

MARITA CONLON-McKENNA



THE
MAGDALEN

Betrayed, deserted,
rejected...will she ever
know happiness again?

About the Book

*Bound to a life of hardship and misery . . .
the women of the infamous Magdalen laundry.*

Unmarried and pregnant, Esther Doyle is rejected by her family and is sent to join the fallen women of the Holy Saints Convent in Dublin.

At the mercy of the nuns and forced into silence, Esther spends her days alongside other 'Maggies' despairingly forced to work in the clammy, sweatshop conditions of the Magdalen laundry. It is a bleak existence, but Esther has little choice. Yet despite the harsh reality of her life, Esther finds comfort in this isolated and shunned community of women.

Imprisoned in her fate and plagued with an uncertain future, it will take every ounce of courage for Esther to imagine a new life for her and her child beyond the grey walls of the Holy Saints Convent.

With a new introduction by Marita Conlon-McKenna.

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About the Author

Also by Marita Conlon-McKenna

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THE MAGDALEN

Marita Conlon-McKenna

*To my beautiful daughter Laura.
You helped me every step of the way.*

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Introduction to the 2013 edition

It is almost fifteen years since I first wrote *The Magdalen*, the story of a young Irish girl who gets pregnant and, like many other unmarried mothers of that time, is sent to work in a Magdalen Laundry. Many unwanted women, orphaned young girls and those rejected by their families found themselves living and working in Magdalen Laundries around Ireland. Irish companies, hotels and government offices used the services of these laundries, which were run mostly by Catholic orders of nuns. Conditions were harsh and the women and young girls working as unpaid labour in the laundry were often subjected to unnecessary mental and physical cruelty as well as deprivation and isolation.

In 1993 The Sisters of Our Lady of Charity in High Park Laundry in Dublin sold part of their convent grounds to a developer. An outcry ensued when the remains of 155 women buried in unmarked graves were then exhumed and cremated and reburied in a mass grave in Glasnevin Cemetery. The secrecy had been broken, and former inmates of Magdalen Laundries around Ireland began to come forward and testify to the neglect, abuse and cruelty they had endured.

In the following decade the Irish state and religious run institutions were beset by scandal after scandal as story after story broke of neglect, cruelty and the physical, mental and sexual abuse of children being cared for in Children's Homes and Orphanages operated by religious orders. In May 2000 the Irish government established a commission to inquire into child abuse chaired by Mr Justice Ryan. In May 2009 the Ryan Report was released

with victims of abuse between the 1930s and 1990s offered redress. However, although the Irish government acknowledged that women in the Magdalen Laundries were also victims of abuse they were not included in the inquiry.

Justice for Magdalenes lobbied the government to investigate the Magdalen Laundries and went to the United Nations Committee Against Torture with their case, saying that the exploitation of these women was a violation of their human rights. In response to this in 2011 the Irish government set up a committee, chaired by Senator Martin McAleese, to uncover the facts about the laundries and the state's involvement.

The McAleese Report was published on 5 February 2013, and found that there was state collusion in the admission of thousands of women into the Magdalen institutions. Survivors angrily protested that they had been failed again by the state as they had no access to redress.

On 19 February 2013 Irish Taoiseach Enda Kenny stood up in the Dáil in Dublin and offered a sincere and emotional apology to the women of the Magdalen Laundries on behalf of the state, the government and Irish citizens for all the hurt that was done to them and the stigma they suffered as a result of the time they spent in a Magdalen Laundry. A number of survivors from the Magdalen Laundries were present to hear this historic and moving speech.

The shameful story of the forgotten Magdalenes has touched many over the years. These strong and courageous women and girls deserve not only to be remembered but also justice for the way they were treated. A review by Justice John Quirke to assess support and redress for Magdalen survivors is currently underway.

*Marita Conlon-
McKenna
May 2013*

*Sisters of the Holy Saints Magdalen
Home for Wayward Girls and Fallen
Women Dublin, 1952*

Esther Doyle closed her eyes. She could hear the slow chimes of the mass bell ringing across the convent and laundry yard. Soon the girls and women would dress quickly and quietly and make their way to the small chapel for Sunday mass. The huge washing machines, steaming hot irons and rumbling dryers would all lie still, for today was the Lord's day, the day her child would be born, the child that would be taken from her. She grimaced, trying not to give in to the waves of contractions and the grinding pain in her back. Sister Gabriel, her only companion in this birthing room, was praying softly, her gaze fixed on the wooden cross that hung over the narrow raised bed. Even now there would be no kindness.

How had she come to this, ending up here in a Magdalen home with all the other abandoned women that nobody cared about? Esther longed for one of the women to sit with her, hold her hand, comfort her. As another pain came, the nun placed her hand on her stomach. Esther remembered a time long before this, and thought of her mother . . .

Connemara, 1944

Chapter One

Esther heard the cry, clear across the scattered fields of Carraig Beag, the voice catching on the iodine-scented breeze blowing in from the wild Atlantic Ocean, and knew straight away that it was her mother, calling her, needing her. Autumn was in the air, and all the scraggy briars and brambles about were laden down with fruit. Her two young brothers were busy scrabbling for blackberries, their hands and faces and knitted jumpers stained with juice, the tin buckets full. She couldn't leave them here on their own, for the boys would stuff their faces with the plump, juicy berries till they were nearly sick.

'Leave the buckets and cans!' she ordered firmly, pulling the tin from six-year-old Liam's sticky hands. 'We've got to get back home!' Running hell for leather, she chased across the tussocks of heavy grass and clumpy earth, sensing their fear as they followed her back down the sloping hill towards home.

Panting and breathless, she raced towards their whitewashed cottage and in through the open doorway, to where her mother stood leaning against the old kitchen dresser, her face clammy and beaded with sweat.

'Help me to the bed, pet! The baby's coming, and I need to lie down.'

'Mammy, the baby's not due for weeks yet,' she pleaded, feeling suddenly scared.

'Stop moithering, Esther, and help me to bed!'

Esther let her mother lean on her as she led her into her parents' bedroom, trying to straighten the mess of sheets

and blankets and fix the bolster before her mother plumped down heavily on to them.

She was transfixed as she watched her mother's dress suddenly tauten against her swollen stomach, and saw her mother breathing slowly and deeply, ignoring her.

The boys had arrived, jammed at the bedroom door, eyes wide with curiosity. 'What is it?' asked Tom, his freckled face worried.

'The baby's coming early!' muttered Esther, shoving her brothers back outside. Her mam wouldn't want them to see her like this.

Majella Doyle's pain was easing, and she gestured to Esther to help her lift her legs on to the bed. Both feet were swollen, and a trail of stalky veins patterned across her mother's pale skin. 'That's it, dote! That's a bit better!' sighed her mother, closing her eyes and letting her head rest against the wooden headboard.

Relief flooded through the thirteen-year-old; however, a minute or two later, the tracings of pain again shadowed her mother's face as she tried to catch a large gulping breath.

'Mammy, I'll go and get help!' offered Esther. 'I'll run down and get Mrs Murphy.' Maureen Murphy, the local midwife, had attended her mother before, taking total charge when her younger brothers had been born; she had even helped to deliver Esther herself. She'd know what to do.

'No, Esther!' insisted her mother. 'You've got to stay.'

Esther was filled with an immense longing to be out of the small stuffy bedroom and away from all this. If only her daddy or her older brothers were here instead of out in the boat, fishing. Majella, as if sensing her thoughts, grabbed her by the hand.

'I need you to help me to birth this baby, pet. Send one of the boys!'

'Tom!' screamed Esther.

Her bewildered eleven-year-old brother came to the doorway.

'Run, Tom! Go and get Mrs Murphy, Aidan's mother, you know where they live!' He was munching on a heel of bread, trying to swallow it. 'Do you understand, Tom? Tell Mrs Murphy that Mammy's having the baby now and she's got to come straight away!'

Tom looked up at her through those long black eyelashes of his. He could always tell what she was thinking, and sensed her panic about the baby. Flinging the crust to the floor, he took to his heels.

'Esther, you've got to help me,' ordered her mother breathlessly, slumping down in the bed and pulling up the skirt of her dress; her knickers were already discarded. 'The baby's coming!'

'I can't do it, Mammy! You know I can't!' she pleaded. Esther hadn't a clue about what to do. Up to now she had only seen a few sheep lambing in the fields, and old Mrs Casey's cat having four black kittens, and knew absolutely nothing about birthing babies.

Majella Doyle was making a strange kind of panting sound. Esther watched as her mother's sweat-soaked face contorted with pain. 'Fetch a towel or a blanket for the baby, and something sharp like scissors or a knife!' she ordered.

'Liam!' Esther screamed at her little brother. 'Bring me the breadknife. Be careful and don't run with it! That's the good boy!'

In an instant he was beside her, his blue eyes almost shut as he passed her the long bone-handled silver knife.

'Out!' she bossed.

'It's coming!' Her mother was blowing and panting and in between shouting at Esther to look between her wide-open legs. Through the stretching purple circle of taut flesh, Esther could see tufts of black hair.

'I can see the baby's hair!' she blurted out, suddenly feeling strangely excited.

Her mother was straining, pushing. 'Hold the head!' she ordered.

Esther shut her eyes, and almost fainted with the shock when she realized that the baby's head was through. She held it with her hands, supporting it firmly as her mother began to push again. The baby seemed to almost slip sideways, shoulder first, and slide all warm and steamy into her nervous hands. The baby's skin was smeared with blood and a white greasy kind of thing, but it was the blueness of the strange small body that scared her. The eyes were shut and no sound issued from the tiny purple-coloured lips; a twisted rope of mottled cord lay wrapped around her baby sister's neck.

'Is the baby all right?' demanded Majella anxiously.

'Mammy, it's a little girl, but . . . the cord . . .'

Esther grabbed at the cord, trying to loosen it and unwind it without hurting the baby's neck.

'You must cut it and tie it off!' stated her mother firmly.

'What'll I tie it with?' asked Esther, frantic, then reaching up to her hair she pulled off the narrow black ribbon used to keep her light brown curls in check.

'Good girl! Do it quick! Tie it close to the baby's belly first before you cut!'

She managed to hold the fleshy rope and, as tight as she could tie it off, close to the baby's sunken belly, she knotted the ribbon.

'Now cut it!' ordered her mother, trying to sit up more to help her.

The bed and Esther's hands were spattered with blood, but the fleshy link between mother and child was severed.

'Is she breathing?' shouted her mother.

Esther could barely look at her. The baby had seemed to move but now was floppy in her arms, and an unnatural bruised blue-grey colour from top to toe. Out of instinct she

turned the baby over, tilting her, patting the small back, then looking again; she wiped the tiny face with the corner of the sheet, opening the mouth with her little finger. It was almost like a sigh, but the baby gasped for breath, the small curving chest moved. Relieved and excited, she wrapped the sheet loosely round the baby, ready to pass her to her mother, realizing only then that she lay, almost passed out, white against the pillow.

‘Out of the way, girl, or your mother will bleed to death!’

Mrs Murphy had arrived and, tossing Esther aside, pushed up beside the patient in the bed, pulling back the bloodstained blankets and sheet. ‘Get me cloths, towels, sheets, anything, quick as you can, girl!’ ordered the stout, fair-haired woman, rolling up her sleeves and fastening a neat white apron over her massive chest and body.

Esther stood mesmerized, holding the new baby.

‘Run, girl! We’ve no time to waste. For the love of God, put that child down somewhere!’

The small wooden crib fashioned by her grandfather had not been brought into the house yet, so Esther placed the small body in an open drawer, wrapping a woolly shawl around the sheet.

‘Run, girl! Run!’

Esther was like a madwoman, running around the small overcrowded cottage in a frenzy, pulling sheets off her own and the boys’ beds, grabbing the towels in the airing-cupboard and those drying over the range, Tom helping her like he always did. ‘Tom! See if any of the sheets on the clothes line are dry!’ she bossed, sending her anxious young brothers out in the sunshine. Wouldn’t you know it! Little Paddy had just woken from his nap. He’d peed himself and drowsily cried for his mother. ‘Where’s my mammy?’ he whined, tufts of soft fair hair standing up on his head, his cheeks rosy, smelling of urine.

‘Sssh, pet! Tom and I are minding you for the moment.’ She tried not to let him sense her fear and handed him over

to a reluctant Tom.

Back in the bedroom, Esther could feel herself getting dizzy as Mrs Murphy used towel after towel to staunch her mother's bleeding.

'Don't you go fainting on me, Esther,' she warned. 'Where's your father?'

'Off fishing with Ger and Donal. They'll not be back for hours!'

'Well that'll be far too late for us - we've got to raise this bedstead now!' insisted the midwife.

The two of them took a corner each, struggling and pulling, but there was no budging it.

'We need more help and something to prop it up with!'

'Tom!' called Esther through the open window. 'Get some blocks of wood and come in here immediately.' Within seconds her younger brothers were standing at the doorway.

'Esther, you and I and young Tom will have a go at lifting this corner and maybe the young lad will be able to lie on the ground and slip a block of wood under the end of it. Now, one . . . two . . . three!'

They all strained, lifting the heavy corner till it felt like the very veins in their heads would burst, while Liam managed to dart in and shove the circle of sawn ash underneath it. The bed was now tilted at an angle, their mother lying lopsided. 'Now the other side!' cajoled Maureen Murphy. They repeated the process, though unfortunately one side was slightly higher than the other, but it was the best that they could do.

'There you go, Majella! That's a lot better!' murmured Mrs Murphy. 'Now boys, away out with ye!'

Esther stood watching as the neighbour attended to her mother.

'Let's hope she doesn't get a fever out of this,' worried Maureen aloud. 'She's lost a lot of blood, Esther, so we'll just have to wait and see.' Esther nodded dumbly. 'A cup of

tea would be much appreciated,' suggested Maureen, tidying up the bundle of soiled laundry scattered on the floor and the bed. 'I'll take these home to wash for ye.'

Esther lifted the kettle on to the cooker and set it to boil, all the time praying that her mother would survive this. Having babies was a desperate ordeal by the look of it, so why in heaven's name did women like her mother go through it? By the time she got back to the bedroom Mrs Murphy had made her mother comfortable and she had dozed off to sleep.

'She's exhausted, poor dote,' she murmured, taking a large sip of milky tea from the cup that Esther passed her. 'I think Majella might be needing the doctor. I'll send for him.'

'What about the baby?' Esther lifted the baby from the drawer and passed her to Maureen Murphy.

'The poor little creature never had a chance, God be good to her! Stillborn, they call it, Esther. She was not meant for this world.'

'No!' protested Esther. 'She was alive, I saw her move, take a breath when I pulled the cord from round her neck, honest, Mrs Murphy!'

'You thought you saw, hoped you saw, pet.'

'I did!' she insisted, grabbing the baby back. She was sure and certain that the baby had been alive.

'Don't upset yourself about things that you're too young to understand! I'm only thinking of your poor mother.'

Esther pulled back the folds of the towel to reveal the pale, still, doll-like face.

'Not meant for this world,' murmured Maureen Murphy kindly, trying to rewrap the newborn infant.

Esther pressed her ear against the tiny chest and neck, then, almost demented, pulled the baby to herself, shaking the limp body. Three tiny fingers moved. They both saw it.

'Jesus, Mary and Joseph!' declared the midwife, blessing herself.

'You see!' insisted Esther triumphantly. 'She's alive!'

'Give me the child to examine!' said Maureen, unwrapping the baby carefully. 'She's born too early and mighty small and far too blue for my liking, and well, there's something not quite . . .'

Esther's blue eyes fastened on the woman, daring her to say anything bad about this new sister that she had helped to deliver.

Ten years working on the wards in a large Liverpool hospital had helped Maureen develop an instinct about patients, no matter how old or young they were, the ability to sense when things were not right. 'Well, I'm no doctor but 'tis God's will!'

Mrs Murphy bundled up the soiled bedlinen. There was not much else she could do here for the moment. Majella Doyle was deep in an exhausted sleep. She'd away home. Esther touched the older woman's arm.

'Thank you for coming, Mrs Murphy. I don't know what my mammy would have done without you. We are very grateful.'

'Say nothing, child. You were the one here with her when she needed it most, but you know, we are still not out of the woods, yet, so don't be getting your hopes up too high. I think I'd better walk down to McEvoy's Bar and ask to use the phone; I'm thinking that Dr Lawless might have a look at your mother and the baby. I'll pop back up later to see how they're doing.'

Esther watched as their neighbour walked back down the path. After all the excitement she was strangely tired herself, but couldn't resist another look at her new baby sister, lifting her up carefully. Imagine if the baby hadn't moved those tiny fingers, given a sign that she was alive, taken that one shuddering breath and clung on to life! It didn't bear thinking about. She pressed her face against the soft baby skin, inhaling that newborn smell as her small sister yawned and moved against her. Already she felt an

instinctive bond and sense of responsibility for this new sister. She loved all her five brothers dearly, but this little baby was different. She'd helped her to come into the world and saved her life - she wasn't prepared to let anything bad happen to her.

'I'm your big sister Esther, d'ye hear! I prayed and prayed every day for God to send me a sister and now he's sent you! You've got to get bigger and stronger, for you're the only sister I've got. I promise to look after you and mind you!'

The baby shut her eyes firmly and murmured softly as Esther kissed her forehead before lowering her back down gently on to the folded blanket. As long as she lived she'd never let anything harm her baby sister.

Chapter Two

'Where's your mother, child?' demanded her father the very minute he stepped through the door of the cottage.

'She's asleep in bed, Daddy,' grinned Esther, all excited and dying to tell him the news. 'She had the baby this afternoon. It's a little girl and I helped Mam to deliver her.'

'Good girl yourself!' he said, ruffling her long brown hair with his hand. 'I thought the baby wasn't due for more than another month!'

Dermot Doyle pushed his way past her and into the bedroom. Majella looked like a corpse - her lank fair hair spread across the pillow and not a drop of colour in her face - and the child was the smallest he'd ever seen. They both were unaware of his presence. Esther followed behind him.

'It's a little girl, Daddy. You wanted a little girl didn't you!' she suggested. Dermot nodded, letting his finger touch the baby's soft cheek. 'She's got dark hair like you, Daddy,' said Esther, trying to please him. Her dad was known for his thick black curly hair and handsome good looks.

'She's a scrap of a thing!' he muttered. 'Not a bit like any of ye, and that's the truth.'

Esther knew it was a worry for her father to have another mouth to feed, what with rationing and all, but it was nice for her to have a sister. God knows, she had more than enough brothers already.

He followed her out to the kitchen. Tom and Liam were busy telling their older brothers Gerard and Donal about the baby, and how they'd lifted the bed and fetched Mrs

Murphy. Dermot sat at the table listening to their excitement, Paddy curled up on his lap. The day's fishing had been bad and they'd only managed to catch a few mackerel, but at least there was food to put on the table and he'd sold the rest of the catch.

'Is Mammy all right?' asked Donal. 'She looks right bad.'

'She lost a lot of blood. Mrs Murphy said she'd come back later to check on her, and that she'd phone Dr Lawless.'

'Speak of the devil,' murmured Gerard. 'The doctor's car is coming along the road.'

Dr Bernard Lawless slowed his black Ford to a crawl as the car bumped and jolted over the dirt track that led to the Doyles' cottage. Why in God's name didn't Dermot Doyle get out his shovel and fill some of those holes with sand before someone did themselves an injury? It was wrecking his suspension. Two of the young lads ran out to greet him, confirming that their father and the rest of the family were inside. He grabbed his bag off the front seat. There had been a garbled phone message to his home from Maureen Murphy about Majella Doyle, and his wife had insisted that he visit the poor patient before she served him his tea.

There was a magnificent view from the cottage as it overlooked the whole of Carraig Beag and the bay below, though like most of the houses in this distant part of Connemara it was in sore need of a lick of paint and a bit of reroofing. Dermot Doyle opened the door to him, welcoming him in, the older boys barely civil enough to look at him and the daughter jumping up politely. They could do with opening a window and letting a bit of air in the place, and why a good fire had so often to be blocked off by a wooden horse covered with steaming clothes laid out to dry was beyond him.

Awkward and embarrassed, Dermot led him to the bedroom. Two years ago, after Majella's last miscarriage, he'd advised the both of them to have no more children and

yet here he was again, welcoming another Doyle to the brood. Dermot Doyle was a big strong sort of fella, handsome in a stocky, weatherbeaten way, but looked sheepish now as he opened the door.

‘Majella, how are you? I believe you have a second daughter!’

The woman looked absolutely ghastly pale. Maureen Murphy had done the right thing in getting him to call.

‘Could I have a bowl of warm water and some soap and a clean towel,’ he requested, ‘as I need to examine your wife.’

Glad of the excuse, Dermot slipped back outside, sending Esther in with the bowl.

‘I hear you did a great job today, Esther!’ praised the middle-aged doctor, easing off his check sports jacket, rolling up his sleeves and washing his hands and forearms. ‘You always have to be careful of germs.’ Esther blushed. She was a pretty little thing, a mixture of both parents.

Majella’s blood pressure was low and she seemed to have lost a huge amount of blood. He’d prefer to have her in the hospital in Galway than a remote place like Carraig Beag. ‘Majella, what about the hospital in Galway? It would only be for a few days, I promise. You need a blood transfusion.’

The forty-year-old patient shook her head vehemently. ‘I’ll not go and leave Dermot and the children. I’ll be right as rain in a few days when I get my strength back.’

‘You need to be in hospital, woman!’

‘No!’ replied Majella firmly. ‘I don’t want to go and I’m not going, Dr Lawless. I birthed the rest of my children here in the house and got over it fine, and this time it’ll be the same.’ Esther had never seen such a fiercely determined look in her mother’s eyes, which seemed to jump out of her white face.

‘I’m not intending to upset you, Majella, it’s just that I want to do what’s best for you; the blood would pick you up.’

Esther could tell by the stubborn set of her mother's face that the doctor was wasting his time. 'Maureen and Esther here will look after me, Dr Lawless, I'll be fine,' she said, her mind made up.

Bernard Lawless rummaged in the depths of his brown leather medical bag, producing two bottles of tablets which he instructed Esther to give Majella twice a day. 'And you're to make sure your mother gets plenty of rest, Esther.' He then set about examining the baby, lying her on the bed and unwrapping her.

'Is she all right?' begged Majella, leaning forward. 'She's only skin and bone, the poor mite.'

Dr Lawless said nothing, listening to the baby's chest and moving her arms and legs. 'What was she like when she was born, Majella?'

A look of anguish flitted across her mother's eyes. 'Blue and floppy.' She said it so softly, Esther wondered if the doctor had heard her.

'The cord was wrapped round her neck,' mumbled Esther herself, trying to calm and soothe the baby, whose chin trembled at the doctor's touch.

'Esther, would you be so kind as to go out and tell your father I'd like a word with him.'

Bernard Lawless rewrapped the child, passing her into Majella's arms. Sighing to himself, he braced himself for the bad news that he had to give the baby's parents. Years of medicine could never prepare you for such occasions; each couple reacted differently.

'Your baby is damaged,' he tried to explain gently, believing that Dermot and Majella deserved the truth, and knowing how hard it was to accept a handicapped child.

Majella was heartbroken, crying, 'She's just like my other babies! I'm telling you, Dr Lawless, she's no different!' ranting on and on trying to convince herself, whereas Dermot just sat quiet by the bed, with the look of a prizefighter recovering from a knockout punch.

It was too soon for them to take in words about lack of oxygen and pre-term births; they needed time to think. Putting away his instruments and closing his bag, the doctor got ready to leave.

'I'm sorry, Majella,' he said, placing a hand on her shoulder. 'Look, I'd best be getting home, for Yvonne'll have my tea ready. I'll look back in on you tomorrow and in a few weeks we can organize to get some tests done in Galway, to see what's what, and the extent of the damage.'

Dermot Doyle walked him to the car, and this time Bernard made it quite clear that, but for the swift action of Maureen Murphy and his young daughter, he would have lost his wife, and that there should be no question of any more pregnancies. What his wife and child needed now was good nursing care. Perhaps Maureen could help?

Dermot Doyle watched as the doctor sat into his shiny new car and drove away. Business that fella had telling him what to do about his own wife and children, and he living a soft life in a big house beyond Carraroe!

Dermot sat with the paper held up in front of him, a grim expression on his face, as Esther and Donal cooked the tea. Donal showed Esther how to gut a fish, and Tom was set to washing the potatoes. They could tell Father was annoyed after the doctor's visit, for he hated anyone criticizing him, and he didn't want to face back into Majella.

Gerard sat near the fire, complaining about being hungry and how late the tea was while Tom played with Liam and Paddy, distracting them while Esther set the table.

After tea they fetched in the crib, and Mother woke. Esther had made her a cup of tea and called Donal to help her to sit up in bed.

'I'm feeling right giddy. My head is light,' murmured Majella.

Esther stroked her arm. 'It's all right, Mammy, you just got to rest, that's what Dr Lawless and Mrs Murphy said.'

‘I must get up to the baby!’

‘Don’t be so daft! I’ll get her for you.’ The baby lay dozing in the wooden cot, barely stirring when Esther lifted her. ‘Isn’t she beautiful, Mammy!’ she enthused.

Esther passed the baby into her mother’s arms, watching as her mother nuzzled the baby’s face and hair. ‘Another month would have made all the difference. I wonder would she feed?’

Esther watched as her mother opened the nightdress that Mrs Murphy had put on her earlier. The baby refused to suckle, her tiny eyes and mouth shut firm against her mother’s breast. Paddy used to love the comfort of the breast, but the baby seemed too tired and weak to even bother to suck.

Majella tried to rouse and tease the child, but she would not stir. In the end Esther caught at the bare scrawny feet, running her finger along the soles and tickling the baby’s toes. A slight shudder seemed to ripple through the child and she began to open her mouth and ever so slowly to suck. But the baby would only feed for a short time before closing her delicate lips. Anyway, her mam looked exhausted, and was glad to let her take the baby.

Esther wrapped her again and carried her outside to show her off to her brothers. They all crowded around the kitchen, trying to have a good look at their new baby sister.

‘She’s very small,’ said Donal, taking a gentle hold of the tiny hand. Donal was the softest of all her brothers and loved small children and animals. She could see how concerned he was as he bent his fair head over the baby, studying her intently. ‘All babies are small in the beginning,’ replied Esther knowledgeably. ‘Anyways, girls are always a bit smaller than boys.’

Esther wouldn’t let any of the others hold her, the baby was too poorly for that. Their father seemed to have little interest and had gone back in to sit with his wife for a

while. Later on, she watched as he grabbed his hat and coat from the hook behind the door.

'I'm off to McEvoy's!' he called. 'I'll be back in a while.'

'Daddy, you shouldn't go!' pleaded Esther, standing in front of him, almost blocking his path. 'Not tonight of all nights, with Mam and the baby poorly.'

Dermot shrugged his shoulders, ignoring her, pulling on his jacket as he went out into the night air. He had to get out of the cramped cottage, and away from them all!

Esther was fed up. She didn't know how her mother stuck it. Night after night her daddy disappeared down to McEvoy's small public house, about a mile away. It would be hours before he returned, smelling of that strange sour porter he seemed to crave so much. Mammy and the rest of them, and now the new baby, were no match for the place.

He was only just gone when Maureen Murphy arrived. She made Esther fetch more bedlinen and gave Majella a bit of a wash.

'Where's Dermot, Majella? I didn't see him outside.'

Majella looked across at Esther. Esther could see the hurt and disappointment in her mother's eyes. Daddy shouldn't have done this to her, gone and left her here. 'He had to go out for a while,' said Majella softly.

'I suppose down to John Joe's bar, is it!' Maureen sniffed disdainfully, folding an old towel.

Esther fumed inwardly, trying not to be disloyal, for even the neighbours knew what her daddy was like and how much he loved the drink.

'He's just gone down to McEvoy's to wet the baby's head,' lied Esther, knowing Maureen wasn't one bit taken in.

'Well, isn't it well for some!' she replied sarcastically as she fussed over Majella, making her more comfortable. Mrs Murphy stood over her mother, making her drink a big glass of milk and giving her the tablets that the doctor had