I see Ricky. Ye don't know how my legs tremble whenever I catch a glimpse of him."

Her leg-trembling didn't stop her from being a devil though. When Ev saw Ricky's bike leaning against a shopfront, she

would get us all to walk past it and she rubbed her hand against the handlebars, knowing it was the very spot his hands had touched. She said she got a thrill. I couldn't understand that because even though boys called after me when we were walking along the street, I never felt anything. If they raced past me on their bikes and whizzed back asking me if I wanted a lift home on the crossbar, I soon told them my legs were long and I could walk home. Ev was always telling me that such-and-such a one was crazy about me but while I liked talking to boys, me nor Úna never had the butterfly feeling that Ev and Kait said they felt.

Úna didn't have time for boys because she had to mind her brothers and sisters. Besides, the truth was boys didn't call after her. It might have been because her fuzzy, red hair never grew or got long like Evelyn's, who had curly hair too. Úna's mouth had gotten bigger, so her teeth didn't seem so long. She had curvy lips like Miss Walsh, the woman in the library who wore bright red lipstick. Úna's white skin with no freckles was translucent and dewy like a baby. She still wore specs and the big people said boys didn't like girls with glasses, so maybe that is why boys didn't mess with her like they did with the rest of us.

1967

We may have gone into first year as children, but we came out having bodies that were changing and moods that lasted as long as a chocolate bar between the four of us. That year of 1967 when we left our childhood behind, was a time when the news on the radio and television was as interesting to talk about as Legless shouting abuse at the bishop, another traveller family getting a house in Kilmartin Road, deciding if Jim Smith's eyes were the same shade as Paul Newman's, or if Ricky was as much in love with Ev as she was with him.

Places and people in The North and America were in everyone's mouth. Ian Paisley became part of the everyday gossip as though he were a local. He may have had a bigger, rounded type of head on him than the ones you'd see on the men around town, but people never shut up about him.

"If I had been near him, I know where the feicer's snowballs would have gone," Úna told us her father, Mr McNulty, said when he saw the news about Jack Lynch's car being snowballed in the North.

Kait's mother, Maisie Kenny, didn't care if Ian Paisley came down to Dublin and threw snowballs at all the TDs in the Dáil but she was affected badly by Elvis wedding, like my mother had been affected by Kennedy's assassination. Maisie was in so love with Elvis that, as well as going to all his pictures, she had a framed photo of him hanging up in the kitchen next to the Sacred Heart. Kait told us Maisie even tried to get their father to grow locks and have a quiff like Elvis. Mr Kenny's fringe of

hair fell in his eyes long before the Beatles did, so it didn't matter how much Brylcrem he plastered on, he could never train his hair to go back. Now, after Elvis' wedding, sometimes Mrs Kenny seemed happy he had married Priscilla, saying she was a Galway-girl-type beauty, but other times she felt he had thrown himself away. We found it strange that a mother could be crazy about a singer. Mammy liked Frank Sinatra but spoke about him as if he was one of the priests.

"Frank sings that song beautifully," she'd say in the same tone she would use to say Father Mannion said Mass beautifully.

On television, we saw the American protest marches and heard Martin Luther King speaking at the rallies. Robert Kennedy was mentioned a lot, so Mr Delaney had to assure Mammy the anti-war protests wouldn't be anywhere near where Jackie lived and would not pester her and stop her from sleeping.

In the North, the Civil Rights Movement started too. We learned words like gerrymandering, squatting and water cannons. Mr McNulty, Úna's father, was saying we should all be up there helping the people fight the Brits. Daddy, on the other hand, said the ones in the North were bad enough on their own without getting ideas from the Blacks in America.

"But Daddy the Supremes are black, and they are beautiful. They wear lovely shiny dresses. Me and Ev want to learn to move and sing and dance like they do."

"Is Miss Canny's School of Irish Step Dancing not good enough for yis now?"

"Oh Dad! Don't be silly."

In the Odeon there was a gorgeous, black actor who was in all the films, like Troy Donohue and Rock Hudson used to be.