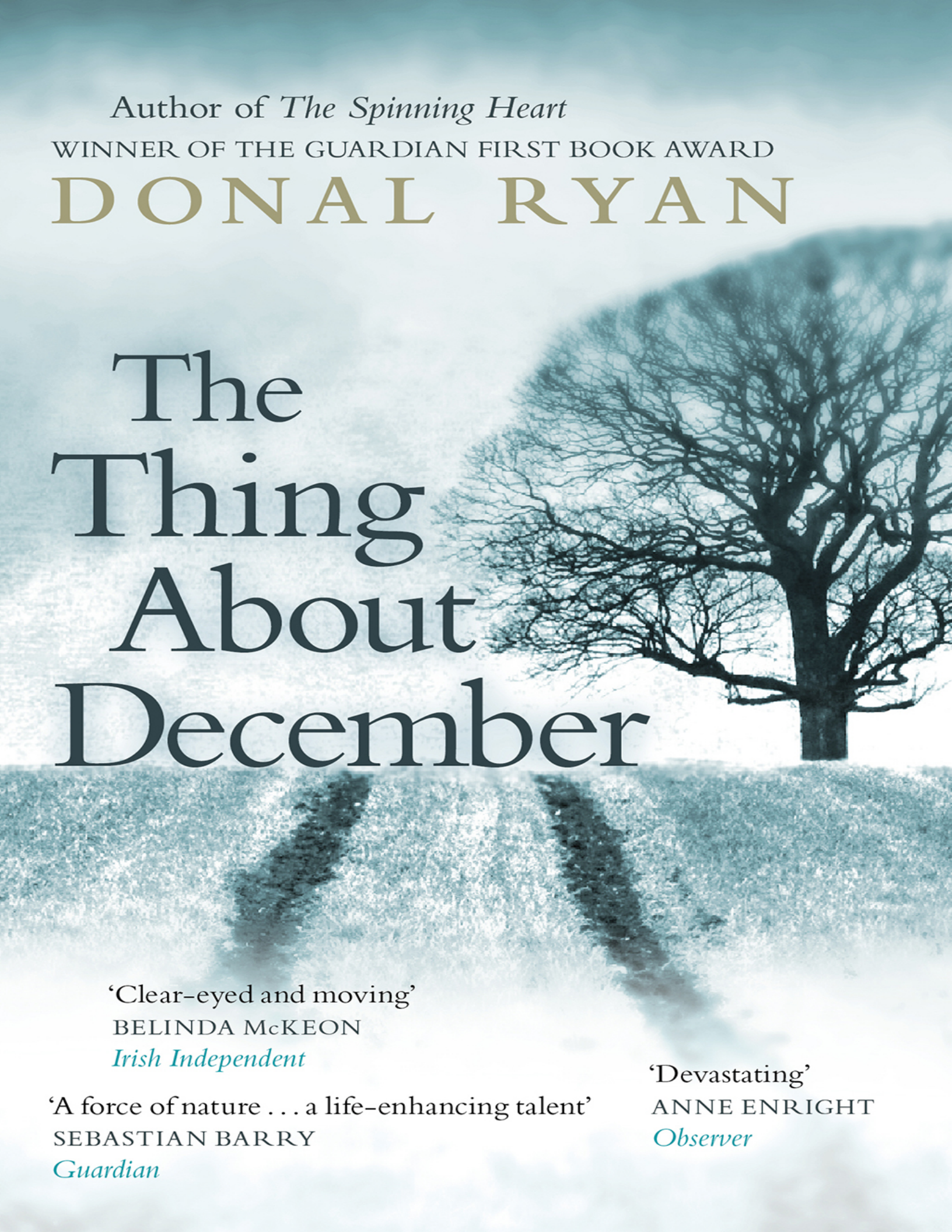
Author of *The Spinning Heart*

WINNER OF THE GUARDIAN FIRST BOOK AWARD

DONAL RYAN

The Thing About December



'Clear-eyed and moving'
BELINDA McKEON
Irish Independent

'A force of nature . . . a life-enhancing talent'
SEBASTIAN BARRY
Guardian

'Devastating'
ANNE ENRIGHT
Observer

About the Book

‘*He heard Daddy one time saying he was a grand quiet boy to Mother when he thought Johnsey couldn’t hear them talking. Mother must have been giving out about him being a gom and Daddy was defending him. He heard the fondness in Daddy’s voice. But you’d have fondness for an auld eejit of a crossbred pup that should have been drowned at birth.*’

While the Celtic Tiger rages, and greed becomes the norm, Johnsey Cunliffe desperately tries to hold on to the familiar, even as he loses those who all his life have protected him from a harsh world. Village bullies and scheming land-grabbers stand in his way, no matter where he turns.

Set over the course of one year of Johnsey’s life, *The Thing About December* breathes with his grief, bewilderment, humour and agonising self-doubt. This is a heart-twisting tale of a lonely man struggling to make sense of a world moving faster than he is.

Donal Ryan’s award-winning debut, *The Spinning Heart*, garnered unprecedented acclaim, and *The Thing About December* confirms his status as one of the best writers of his generation.

Contents

Cover
About the Book
Title Page
Dedication

January
February
March
April
May
June
July
August
September
October
November
December

Acknowledgments
About the Author
Also by Donal Ryan
Copyright

THE THING ABOUT DECEMBER

Donal Ryan

For Anne Marie, with love.

January

MOTHER ALWAYS SAID January is a lovely month. Everything starts over again in the New Year. The visitors are all finished with and you won't see sight nor hear sound of them until next Christmas with the help of God. Before you know it you'll see a stretch in the evenings. The calving starts in January and as each new life wobbles into the slatted house your wealth grows a little bit. It'd want to – you have to try and claw back what was squandered in December on rubbish that no one really wanted. The bit of frost kills any lingering badness. That's the thing about January: it makes the world fresh. That's what Mother used to say anyway, back when she used to have a lot more to say for herself.

EUGENE PENROSE and his pals were sitting on the low wall in front of the IRA memorial again. Isn't it a fright to God to say a man can't walk home without being tormented by yahoos every single day? A few times lately Eugene had clipped Johnsey's heel as he walked past them and he had stumbled and nearly fallen. How could they be always there anyway? The dole is great, Mother says. It allows thugs to live like little lords. How's it he couldn't be a proper man, besides creeping along like a red-faced child, afraid of his own shadow, with tears of shame stinging at his eyes? Daddy wouldn't have put up with it, that's for sure.

People used to be afraid of Johnsey's father. He'd give ground to no man. He loved a good row at the mart or at a match or above in the yard about the worth of a player or the price of a beast or anything you could imagine men

might argue about. But he was as well known for his kindness as for his fury. His kindness was never taken for weakness, though: Daddy was a tough yoke. He'd shouldered many a big forward into the middle of next week in his days playing hurling; Johnsey had often heard that said or something like it. Once he had worn a hurley off of a lad in pure-solid temper and the same lad was never again right after it. Johnsey had only heard that said once, and when the man saying it saw that he was listening, he stopped talking and looked into his glass of whiskey and turned red.

IF HE THOUGHT about something else while he walked the hundred-odd steps from the start of the low wall to the far end of the churchyard he could nearly cod himself that they weren't there at all, watching him coming, looking forward to making little of him. Like the deep pool in the stream down past the weeping willow at the far end of the river field as you start towards the Shannon Callows where he and Daddy used to swim. Sometimes Johnsey wondered what would it be like to lie down under that water and, when all the breath in his lungs was gone, just stay down there and breathe in water instead of air. Maybe a miracle would happen like the ones that happened below in Cork years ago where the statue of the Virgin Mary came alive and said hello to everyone and cried blood over the state of the world. Mother said it was the state of the hairy mollies gawking up at her that made her cry. Wouldn't you cry too if you had that shower roaring the holy rosary up at you night and day? Maybe, instead of drowning, he'd discover he had superhuman powers, that he was able to live under the water and could control the streams and the rivers and the sea and all that lived there, and he could live there himself and be a king, with a deadly-sharp three-pronged fork, and loads of beautiful mermaids swimming around with no bras on and making him his dinner and kissing him.

Maybe when he gets home Mother will have a tart made for after the dinner, and she'll be just taking it out of the oven when he arrives. He'll eat a huge cut of it and she'll stand behind him with a mug of tea (just a tiny drop of milk, otherwise it's ruined, Mother says) and tell him how them apples were still growing outside not even an hour ago. He'll tell her it was a lovely dinner and she'll say Was it, pet, I hope it was, you need a good dinner after your hard day. These days, though, nearly always, she would have his dinner left in the oven and it would be blistering hot or freezing cold; she sometimes left the oven on too high or forgot to leave it on at all, and she herself would be above at the Height where Daddy was buried, saying prayers and cursing at the weeds. All the prayers she was saying for him, he must be getting no respite above in heaven. Father Cotter said at his Mass that there would be a fine house ready for him above and he'd probably start a fight with the angels over the design of it and want it knocked and built again to his own specifications. The neighbours all laughed at that. Some of them even looked at each other and smiled knowingly; sure he was a divil for exactness, you couldn't do a job right for him.

Mother wasn't home. There was a shepherd's pie in the oven, at a proper temperature, covered in tinfoil, and cutlery on the table. He ate it fast, and gulped a glass of milk. There was that thing on telly at seven about holidays, and that blonde lady would be on it. Sometimes if it was quiet enough, if Mother was out and there was no cat scratching and meowing at the window, he could imagine she was talking to him, she was his girlfriend, over in some hot place with palm trees and he was going to be going over to join her once he'd finished building their big mansion of a house. They were talking on a special phone with a big video screen. She was describing it to him, the place where they would spend their holidays. You couldn't watch her properly when you were eating your dinner, you had to keep

looking down at your plate, and then you'd miss whole seconds of her standing there with her shiny blonde hair, in her clothes that only barely covered what needed covering and, sometimes, clear blue water lapping up around her bum in lucky little waves.

Just as it finished, thank God, Mother arrived in. She wanted to know was it busy below, what kind of form was Packie in, any word of the Scottish lady? Packie's eldest daughter was supposed to have eloped to Scotland with a foreign fella. She was now referred to as the Scottish lady. Like a man who went to work in America for a year or two would forever more be known as the Yank. Packie's daughter used to hang around the co-op some Saturdays, letting on to be helping. All Johnsey ever saw her at was inspecting her fingernails and chewing gum and pressing buttons on her mobile phone. She never really looked at him or talked to him, except once she offered him a Rolo and he said okay (why did you say okay, you spa?) and she held the packet out to him and the blasted Rolo got stuck in the packet and his hand shook like crazy and the Rolo was nearly melted before he got it out and now he could feel his cheeks burning hot again just thinking about it.

Packie had had no time for foreigners before the big elopement, but now he had a special hatred for them. You could nearly feel a heat off of it as it burned inside in him. You'd see them now sometimes, brown-faced people, or even proper blacks, driving through the village, on their way to town to cheat the system, according to Packie, sure tis a great country. If they were outside the co-op at the time, bringing in a delivery or something, Packie would nudge him and point with a tip of his forehead. There'd be a wicked shine from his eyes and it was then you could nearly feel that heat, like Packie's soul was already burning in eternal fire for the sins he was committing in his mind. The foreigners might look back, but you could see nothing in their eyes to give away what they were thinking. They're

probably *Hoo-Toos*, Johnsey, Packie would say. He'd spit the words out like you would something you coughed up from your lungs. Probably they killed a rake of *Tootsies* and they're over here now, hiding. Johnsey would laugh and agree away with him, and a picture of the dole boys laughing at Eugene Penrose's stupid jokes would form in his mind and he'd feel sad and ashamed of himself. What in the name of God were a Tootsie and a Hoo-Too, anyway?

They never stopped and came in. Not into the co-op. Sure why would they? Maybe the Spar below did better in the foreigner stakes.

MOTHER DIDN'T really listen to his answers to her fired-off questions any more. She hardly heard her own questions. She asked them in a listing way that reminded Johnsey of the whole class reeling off the times tables in school years ago. He could have said Sure it was a grand day, Mother, I planted an axe in Packie's forehead, took all the co-op money, went off in the jeep and drove over Eugene Penrose and all the dole boys, killed them all dead, and now that I have the supper ate, I'm off to town to be a cool bigshot and get off with girls. She would probably just stay folding clothes and tightening up and nodding and not seeing him and not hearing him. Good luck so.

He went out in the yard to practise driving. Mother's old Fiesta was going grand, and she let him drive it over and back across the yard. She wouldn't insure him on it, though. Insurance for lads like you now is about twenty thousand pounds, Johnsey. Twenty thousand? Would they know he was thick? Was that one of the questions they asked? Yes, Mister Cunliffe, hmm … seeing as you're a bit of a spastic … (there would be clicks of computer keys and sighs of impatience) … it'll be twenty thousand million billion pounds for basic insurance on that clapped-out heap of old shite. Okay? So stick to your laps of the front yard. All right? You fat gom. *Click*.

He thought better of the driving practice. Mother was complaining the other day about the price of fuel, and anyway it was only a frustration that he couldn't keep going past the gate and roar off down the road. He considered walking up through the long acre and down the river field to the stream. There was something satisfying about the crunching noise your boots made when you walked through grass that was decorated by frost. There was a spot down there by the stream on a rise above the little beach of muck formed by the thirsty cattle, under the weeping willow where you could sit, surrounded by light-green branches, where no one could see you. If you sat still enough you could imagine you were a tree too. No one ever called a tree a spastic or tried to trip it or gave out stink to it for stacking things wrong. Daddy said all life depends on trees. They make the air we breathe.

He was nearly over the stile when he thought of Dermot McDermott, and changed his mind. He was leasing the farm but you'd swear he owned the place, the swagger of him. When Johnsey met him on the land, it was as if he, Johnsey, were a trespasser. He'd ask where was he off to, and he'd never call him Johnsey, only always John. He was too cool for auld *peata* names. And he'd consider Johnsey with a quick up and down of his slitted eyes and a bit of a smirk. He'd be probably thinking Look at this ape, his father dies and he can't manage the bit of a farm that's left behind! I'm here driving my big tractor over his birthright! What a waster!

Mother says people who give their sons names like *Dermot McDermott* are up their own arses. As much as to say we're the *real* McDermotts and our boy is Dermot, son of Dermot, descended directly from the High Kings. Thinking they're two cuts above the *hi-pull-eye* and one cut at least above their neighbours. Mother says the *hi-pull-eye* is the people who live in the council houses outside the village on the end of the Ashdown Road. They nearly all have mongrel

dogs and loads of children. Or loads of dogs and mongrel children, Johnsey wasn't sure which Mother said.

THE LOCK on the door of the slatted house was broken and the wood was warped from dampness and rot, so the door was stuck half open. Even after three years it was strange to have the slatted house empty in January. The cattle made their beds in there every winter; they'd be cosy and warm and safe from the cold rain and the stinging frost, all squashed in together and using each other as big radiators. And their shite would flow away down a pipe all winter and into an underground tank to be sucked back up and spread on the land to feed the grass that they would eat and turn back into milk and shite again. Whenever the teacher would describe the Nativity in school, Johnsey always pictured the stable in Bethlehem as the slatted house that neatly divided the front yard from the big yard, and the three wise men as Daddy, Paddy Rourke and Mister Unthank. The baby Jesus would have been fine and warm and safe in there.

There was enough light allowed in so that Johnsey could see the stout crossbeam that dissected the roof. Would it take his weight? Things was built right in them days, Daddy always said. He was very fat, though. Imagine if he did it arseways and fell on his hole and broke his leg! And Dermot McDermott found him, say. And called Mother. And the fire brigade. And Father Cotter. And then Eugene Penrose and the rest of the dole boys would arrive on after seeing the brigade flying out. The whole village would be standing in the yard for a finish, waiting for a turn to look in the door at the fat eejit on the floor of the slatted house with his leg bursted and cocked at a quare angle, crying like a small child, his face purple and swelled and the rope still tight around his neck, and they'd point and shake their heads and roll their eyes until someone kind would break it up and push them away and try to help him, and their kindness would stab him deeper than the laughter of the rest,

because he didn’t deserve it, and they’d know it, but be kind anyway.

Father Cotter was that way, and the Unthanks. Packie Collins wasn’t. He told Johnsey every day that he was only allowing him work in the co-op out of respect for his father, Lord have mercy on him. He was a *liability*. Johnsey often heard Packie muttering about him to customers, who’d look around and smirk, and if he caught their eye they’d salute him, but in a way that was too friendly, as fake as that cake in the window of the wedding shop inside in town. As fake as a three-pound note, Mother would say. Father Cotter’s job was to be nice to people; he worked for God, who gave strict instructions to all to be good and nice. And Mister Unthank was Daddy’s great old friend; they’d palled around together since they were small boys. He’d stood at Daddy’s coffin for ages in the funeral home, with his hand on the rim, just shaking his head and saying, really softly, *Jack, Jack, Jackie*, and tut-tutting, like Daddy used to over things being wasted and things that weren’t right, and Johnsey saw a tear rolling off of Mister Unthank’s chin and landing on his father’s cheek, so that it looked like Daddy himself was crying.

DADDY HAD ALWAYS SAID to be honest. Daddy wasn’t able to tell a lie. Once, years ago, an auld biddy from the village rang to know would Mother be able to bake twenty tarts in a hurry for the ICA show and Daddy told them hold on and put down the phone and went out to the chicken coop in the haggard to ask her and Mother said to tell that old biddy make her own tarts, no, tell her I’m gone to town and won’t be back till nine but Daddy said No, Sarah. You know I can’t tell a lie. And the way he said it, it was like the priest saying *and the Word was made flesh*: it was a fact, a given thing; there could be no argument. Mother stomped into the hallway, raging, and had to tell her own lie. Then she told Daddy that now he had *her* feeling terrible and she had to go as far as town for a finish so as to make her lie into truth, and stay

there until nine o’clock to make doubly certain that truth prevailed that day. That was one of the things about Daddy: he could make you feel bad by being so good, so that you *had* to try to be good like him.

He couldn’t think properly abroad in the yard or around the buildings or even in the dark of the slatted house. The whole place smelled of Daddy. Whenever he looked up the yard he expected to see him striding towards him, saluting with his stick and full of news even when there was no news. Everything in the yard seemed to have died with him, as though they had only existed to serve him. But still all these things were shaped by his weight and worn by his touch so that no one else could quite fit them: the rut along the yard where he had tramped the same track over and over every day where visitors often stumbled, unaware of its presence until its sides caught their soles; the shiny, paint-less edges around the handles of the doors to the slatted house and the milking parlour and the workshop where every day for years on end he had flung them open and closed; the seats of the tractor and the jeep, moulded by the burden of him into a hollow; the very walls of the buildings that seemed to stand now only to honour the memory of his stony strength.

It wasn’t good for you, the way this house was now. Even a gom like him could see that. Sadness plus sadness equals more sadness. Sadness begets sadness. The deadness of the yard and the buildings made the air seem thicker and harder to walk through. Dermot McDermott had enough in his own yard and buildings above; he leased the grass only. Anyway, it would have made his heart sick to see that curly-headed fucker flying in and out around Daddy’s yard with his big fancy John Deere, destroying the place and taking no care to maintain the integrity of Daddy’s world. It would have been an invasion. Better the dead-quiet loneliness that prevailed now than the noisy ignorance of that chap and his

fancy machinery. That’s the way Daddy would have seen it, Johnsey was certain.

He heard Daddy one time saying he was a grand quiet boy to Mother when he thought Johnsey couldn’t hear them talking. Mother must have been giving out about him being a gom and Daddy was defending him. He heard the fondness in Daddy’s voice. But you’d have fondness for an auld eejit of a crossbred pup that should have been drowned at birth. He’d be no use for anything only eating and shiteing and he’d be an awful nuisance, but still and all you’d give him the odd rub and a treat, and you’d nearly always be kind to him because it wasn’t his fault he was a drooling fool of a yoke. You wouldn’t be going around showing him off to people, though, that’s for sure.

His bedroom was the best place to think about things. Too much thinking could balls you up rightly. Your mind could start acting like a video player, showing you your own thickness. It was worst when he’d had to talk to people, like one of the auld biddies quizzing him on the way home or in the bakery about Mother or someone stopping him on the street to know how was he and how was his Aunty Theresa and was Small Frank finished his auld exams and he’d stand there and feel his cheeks burning off of him and he’d do his damnedest to try and answer properly and sound like a normal fella but words could make an awful fool of you. What use was talking, anyway? What was ever achieved with words?

Johnsey often thought about girls in his room. He had a dirty magazine that used to belong to Anthony Dwyer, who wasn’t quite the gom Johnsey was, but who had the added hardship of being a meely-mawly with one leg shorter than the other. Looking at Dwyer’s magazine often landed him in a sinful place and the thought of doing that made him feel like he sometimes did before walking up to Communion if the Moran girls were sitting near the front in their short skirts: he could feel his heart hammering and jumping and

kicking about the place, for all the world as though it was ready to jump up his throat and out his mouth and slap him in the puss before running off on little fat red legs, leaving a bloody trail behind it, shouting Good luck now, fatarse, sure you don't need me, anyway! He had a look out the window and across the yard. No stir abroad. Why would there be?

He imagined Dermot McDermott with a lovely girl in a short skirt and she pinned up against that bollix, trapped, and he saying to her Go on, come on will you and trying to have his rotten way with her and she not wanting to and trying to free herself. Then he imagined he, Johnsey, striding up behind Dermot McDermott and he turning around and Johnsey planting him a box, square on the jaw, and the lovely girl crying Thank you, thank you and Johnsey would put his arms around her and she would suddenly decide she wanted after all to do the dirty things Dermot McDermott had wanted her to do, only with Johnsey, and not the curly fucker who was now prostrated in the muck.

JOHNSEY HAD never really spoken to a girl, besides Mother and the aunties and the auld biddies, and they were certainly not real girls like the ones in town or outside Molloy's smoking fags in what Mother called their *bum freezers*. A few hellos and goodbyes and grands and yes pleases and thanks very muches to Packie's daughter and the very odd customer in the co-op who was female; that was it, really.

His parents had talked him into going to a disco once. He didn't know why they were so mad for him to go. It was for the youth only, and being held in a parish hall fifteen miles away. A bus was going from the village, a twenty-five seater, but some would have to stand. The thoughts of that bus, and a hall with girls in it, and Eugene Penrose and all the cool lads laughing and looking at him as if to say where does *he* think he's going, he's not one of us, and the risk of having to talk or being expected to disco dance; Johnsey didn't know why Mother and Daddy were doing this to him.

Why couldn’t he just stay at home with them, like always, and watch *The Late Late Show* and drink tea and eat buns or currant cake?

Johnsey was thirteen then, his hair was thick and black and wouldn’t be told which way to lie, his face was red, his hands were too big, his feet often betrayed him, his voice cracked in his throat and escaped from his mouth all high-pitched or too low and his head shook when he was forced to talk, and surely to God this much misery was too much for one boy to have to bear.

Mother had bought him new trousers especially – they would be for good wear as well, they wouldn’t go astray, anyway – and a shirt and a jumper. The jumper was right expensive, and it had a tiny little golfer on it like the ones all the cool lads were wearing. And he had Doc Marten shoes on. Daddy had brought them home for him in a box that said ‘Air Wear’ on it. But the ones he had brought were too small and he had to carry them back into town and get bigger ones, but he didn’t mind, he said it was his own fault – he should have checked.

When he was leaving the house that night for the disco, Mother had brushed his hair back with her hand and kissed him on the forehead and said My little man, off to his first dance. And Daddy drove him down to the village in the jeep, so he felt like a right big man jumping down from the high seat and Daddy winked at him and said Go handy now, leave a few girls for the rest! Johnsey wasn’t sure what Daddy meant but it sounded manly and funny and he laughed along and said Good luck, thanks, Dad – he only just remembered not to say *Daddy* while there was a chance any of the cool lads could hear. Daddy had given him a whole fiver on the way down, and it was warm in his hand. The bus was paid for and it was two pounds in, so three pounds of the fiver was all his for spending. What was there to buy at discos? Johnsey could not imagine. Surely there’d be Coca-Cola, anyway. In spite of his nerves, he felt a thrill.

He had been hoping Dwyer would be down at the memorial to wait for the bus so he would have a comrade in spastication. He could still hear Daddy's jeep and smell its fumes when Eugene Penrose sauntered over, flanked by little Mickey Farrell and a lad with fair hair from Fifth Year who was in a fight one day with a fella from the minor team and he drew shocking red blood and won the fight and the fella from the minor team, who was *eighteen*, started crying and the blood solid spurted from his nose.

What are you doing here? Eugene Penrose's hair was long, straight down from his fringe and over his ears. He looked like a right dipstick, Daddy would say. An awful-looking yahoo!

Going to the disco, Johnsey had said.

Are you now? Come on so, come over here and stand with us, old Paddy Screwballs is driving the bus so he'll be ages yet. He's probably above at home picking cling-ons out of his hole.

Johnsey didn't know what to do. Eugene Penrose had talked friendly to him before now and it only ever ended badly. Once, it had lasted a full day, the friendliness, but then he had grabbed his schoolbag going past the church gates and hung it off the high railing and when Johnsey had reached up to get it, Eugene Penrose had pulled down his pants and put a big fist of muck in his underpants and mashed it in with a kick and started roaring that Johnsey had shat in his pants and the whole school-bus crowd saw him with muck all over his arse and on the backs of his legs and he was called Shittyarse Cunliffe for nearly a year after it.

But Johnsey followed Eugene Penrose and little Mickey Farrell with his slanty eyes (Mother had asked Daddy one Sunday coming from Mass, Is that little lad of the Farrells a Mongol, and Daddy had laughed and said No, he's a rat like his father) over to the memorial where all the cool lads were and a few girls acting like they were disgusted with the cool

lads but you could tell they weren't, really, and a couple of nervous-looking spastics standing to the side, like bits of auld watery broccoli beside a plate of steak and chips.

Hey, lads, Penrose declared, pulling him by the arm to present him to the rest, Look at Cunliffe's jumper – I'd say his mother knit it and glued a golfer on it!

I'd say his father bought it off the tinkers, someone else volunteered. Johnsey could see his fellow spastics were guffawing away with the cool lads, feeling safely ignored for the minute and trying to gain ground while they could.

Hey, Johnsey Cunt-Lick, don't shit in your pants now, it's only a small bus!

We'll put the fucker in the boot!

Someone grabbed the back of his jumper and yanked the label out and roared *Penneys!*

Johnsey knew his mother hadn't bought his jumper in Penneys; she'd gone to a right expensive place in the city. He knew because he'd heard her telling Daddy it was an awful price and Daddy said Sure what about it and she said It's true, what about it. Then he heard a rip and the two buttons on the shoulder of his jumper landed on the ground. He bent down to pick them up but the jumper-grabber behind still had a grip and there was another rip. Now the neck of his jumper felt too loose and it was slipping down over his shoulder and he wondered how would he explain to Mother and Daddy how his new jumper that was an awful price got destroyed.

Paddy Screwballs arrived and Johnsey's torment, for the moment, was at an end. Surely to God he would be left alone on the bus, with an adult driving it. He sat at the very top, as close to the driver as possible. The other two harmless lads sat across from him. They looked a bit ashamed.

But his sanctuary was soon destroyed: Eugene Penrose landed down beside him, and put a big *mar dhea* friendly arm around his shoulders, and Johnsey had to shove in for