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THE SPECKLED PEOPLE de Hugo Hamilton:
VIDAS MATIZADAS E OS MATIZES DA TRADUÇÃO

Anexo III

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The most gripping book I've read in ages . . . Fascinating, disturbing and often very funny.' RODDY DOYLE

In one of the finest memoirs to have emerged from Ireland in many years, the acclaimed novelist Hugo Hamilton brings alive his German–Irish childhood in 1950s Dublin. Between his father's strict Irish nationalism and the softly spoken stories of his mother's German past, this little boy tells the tale of a whole family's homesickness for a country, and a language, they can call their own.

'An extraordinary achievement . . . A wonderful, subtle, problematic and humane book. It is about Ireland as well as about a particular family, but it is also about alternatives and complexities anywhere.' GEORGE SZIRTES, IRISH TIMES

'This story about a battle over language and defeat 'in the language wars' is also a victory for eloquent writing, crafty and cunning in its apparent simplicity.' HERMIONE LEE, GUARDIAN

'Hamilton's first masterpiece. To read The Speckled People is to remember why great writing matters. A book for our times, and probably of all time.' JOSEPH O'CONNOR, DAILY MAIL
Seven

One day the boiler burst. It started hissing and clicking because of all the bad things that had been thrown into it. It got so hot that you could hear it cracking inside. Then there was a bang and it burst open with hot brown water gushing out all over the kitchen floor like tea with milk. My mother told my father to call the fire brigade. He frowned and sucked in air through his teeth. But then he put out the fire by himself. He carried the red coal out on a shovel and rolled up his sleeves to sweep the tea out of the back door.

Then it’s winter and our house starts filling up with mice. The pipes are cold and there are mice in every room because they get in under the back door. More and more of them are coming in every day until all the mice from the whole city are living in our house, my mother says. They’re in the hall and on the stairs, everywhere you go. Any time you open the door and go into a room you see them running away. But mostly they’re under the stairs where things are kept, like jam jars and pots and old shoes. There are so many of them that you have to watch where you walk, because one day when Franz was running down the three steps from the hallway into the kitchen, a baby mouse ran out from under the stairs and got squashed. We all crouched down to examine the flattened corpse until my mother told us not to be so interested in blood and took it away on the shovel.

It’s so cold, we stay in one room by the fire where it’s nice and warm, but if you go from that room up to the bedroom, it’s like going out on the street and you need your coat on. My mother shows me her hands and says they will never get warm again. They’ve gone blue and green with the cold, like mackerel. She wants me to take pity on her hands and please let them in under my jumper to get warm. Be a good boy and give shelter to my poor fish-blue hands, she says. Just let them in for a little second or two to get warm. Then I scream and laugh and my mother screams and laughs, because the mackerel are fast swimmers and they go up under my jumper and down around my neck into my shirt and my mother says: ‘Wie schön, wie schön warm’, oh lovely and cosy and warm.

Áine came back from London, but she’s so sad that she only talks to herself in the mirror now. She can’t even say ‘walk on the wall’ in Irish or English or go down to the seafront because her legs won’t carry her. She’s never going back to London, but she doesn’t want to go back to Connemara either, so she lives with us. Sometimes you hear her upstairs crying and my mother says something happened to her, something that can’t be explained or forgotten about either, so we just had to wait for her to get her words back. Onkel Ted has to come and make the sign of the cross over her, but still she won’t come out and nobody knows what to do. My mother says it’s the worst thing of all to be sad for yourself. You can help other people but often you can’t help yourself.

At night you can hear the mice scratching and chasing each other around. For a while we counted the number of mice we saw every day, but then we didn’t know if we
were counting the same mouse twice in different rooms. My father bought two traps to catch them but that wasn't enough, so he bought another one that would catch three of them at the same time. It made no difference. Even if you caught three mice each day, my mother said it would still take a hundred years to catch them all because they could have families faster than we could kill them. The only thing was to stop talking about them and then they would go away. One day, there was a dead mouse in the trap that was half eaten by his own friends, and my mother said it was time to stop talking about it. Mice have no feelings, she said, and some people have no feelings either.

Aine spent all her day sitting up in bed smoking cigarettes. My mother said the best thing was for her to find a new job, then she could buy new clothes and go out and meet new people. Aine's legs wouldn't even carry her to the front door, so my mother went around to all the neighbours to ask if anyone knew of any jobs. She spoke to people who owned a man's shop and people in two grocery shops. After a long time she found a job in a gift shop, but Aine burst into tears on the first day and the owner told my mother that a gift shop is meant to be a happy place and nobody was going to buy anything from a person with tears in their eyes. He said he would prefer it if my mother came to work for him instead. My mother said she would love to work in the gift shop, but her hands were like mackerel and nobody was going to buy anything from fish-cold hands.

My mother said she knew what the problem was. If Aine had nice shoes then she would feel better and her legs would carry her down the street with no shame. My father said it was a waste and that everyone else in our house needed shoes, too, but my mother said it would all be paid back in other ways. So Aine got new shoes, but it made no difference. At night she left the light on in her room and my father said that was a waste, too, because she was not even reading a book, only sitting there smoking cigarettes. He said he gave up smoking when he wanted to buy German records and the only way of paying for them was to take the money from the cigarettes instead. If he had a mouse for every cigarette that Aine smoked and a penny for every mouse that he caught, he would be able to buy every opera and every symphony that ever existed on Deutsche Grammophon. He said it was the cigarettes that were making Aine sad. And one morning, my mother found a black hole in one of the pillow cases and she was afraid the house would burn down.

Every day my mother sits down with Aine and tries to make her smile. She says nobody can make you smile if you don't want to. Every day my father goes to work on the train. Every day we catch three mice and every day new ones come. Every day I scream and laugh when my mother's mackerel hands go under my jumper. Every Sunday Onkel Ted comes to tea after his swim at the Forty Foot because he doesn't feel the cold. We tell him things that happened, but not about mice and not about Aine or the black holes burned in her dresses. My sister Maria pulls up her dress to show Onkel Ted her tummy and then we reach into the pocket of his jacket for the sweets. He goes upstairs to make the sign of the cross over Aine and when he comes down again, he says my mother should take her out dancing.

'Irish dancing,' my father said. 'It would have to be Irish dancing.'

Then everybody is silent for a while looking at each other. Until my mother suddenly bursts out laughing and
she's forgotten how to dance. Two silent brothers looking at my mother laughing and laughing at the idea of coming all the way over from Germany to bring an Irish woman out to Irish dancing. Onkel Ted smiles and waits for my mother to finish. He's very serious and says there are things you never forget like cycling and swimming and helping other people. So one evening, my mother and Áine got dressed up and went dancing in the city. She put on her blue dress with the white spots and Áine put on her new shoes and a dress without holes in it. My father stayed at home reading his book and we sat on the carpet playing cars and listening to mice.

My mother said Irish dancing was not like waltzing or any kind of dancing that she had ever seen before. She said in Ireland your feet never even touch the ground. Everyone was floating, except for a man who sometimes slapped his heel down with a bang to the music as if he were trying to make holes in the floor. The dance hall smelled of smoke and perfume and sweat and it was filled with people of all ages. There was a priest and some nuns as well, sitting down in the seats. An old woman with long hair was dancing as if she were only sixteen. All the men were on one side of the hall and all the women on the other. The women danced as if the men didn't exist, and at the refreshments counter there were people talking over tea and sandwiches as if the dancing didn't exist. My mother watched three boys sharing a bottle of fizzy lemonade. Each time one of them drank through the straw, the other two kept watch to make sure he didn't go past a certain mark before he passed it on to the next boy. They had tears in their eyes from drinking so fast.

All the time, men came walking across from the other side of the hall to ask my mother to dance, but she smiled and shook her head. She thanked them and asked them to dance with Áine instead. My mother says you can see a man's face drop. But once they had come all the way over, they could not just turn around and go away again empty-handed. Áine didn't want to dance either. She said her legs were gone soft. So the man had to pull her out by the hand, with my mother pushing her from behind. Then Áine tried to hold on to her seat with her foot and the chair went scraping out on the dance floor behind her, until my mother finally got it off. Even then the man had a hard job trying to make Áine dance, because her feet stayed on the floor and would not move. My mother said Áine had cement in her shoes and all the men soon stopped coming over.

She says it was funny, a German woman pushing an Irish woman out to dance against her will. She says it's hard to understand what's going on in people's heads in Ireland. She says Irish people dance with their heads and speak with their feet. Everybody knows what's inside everybody else's head, but nobody ever says it out loud. They like to keep everything inside. She says German people say what they think and Irish people keep it to themselves and maybe the Irish way is sometimes better. In Germany, she says, people think before they speak so that they mean what they say, while in Ireland, people think after they speak so as to find out what they mean. In Ireland the words never touch the ground.

After the dancing, Áine lost her words altogether. There was something inside her head that was making her sick. She didn't speak about it, she would die. She was not eating any more either, only smoking cigarettes. Dr Sheehan had to come one day, because Áine started burning holes in her legs and arms. He said she
would have to go to hospital, but then Onkel Ted came to make the sign of the cross over her once more. He spent a long time in her room talking to her very quietly and nodding his head. He gave her lots of time to remember everything that happened, until she finally spoke in her own language. She told Onkel Ted something in Irish and he came downstairs with the answer. He said if Áine was to stop burning holes in her arms and legs, if she was ever to smile again and stop being sad, then she would have to get her baby back. So one day my mother and Áine went out and they came back with a new baby. She was going back home again because she was happy now. She didn't need to smoke cigarettes and talk to herself any more because she had the baby to talk to. My mother helped her to pack her suitcase with lots of German baby clothes and they laughed because Áine said it was nearly like a German baby going home to Connemara. And the day she was leaving, it was my mother who was crying because Áine was smiling.

Men came to fix the boiler. There was some more brown tea with milk on the floor of the kitchen, but then it was all over and the pipes started heating up again. My father put lots of coal into the boiler so the house got warm. Then there was a delivery of coal. A truck stopped on the street outside and because they couldn't go around the back, the men with black faces and black hands had to come through the house. My mother was afraid the wind would slam the doors shut in anger, so we had to hold them open, Franz at the front door, me at the in-between door, and Maria at the back door. She told us to count the bags as they came in. In Ireland people count in their heads, she said, but in Germany people count out loud. Out loud we counted – *Eins, Zwei, Drei, Vier, Fünf* . . . all the way up to fifteen. The men walked in stooped over with the heavy sacks, leaving long black marks where the sacks scraped against the wall on their way through. And where they went down the three steps towards the kitchen and out the back door, they put a black hand up every time to hold on to the door frame. One of the men winked and made me forget what number I was on. I didn't know if I should be counting the sack that was coming or the sack gone by. But then I heard Franz counting the next number at the front door and I was able to catch up.

When the shed outside was full and the coal was spilling out across the path, the men got back into the truck. One of them counted the empty sacks as if he could not trust us to count right. He came back inside with a pink piece of paper covered with black fingerprints and asked my mother to sign her name. That was to make sure she agreed that there was no mistake in the counting and that nobody ran away with one of the empty sacks. But there could be no mistake because we counted out loud in German and the man counted the empty sacks in English, and it was the same number no matter what language.
Eight

My mother has to go home to Kempen and we can't go with her. She's on the phone in the front room crying and speaking in a loud voice to Germany and we're outside the door listening until she comes out with shadows around her eyes. She says she has to go away for a while. So then we have to stay in the house with the yellow door where they speak no Irish and no German, only English. My mother lays everything out on the bed for us and packs it into a bag. We get up very early in the morning when it's still dark outside and the light in the bedroom is so bright that you can't look at it. It's cold, too, and Franz is standing on the bed in his underpants, shivering and singing a long note with his teeth clacking. I'm able to put my shirt on by myself but I can't do the buttons because my fingers are soft. My mother is in a hurry and she pinched my neck when she was doing up the top button, but she said sorry and then it's time to go. It's still dark outside on the street and you can blow your breath out like smoke. It's still dark when we get on the bus and still dark when we come up to the yellow door and then I can't walk because my legs are soft. I have a limp in both legs and I hold on to my mother's coat because I don't want to emigrate and live in a different country from her.

I don't know where Germany is. I know it's far away from Ireland because you can't go there on the bus, you can only look at it on the map. I know there was the First World War and the Second World War and the second would not have happened without the first. I know the Germans wanted to have an empire and that wasn't allowed. The goat wanted to have a long tail but only got a short one, my mother says, whenever we want something that we can't have.

I don't like the house with the yellow door. I don't like the room with the toilet and ten potties hanging on the wall. I don't like the smell of the brown rubber sheet on the bed and I don't like the smell of custard. The house with the yellow door and the yellow custard is a place where you wait for your mother to come back and sometimes you hear other children crying on the stairs because they're waiting too. Franz would not eat the custard or go to the toilet. He closed his mouth and said he would never open it again for the rest of his life. The nurse tried to pretend that the spoon was a train going into his mouth, but he shook his head and turned away. He could only eat and go to the toilet in German. So my father had to come and bring him to the toilet. I closed my mouth and refused to speak because the nurse would not say goodbye to the moon. I said she was from a different country and then my father had to come another time and give the nurse the word for moon in Irish.

I know that my mother's father, Franz Kaiser, owned a stationery shop in the town of Kempen and nobody had any money to buy anything, so he had to close it down. But that didn't stop him making jokes and playing tricks on people just to see the look on their faces. My mother says he was famous for all the funny things he did because he always made up for it afterwards. One day in the Kranz
Café he stuck his finger into a doughnut and held it up in the air to ask how much it cost, just to see the look on their faces when he said it was too expensive. But then he bought all of them, one each for my mother and her four sisters and one each for all the other children he could find on the market square.

One day he played a trick on the commanding officer of the Belgian army. I know that my mother's town was in the Rhineland but that was occupied by the Belgians and the French as punishment for the First World War. It was confiscated from the Germans by the Treaty of Versailles. So one night Franz Kaiser and his cousin Fritz planned a new trick. They filled a porcelain potty full of ink from the shop. They spread out a sheet of paper on the table and took down the big quill from over the door outside the shop. Then they invited the commanding officer of the Belgian army to come to the house for a drink, just to see the look on his face when they brought him over to the table and asked him to sign a new treaty. The officer was very angry, but then they gave him a cigar and the best wine in the house. My mother says everybody liked Franz Kaiser's jokes, even the people who were joked about, and maybe the Second World War would not have happened if there were more people like him. Then the Nazis took over and there was no more time for joking in Germany.

Then he was ill and my mother had to tell him what was happening outside on the square. He sat up in a bed in the living room upstairs over the shop, with the big alcove and the piano at the window. She had to look out and tell him who was going by. And every day, her mother played for him to make him better. She sang the Freischütz and all the Schubert songs she had performed at the opera house in Krefeld, when he sent her a bouquet of bananas instead of flowers. Every day, she shaved his face and played the piano, but he didn't get better. My mother was nine years old and one day he asked her to bring him a mirror so he could say goodbye to himself. He didn't want to know who was passing by the house any more. All he did was look into the mirror for a long time in silence. Then he smiled at himself and said: 'Tschüss, Franz . . .'

My mother says she will never forget the smell of flowers all around his bed and she will never forget the people of the town all standing outside on the market square. She remembers the shadows around her mother's eyes when the coffin came out of the house. She says that maybe it's not such a good thing to be the child of two people who loved each other so much, because it's like being in a novel or a song or a big film that you might never get out of.

After that her mother was always dressed in black. Every evening she gathered all the five girls together in the living room over the shop. Marianne, Elfriede, Irmgard, Lisalotte and Minne all listening to Schubert songs and looking out at the people crossing the Buttermarkt square to go to the cinema. My mother says she can remember the soft, sad rain that blurred the sign above the cinema saying 'Kempener Lichtspiele' and made the tree trunks black. There was no money left in Germany, so her mother then had to teach the piano and put a candle in the fire to make the house look warm. They had to sell things like candlesticks and vases. The furniture began to disappear and the rooms began to look empty. Then Germany was so poor that they decided to emigrate to Brazil.

Things were happening in the town of Kempen that made people afraid. Everyone was afraid of the Communists and one night two men in brown shirts were beaten up with sticks in the street near the old school. Then it was
all turned around and the Communist men were beaten up with sticks and fists by the men in brown shirts. People stayed inside their houses because of things like that. They didn’t want to go outside and my mother says Germany belonged to the fist people and it was better to start again somewhere else like Brazil.

First of all it was the oldest sisters Marianne and Elfriede who were to go and marry two German boys already out there. There was a Catholic organisation in the Rhineland which matched up German girls with German boys to go and start a new life planting coffee and tobacco and looking for rubber trees. They would arrange the passage first to San Francisco and on to Brazil through missionary routes. Marianne and Elfriede went to special courses at the weekend to learn about agriculture. My mother and her sisters started laying out their things on the bed, getting ready to pack their bags, and reading books about the rainforest. They knew it would be very hot, so they bought straw hats and fans. There would be lots of insects, too, so they had to learn how to smoke to keep them away.

‘Can we do the pipes now,’ Lisalotte kept asking.

But first of all they had to sit by the piano and learn all the Schubert songs. In Brazil, it would be just as important to keep singing the German songs and telling German stories as it was to smoke and keep the insects away. And maybe the music would even help to bring back the good times. Maybe it was not too late and the music would help the word people to take over again from the fist people in Germany. They even sang one or two pop songs as well, swing songs that everybody whistled and sang on the Buttermarkt square.

They sang and laughed until the tears came into her mother’s eyes and nobody knew if she was crying or laughing any more. And then, at last, they took out the pipes and filled them up with tobacco from a tweed pouch. They got out the flint lighter with the initials FK that Franz Kaiser used for cigars. All the things still there from the time he invited men from the town to come over to the house and smoke until you couldn’t even see the wallpaper. Now it was time for the girls to do the same. They lit up the pipes and passed them around. Each one of them had to practise puffing and coughing and spitting and holding the pipe in the side of her mouth. The smell of tobacco filled the room and it was like her father was back again.

‘At last the room smells like men again,’ my mother said, and they had to laugh and cough so much that they couldn’t speak. They practised singing and smoking every night until they were ready to go away. But then my mother’s mother Bertha got ill. She was not able to live without Franz Kaiser, either in Germany or in Brazil. She died and there was another big funeral with lots of people standing outside on the Buttermarkt square waiting for the coffin to come out of the house. Then my mother and her sisters had to go to live with their Onkel Gerd and aunt Ta Maria. Then it was the end of smoking pipes and talking about Brazil, because Onkel Gerd was the lord mayor and he said he couldn’t let them emigrate until they were eighteen. He said they would be homesick. They would be able to make German cakes and sing German songs but they would miss their own country. He didn’t say they were not allowed to go. Instead, he gathered them all in the living room and turned the question over to them.

‘What would you do if you were in my shoes?’ he asked them. ‘What if you suddenly had five lovely daughters,
would you send them away to Brazil to be eaten by
insects?"

After that there was lots of trouble for Onkel Gerd
because he would not join the Nazi party. He said there
was no place left in Germany for the word people to go.
He said the first people had robbed all the words, from the
church, from all the old songs, from books and films. They
had broken into the theatre and taken the drama out on
to the streets. Everybody was excited by the new colours
and the new words. But if you were not one of the first
people, you had to learn silence. You could only speak
in the privacy of your own house, Onkel Gerd said. You
could make jokes inside, but that's where they had to stay
because it was not safe to speak outside any more. There
were jokes you could not make on the Buttermarkt square
any more because the first people had taken over Germany.

One day my father came to the house with the yellow
door and took us home on the bus. He was smiling and
said we would never have to eat custard again. I know that
Germany is a place full of cakes and nice things that you
can't get in Ireland, because my mother came back with
four large suitcases, full of chocolate and toys and clothes.

There were new games, too, like the game where you throw
all the coloured sticks on the floor in a big mess and then
you have to pick them out one by one. My mother looked
new because she had new clothes. She was smiling all the
time and had new perfume on. She brought home a pewter
plate and candlestick that was left over from her father and
mother's house. She had pictures of the house and said we
would all go there one day. My father and mother drank
wine and there was big German music all around the house,
maybe outside the house, too, and all the way down to the
end of the street.

Sometimes my mother turns around suddenly to take us
all into her arms so that my face is squashed up against
Franz and Maria. Sometimes she wants to take a bite out
of Maria's arm, just a little bite. Sometimes she still has
tears in her eyes, either because she's so happy or because
she is still sad for Onkel Gerd. He was a good man who
spoke very little, only when he had something to say. It was
the biggest funeral she had ever seen in Kempen, because
he was a lord mayor once and he would not join the first
people. He was not afraid to resist. She hung a photograph
of him in the living room so that we could see him and be
like him.

My mother also brought back a typewriter and some days
later she opened it up and allowed me to type my name.
Johannes. The letters fly out and hit the page. Lettetet.
Lettetet. Sometimes two letters get stuck in mid-air and
my mother says we have to be more gentle, only one at
a time. She holds my finger and helps me to pick out
the letter. I press down on the key and the letter shoots
out so fast that you can hardly see it. It slaps against the
paper like magic. I want to write 'Johannes is the best boy
in the world', but it would take too long. Then I ask her
if I can write 'Johannes is the boldest boy in the world'
instead and my mother laughs out loud. She says I'm the
best boy and the boldest boy at the same time, because I
get the most amount of slaps from my father and the most
amount of hugs from her to make up for it. Then Franz
wants to write down that he will never have to emigrate
and go to the yellow house again but it's too late and we
have to go to bed now.

At night, I can hear my mother downstairs in the kitchen
with the typewriter. She's *lettetetting* on her own, while my father is in the front room reading. The letters fly out and hit the page faster than you can speak. She's *lettetetting* and *lettetetting* because there's a story that she can't tell anyone, not even my father. You can't be afraid of silence, she says. And stories that you have to write down are different to stories that you tell people out loud, because they're harder to explain and you have to wait for the right moment. The only thing she can do is to write them down on paper for us to read later on.

'To my children,' she writes. 'One day, when you're old enough, you will understand what happened to me, how I got trapped in Germany and couldn't help myself. I want to tell you about the time when I was afraid, when I stood in my room and couldn't shout for help and heard the footsteps of a man named Stiegler coming up the stairs.'

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**Nine**

On the first day of school I slapped the teacher in the face. I knew there would be lots of trouble. I thought Onkel Ted would have to come and make the sign of the cross over me, but when my mother came to collect me she said nothing, just smiled. The teacher said she had never been hit by a child before and that I was the boldest boy she had ever met in her entire life. My mother was so proud of me that she smiled and kneeled down to look into my eyes for a long time. Outside she told all the other mothers that I slapped the teacher in the face and they shook their heads.

On the way home the bus conductor threw his eyes up and said I would go far. She even told the man with one arm in the vegetable shop.

'You'll have trouble with him,' they all said, but my mother shook her head.

'Oh no,' she said. 'He's going to be like his uncle, Onkel Gerd.'

The teacher's name is Bean Uí Chadhain and the school is called Scoil Lorcán. You go down the steps into the classroom at the bottom and there is lots of noise from all the other children and a sweet smell, like a school bag with a banana sandwich left inside. There are toys in boxes to play with, but some of them are broken and the cars have bits of plasticine stuck to the wheels. There's a map
of the world on the wall and you learn to sing and go to
the toilet in Irish, to the leithreas. And after that you get
into another line to go to the yard, where the older girls
are chasing and screaming, and across the wall the older
boys are chasing and fighting. Then it's time to sing the
song about the little red fox. Everybody who is good gets
a milseán, a sweet, and anyone who is bold has to stand on
the table to show how bold you are.

'Maidirín a rua, 'tá dana,' we all sing together. The little
red fox is bold. Except that bold doesn't just mean bold,
it also means cute and cheeky and brave and not afraid of
people. The little red fox who is not afraid of anyone at
all, we sing. But then Bean Uí Chadhain lifted me up on
the table and said I was not going to get a sweet.

'Bold, bold, bold,' she said. 'Dána, dána, dána.'
So then I slapped her in the face and my mother was
proud of me. She's so happy that she puts her hand on my
shoulder and tells everybody in Ireland what I did. They
shake their heads but they should be nodding. Only Onkel
Ted nods his head slowly on Sunday when he comes, but
then you don't know sometimes what's right and wrong
because he nods slowly even when you tell him bad things
that happened. He says there are some things you can only
do once in your life and most people never do at all. My
father says Bean Uí Chadhain is the wife of a famous Irish
writer called Máirtín Ó Cadhain who wrote a book about
dead people talking. It's about a graveyard in Connemara
where all the dead people talk to each other and anyone
who dies brings new stories from the living world over
the ground. I slapped the writer's wife, my father says, and
he's proud, too, because the book was written in Irish. And
dead people have the best conversations of all. Lots of people
don't really speak until they're dead, because only then can
they say all of the things to each other in the graveyard
that they have been keeping secret all their lives.

My mother says you can't be afraid of anyone. You can't
let anyone make you small, because that's what they tried
to do with Onkel Gerd. He had to keep quiet and say
nothing while he was alive, but now he's talking in the
grave. He's talking to my mother's father and mother in
Kempen, telling them that my mother didn't go to Brazil
after all, but went to live in Ireland instead. Now they're
having a great talk about how things were in the old days,
all the jokes that Franz Kaiser made and why nobody had
a sense of humour any more except for the people who were
already in the grave and had nothing to lose. Now Franz
Kaiser is playing all the tricks he didn't get to finish before
he died. And now Onkel Gerd is telling everybody down
there that Hitler is dead. There were stories brought down
with the war, when the planes were all going back home
to England and they dropped the bombs on the bakery
in Kempen very early one morning when everybody was
queueing up for bread. There were stories going down of
people killed all over Europe when nobody was able to stop
the first people from taking over.

My mother says you can't keep people from talking in
the grave. And you can't keep them quiet by making them
stay at home or locking them up or stopping them from
writing in newspapers. That's why you should never be
afraid to speak. My father says that all the people who died
in the Irish famine are still talking. They're whispering
with dry lips and staring out with empty eyes. He says
you can't go anywhere in Ireland without hearing them.
You go out into the fields around west Cork, he says, and
it's never silent, not even for a moment. He says a lot of
the people born after the famine could not talk because
they had lost their language and that’s why they speak English and have to listen to the words first before they can be sure of what they’re saying. But all that will be put right now that we’re speaking Irish again.

7 You’re better off dead than not being able to speak, my mother says. That’s what they tried to do to Onkel Gerd. He was the Bürgermeister, the lord mayor, and they came to him every day and asked him to do things he didn’t want. Ta Maria was the sister of my mother’s mother Berta and she was called Frau Bürgermeister, Mrs Lord Mayor. Then they suddenly had five daughters to look after and send to school every day on the train to the convent in Miíhlhausen. So when people came to the house and said the lord mayor should belong to the Nazi party, he said he was the father of five girls and shook his head every time. They were friendly and polite and spoke to Ta Maria, too, on the way across the Buttermarkt square, hoping that she would change his mind. They liked Onkel Gerd and said he was a good lord mayor, so they didn’t want him to be made small like the other man Lamprecht who had to be taken away to a camp in Dachau because he kept on writing in the newspaper. They said they were hoping that would not happen to a man with five lovely new daughters.

Onkel Gerd sat in silence for a long time every evening, 25 my mother says, because it was not easy to know what was right and wrong sometimes. My mother and her sisters kept on going to school and every Sunday they went to the graveyard to visit their father and mother. They passed by the old house on the Buttermarkt square but never went inside again because there were other people living there now. The town had changed. Everyone was poor and it was all right to beg and have a leg missing. People who had never dreamed of asking for things before were coming up to the house looking for help. So then there was an election and the Nazi party promised there would be no beggars in Germany ever again. At night, people said there were groups of men gathering around fires outside the town. People didn’t know whether it was exciting or frightening or both, because on the day of the election the town was full of cars and people drinking beer in their best clothes, and when Onkel Gerd went up to vote, there was trouble.

10 My mother says they were very sly. They wanted to see what side Onkel Gerd was on, so they gave him a ballot paper with a special mark on it. He looked at the names of the parties and the boxes beside them to make an X in, with the Nazi party at the top and all the other parties like the SPD and the Central party below. When he held the ballot paper up to the light he found a small watermark in the corner that should not have been there. He knew they could check afterwards to see where he put the X.

‘This is still a secret vote,’ Onkel Gerd said and handed back the paper.

Everybody had their eyes on him and the hall was silent. He knew there would be trouble because he asked what the watermark was doing on his ballot paper, but the official just smiled and said he was making too much of it. In any case, they said, if he had a clear conscience and had nothing to hide, then the watermark wouldn’t bother him because everyone else was voting for the Nazi party, too.

‘What about the secret ballot?’ Onkel Gerd demanded. If everyone was going to vote for the Nazi party, then wasn’t it better if they did so by choice? He refused to leave. He knew it was the only way that he could be honest and not take the easy way out like everyone else. He didn’t say he was against anyone or for anyone else.
He just stood and waited while the officials all whispered among themselves and wondered what to do. Until they gave him a clean ballot paper at last, because they couldn’t bear to look at his face any more and they didn’t want the lord mayor standing around in the polling station all day with his arms folded for everyone to see.

My mother says it’s important to make a stand. Onkel Gerd won his fight in the polling station, but he went home and knew that everything was lost. Within days they heard from the other towns in the Rhineland that the lord mayors who had not spotted the watermark on the ballot paper were not so lucky. They were put out of office immediately the following day and replaced by people on the side of the Nazi party. Many of them were beaten up, my mother says. The first people came to their houses and some of them were sick for a long time and couldn’t hear properly afterwards or had trouble with their kidneys and never went to work again.

Onkel Gerd stayed on as lord mayor because nobody knew where he put his X. But that didn’t last long either because they came to his office every day and asked him to do things he didn’t want. And one day, when it was suddenly against the law to be a lord mayor without belonging to the Nazi party, he had to go. They gave him a last chance, but he still shook his head. Another man was waiting to take over and sit down as soon as Onkel Gerd cleared his desk. There was some handshaking and polite conversation, but then it was over quite suddenly and it was hard to walk home that day. It was hard to walk past people on the street because everybody knew he was nothing any more. And it was even harder to explain to Ta Maria and their five new daughters. She had her apron up to her eyes as they gathered together in the living room.

He stood there to tell them that even though he was not the lord mayor any more and nobody knew where the money was going to come from, he would still do everything he could to look after them. He had been made small, but he would not let them down. Some of the women still called Ta Maria Frau Bürgermeister on the street, but that was just a habit and it didn’t really matter. Anyone who was not with the Nazis had nothing more to say.

After that, Onkel Gerd would sit at home for a long time without saying a word. Sometimes he played the lute in the evening and sometimes he lit a cigar and let the smoke fill the room until nobody could see him any more and it looked like he had disappeared. It looked like the Bürgermeister had vanished from the town altogether because that’s what the Nazi people wanted, and even when he went for the short walk to Mass or to the library, nobody saw him. Mostly he stayed at home reading books, because there were very few people he could talk to and reading was the best kind of conversation you could have. With no secrets held back. It was as good as any conversation you could have in the graveyard.

I am the boy who slapped his teacher in the face. I’m the boy who’s not afraid of anything, my mother says. One day she didn’t come to collect me. I ran up to the gate of the school but she wasn’t there. She was late because the bus driver didn’t see her, even though she had her hand out. She says bus drivers in Ireland are blind because they don’t know what it’s like to be a passenger. So she didn’t come and I ran all the way home in the rain. She was waiting at the door when I got back. She took off my shoes and stuffed them with newspapers. She put them beside the boiler and started rubbing my head with the towel and laughing because my hair was standing up like
a hedgehog. And then it was time to make a cake. I stood beside her in the kitchen and tried to teach her Irish. She was holding the bowl in one arm and stirring with the other. I looked at her mouth as she repeated the word in Irish for milk. But it was all wrong. Her lips were still trying to speak German and it was funny to hear her say it as if she didn't know what milk was. I tried other words like the Irish for water, bread, butter, but she didn't know what they were either. Every time she tried to get it right, she had to smile and surrender, because she knew that Irish was my language.

'Céol,' I said. 'That's music.'

'Céol,' she repeated, but it was still not right.

She knelt down and watched me say it again. She held her hands up in the air as if she was counting to ten with cake mixture all over her fingers. She followed my lips with her eyes but she could see no difference. Then she continued making the cake and trying the word out by herself.

'Céol, céol, céol.'

She thought it was funny that I was teaching her how to speak. I was the teacher now and she was the schoolgirl learning to say the words and trying to grow up. Sometimes in the evening after dinner, she went back to the school on the bus to learn Irish and then we had to help her with her homework. But she can't be Irish. It's too hard.

Then I made a rule about Irish in the kitchen. I drew a line and said that anyone crossing the border into my land was not allowed to speak German, only Irish. If my mother or Franz or Maria wanted to come in, they had to stop and say something in Irish first. And if they spoke German, I expelled them. Even my mother has to cross over to Irish if she wants to get into my country. But she laughs. She says there will be no yellow cake with chocolate on top if I stop her. She says you can't make rules like that in the kitchen. It's like something the Nazis would do. I keep saying that nobody can break my rules but she keeps laughing at me. She says she's going to cross over and tickle me. She puts the cake in the oven and then says the word in Irish for music again. And even though she doesn't say it right, even though she's still saying it with German lips, I can't stop her coming across the line and I can't stop her laughing and tickling me to death.
First of all you have to mix the butter with the sugar. You have to do it hard, my mother says, but after that, everything has to be done very gently because you don’t want to make an unhappy cake. If you bake in anger it will taste of nothing. You have to treat the ingredients with respect and affection. You lift the mixture and slip the beaten egg inside, the way you would slip a love letter into an envelope, she says and laughs out loud. You fold in the flour with air-kisses and you stir in one direction only, otherwise people will get the taste of doubt. And when you lay the mixture into the baking tin, you place a piece of brown paper all around the edge and another flat piece across the top to create a dome that will keep it from burning. And once the letter is posted and the cake is in the oven, you have to be very quiet and wait. You don’t trudge around the house shouting and slamming doors. You don’t argue and you don’t say a bad word about anyone. You whisper, you nod, you tiptoe around the kitchen.

My mother likes the radio. She likes the song ‘Roses Are Red, My Love, Violets Are Blue’, but she’s not allowed to sing it and she can only listen to it when my father is at work. When he comes home he switches on the news. The light comes on and you see all the names of the different cities like Budapest and Prague, but it takes a while for the radio to warm up and the voices to come out. After the news the radio should be speaking Irish. If you sing a song, sing an Irish song, the man says, and my father nods his head. If there’s a pop song in English my father suddenly pushes back the chair with a big yelp on the floor and rushes over to switch it off. The voice doesn’t take time to go away again, it disappears immediately. But even in the few seconds it takes my father to switch it off, before it gets a chance to go as far as ‘Sugar is sweet, my love . . .’, enough of the song has escaped and the words are floating around the breakfast room. We all sit around the table in silence, but you can still hear the song echoing along the walls. It gets stuck to the ceiling. Stuck to the inside of your head. And even though my mother is not allowed to sing it, she can’t stop humming to herself in the kitchen afterwards.

In Germany, my mother says, there was good music on the radio. You had great singers like Richard Tauber and you heard some good stories and theatre if you were lucky. But it wasn’t long before you got the speeches. Onkel Gerd said people thought Goebbels and Hitler had rabies because they were always foaming at the mouth. He said that having the radio on was like letting somebody into the house, somebody you thought you could trust, somebody who would pretend to be your friend and then start saying things in your ear. And once you invited them in for afternoon coffee and cake, you would be slow to argue back. Sometimes Onkel Gerd talked back at the radio, standing in the middle of the room and waving his finger, but there was no point because the radio never listens. Ta Maria said you could always tell a decent person by their shoes and their hands, but Onkel Gerd said the radio would sit there all polite and decent in your front room and, before
you knew it, you found yourself agreeing with the most outrageous gossip and resentment. The radio made you feel that you belonged to a great country. It made you feel safe and hurt and proud, all at the same time. Some people had no friends at all and no mind of their own, only the radio and the voice of Hitler foaming at the mouth. The radio was a scoundrel who never listens, a scoundrel with nice hands and nice shoes and nice music.

'You can't switch off what's happening,' Ta Maria said.

But Onkel Gerd preferred the silence. Sometimes they huddled together and listened to jazz music from London in secret, like my mother does when my father is out at work. But that's dangerous, too. In our house, it's dangerous to sing a song or say what's inside your head. You have to be careful or else my father will get up and switch you off like the radio.

In Kempen, the man on the radio could just walk in the front door of any house and invite himself in for coffee and cake. People threw their arms out. Sometimes they brought out their best linen tablecloth and lit a candle. Some of them got dressed up to listen to the radio. If it was a Strauss concert they clapped along with the audience at the state concert hall in Vienna as if they were there themselves. They believed what they heard. And before they knew it, they were clapping after some speech, too, because they had no idea who they were letting into their home. The town hall on the Buttermarkt square was then called the 'brown house' because it was full of men in brown uniforms. The newspaper man Lamprecht was taken away to the KZ in Dachau where he could not say another word and that's what was going to happen to Uncle Gerd, too, if he opened his mouth. They had switched him off. He had no name any more and no voice. He had no face and no hair and no eyes. Nobody saw him, even when he walked over to Mass on Sunday morning. And then one day they made a rule that the Jewish people had no names and no faces either. Everybody had to pretend they had disappeared, too. When they came to the market square you could not buy their pickled gherkins, you could not even say 'good morning' to them. They still walked around the streets but nobody could see them. It was easy enough, because once the lord mayor was gone and the newspaper man was gone, anyone else could disappear, too.

'Unverschämt,' Ta Maria said. It was a rule that nobody would be able to obey. Onkel Gerd said it was un-German and wouldn't last long. He said they would continue to greet Jews in the street as always. No matter what rule they made in the brown house, they would carry on recognising Jewish names and faces. But it didn't matter any more because it was like the people with no faces saying hello to other people with no faces. They might as well be like the people in the graveyard talking to each other. Nobody in the brown house cared very much whether Onkel Gerd was still saying hello to the Jews or not because he didn't exist anyway. What they did care about was my mother and her sisters. They didn't want them to disappear, so they made another rule which forced them to join the Bund deutscher Mädels — the League of German Girls. It was another rule that could not be obeyed. So they ignored it and continued to attend their own Catholic youth meetings until people came around to the house and asked questions. Three hundred other girls from Kempen and the surrounding district had all joined in the BDM rallies without question, so why not the Kaiser girls.

Ta Maria heard things at the Café Kranz on the Burgring. She went around there for coffee every afternoon because it
was the place to hear what people were saying around the
town, what they whispered, what you did not hear on the
radio. Everybody said it was best to go along with things
for the moment, see what happened. It wasn’t all that
serious anyway, because they were joking and giving the
BDM funny new names in secret. Instead of calling it the
League of German Girls, everybody was now calling it Bund
deutscher Matratzen—the League of German Mattresses. My
mother says her father would have laughed at that.

Onkel Gerd called them all into the living room and
asked them to sit down. He waited for a long time, quietly
picking out his words before he slowly looked around at
each of them individually and told them they had to decide
for themselves. He was always calm. He didn’t trust things
that were said with emotion, the way they spoke on the
radio. Instead, he spoke slowly in clear sentences, breathing
quietly and hardly moving his head, like a father. He said
it was all right for him to make a sacrifice, but he would
not force it on them. He said you have an instinct and you
have an intellect and if you had to join the BDM meetings
by law, then maybe there was another way out. Sometimes
it’s good to tiptoe around things to avoid trouble.

‘The silent negative,’ he said. ‘We will use the silent
negative.’

On Sunday the Buttermarkt square was full of colour.
There were flags everywhere, flying above the trees and
hanging from all the windows around the square. There
were standing columns, too, with eagle wings. Loud-
speakers had been broadcasting speeches and marching
music all morning, and a massive portrait of the Führer
had been put up outside the brown house. My mother
said she looked up and saw a long red flag with the black
swastika on a white circle hanging from the window where

her mother once played the piano and where her father said
goodbye to himself in the mirror. Sometimes, she says, you
have to bite your lip and not allow yourself to be hurt.

Onkel Gerd said it was only a matter of time before
somebody took it into his head to play God. The BDM
meeting had been arranged to coincide with Mass, so
that the girls in Kempen would turn away from the
church, so they would belong to the state instead, like
a big family. My mother insisted on getting up for early
Mass. She could hear the loudspeakers on the square as if
they wanted to drown out the prayers inside. And when
she arrived late on the square with her missal under her
arm, the BDM leader was already foaming at the mouth.
She told the Kempen girls they would never need Mass
or missals, or candles or head scarves or Corpus Christi
processions any more, because now they would be devoted
to the Führer. One day, the men in brown broke into the
convent school in Mühlhausen smashing everything up and
painting swastikas on the walls of the classrooms. And not
long after that, they closed the convent down altogether so
the nuns had to disappear, too.

The leaves of the missal are not like any other book, they
are soft and thin, easy to bend and easy to turn without
the slightest bit of noise in church. But outside at the big
BDM assembly on the square, my mother says they made
a big noise that nobody could ignore. All the girls had to
raise their right arms in salute. So when my mother raised
her arm, the missal fell down on the cobbles with a clack.
It opened up and the breeze rustled the pages so they could
be heard all around the square, maybe even all around the
town. She bent down and picked it up. She dusted off the
covers and then finally raised her arm in the air towards the
portrait of the Führer over the Rathaus. The entire square
was suddenly tilted at an angle, like a tilted painting, like the dizzy way you can see things when you bend down to look back through your legs. It was time to be obedient, time to swear an oath of allegiance to the Führer, time for the silent negative.

'I swear under oath that I will - NOT - serve the Führer as long as I live.'

After that it was like any other Sunday. Apart from the flags and the loudspeakers left behind on the Buttermarkt square, everything was normal. The shops stayed closed, but you could buy cake and you could see people coming out of the Café Kranz with precious parcels wrapped in coloured paper, holding them flat as they walked. Like every other Sunday, they went to the graveyard to put flowers on the graves. And then it was time to prepare for visitors in the afternoon.

You have to open the doors to be sure that the smell of soup is not lingering in the hallway when the visitors arrive. A sensitive nose can detect a hint of fat in the air, my mother says. Then you let the smell of baking take over. You would commit a mortal sin any time for a decent cup of coffee, my mother says, and then she laughs out loud, because that's what her aunt Ta Maria always said. The smell of coffee and cake is like a hearty welcome, like an embrace. Your visitor will want to jump right into bed and snuggle up with the cake. And when you're serving, you have to cut the slices without touching the cake. You have to serve with the same affection that has gone into the baking, using the silver trowel that has been in the family for generations. The cake has to appear on the plate as though it had never been touched by human hands.

On Sunday we went for a walk in the afternoon. We had to put on our coats and hats and gloves because it was windy and cold outside. My father criss-crossed his scarf over his chest and we did the same. Maria's gloves were attached to an elastic band inside the sleeves of her coat so they wouldn't get lost. We walked past the station where my father gets the train every day. We came to a place where we could kick through the brown leaves with a hissing noise. Sometimes my trousers rubbed against the inside of my leg and it was sore. And sometimes when we walked around the corner, the wind was so strong that we couldn't even breathe or speak any more. We had to push hard against it until we started laughing.

Then we came to the shop and everyone got pocket money. Franz wanted a toffee pop and I wanted a bag of sherbet with a lollipop inside. We waited outside while my father and mother were still inside trying to help Maria decide what to buy. There were boys standing by the wall of the shop and they started calling us Nazis. There were lots of things like that written on the wall in paint, including a big swastika sign in red. They kept saying we were Nazis, until my mother came out and heard them.

'Heil Hitler,' they shouted.

They were not allowed to say that kind of thing and I looked at my mother to see what she would do. They said it again and laughed out loud, so there was no way that she might not have heard it. She even stopped and looked at them for a moment. But she said nothing. I knew she was biting her lip. I knew by her eyes that she was sad this was happening, but she could do nothing about it.

'Come on, let's walk ahead,' she said. She didn't wait for my father and Maria to come out, she just turned us around and walked away. Behind us we could hear them laughing and clicking their heels. I was sure my father...
would do something, but he said nothing either and we all walked quickly down to the seafront.

We could smell the sea and hear it because it was very rough. The waves were crashing against the rocks, all white and brown. The seagulls were balancing in the air over the waves and we were standing in a line, holding on to the railings with brown rust marks growing through the blue paint. The dog was there, too, the dog that belongs to nobody and barks at the sea until he is hoarse and can't speak. From behind the railings you could look the waves right in the eye as they came rushing in and my mother said: 'God help anyone who is out at sea.' The waves were so strong that when they threw themselves on to the rocks, the foam sprang up like a white tree. Bits of black seaweed were flung in the air with no mercy. We had to move back so as not to get wet. Only a tiny shower covered our faces and we could taste the salt. We shouted back at the waves but it was hard to talk because of the wind. Here's a big one, my father said, but there was so much noise that you could hear nothing anyway, as if the sea was so loud, it was actually silent. My mother said nothing and just looked far away out into the waves. Bigger and bigger waves all the time, hitting the rocks and bouncing up, right in front of us.

Eleven

I like giving the wrong answer. My father sits on the far side of the table in the breakfast room and says he's going to wait until I give the right answer, even if it takes all day.

'Five plus six makes ... ?'

My father was a schoolteacher once so he knows what he's doing. He says that he and his brother Ted both got a scholarship and now he wants to make me the best boy in Ireland at tables. I can see myself twice over in his glasses, sitting with my arms folded. He waits and waits, while I search around in my head and say to myself that I will _not_ — give the right answer. I know the answer but I frown and roll my eyes up towards the ceiling and even put my hand on my chin, because that's meant to help you with thinking.

'Nine,' I answer.

'Wrong,' he says. 'Think again.'

We have all the time in the world. It's Saturday afternoon, he says, and we have better things to be doing. He could be sitting in the front room reading any one of six books about the history of Germany or the Spanish Civil War or the lives of saints or the Blasket Islands or cabinet-making or beekeeping. I could be outside running around in the garden. Franz is waiting for me to go and play football. But we're going to stay sitting there in the
breakfast room all day and all night if we have to. So then I try again, squinting and frowning and humming to myself, now let me see, five and six makes . . . ? I have given every wrong answer there is so there's none left except the right one.

I look at my father's bad ear which is flattened out of shape and purple. When I asked him once what happened, he told me that a teacher in boarding school hit him with a steel ruler. Maria said she would pray for it to get better, but then he frowned and blinked and said he didn't want us looking at his ear any more or talking about it. My mother told us afterwards that he had no father and at boarding school his ear started bleeding and lost all its feeling because he was homesick and wanted his mother.

It's hard not to look at his ear and think about the steel ruler coming down like a sword. I keep thinking of things like that not happening. I try to imagine stopping it with my arm. I imagine fighting off the teacher with long brush. I imagine bending my father's ear back into shape again, like plasticine.

'Concentrate.'

He slams his hand down suddenly on the table and I jump. Then my mother comes in because she doesn't want this to go on for ever either. She says it's time to give in and then I'll be free to go. Outside, I can hear the sound of Mr Richardson hammering at something and the echo coming back across the gardens. I can hear Miss Tarleton's lawnmower and I know there's hardly any grass on her lawn but she does it anyway. Then I hear the two bangs from the lifeboat, one after the other with a long gap in between, and my mother saying 'trouble on the sea'. I can hear the Corbetts' back door closing like a sneeze. Then silence again. Everyone is waiting for the right answer.

My mother is nodding. My father is staring. And Franz is standing at the door with the football.

'Nil.'

It's the only answer I could think of that I hadn't given already apart from the right one. But then there was real trouble and real silence. People passing by our house would have heard nothing at all only breathing. Now I could see my father's eyes inside his glasses, and his ear was red hot, like a piece of coal out of the boiler. He pushed the chair back with a loud howl on the floor and told me to wait while he searched in the greenhouse for a good stick that wouldn't break this time.

My mother shook her head because it was out of her hands. The person who can't hear it, must feel it, she said a few times, because that's what they say in Germany. I could see that she was sorry this was happening but she could do nothing to stop it. She took Franz and Maria away and closed the door. I could hear the 'in between door' closing, too, that separates the back of the house from the front.

I could hear her going up the stairs, further and further away, closing another door behind her until she could hear nothing at all any more and didn't have to think about what was going to happen. Everybody was gone, even the sound of the hammering outside, and I could only hear the stick whipping through the air. My father was breathing hard and thinking about lots of angry things in his head like the lives of saints and beekeeping and the time he was at school in Dunmanway and couldn't go home to his mother. He was thinking about all the things that he couldn't do with his own life, that he was going to make me do instead. He said he would keep hitting me all day and all night until I gave the right answer.

'Eleven,' I cried. 'Eleven, eleven, eleven.'
Then he stopped and asked me if I was good again.

'Yes,' I said.

'Say it.'

'I'm good again.'

I could still feel the hot red lines on the back of my legs when it was time for tea. Franz and Maria wanted to look at them but I didn't want anyone talking about me, not even my mother. My father shook my hand and said it was time to put it all behind us. It was time to smile because we all have to be friends again. But I couldn't smile. So then he held my chin and pushed my lips apart with his fingers and I had to show my teeth.

'Nobody can force you to smile,' my mother said. She had a better idea. She offered me an extra biscuit, one more than anyone else. And then she started telling a story about the time they got married and went up two mountains, one in each country. On the train going along the Rhine together, they sat in a carriage with a young boy who looked out the window and ate biscuits from a brown paper bag. All the way to Koblenz, the boy sat eating one biscuit after the other without a word, as if he would never see a biscuit in his life again, as if he was afraid the time of no biscuits would come back. Sometimes he closed the bag and put it aside, as though he told himself he was not going to have any more, but then he could not resist starting again and again until the whole lot was gone.

After that I was sick for a long time. It started after we helped to clean the windows one day, first with soap, then with crumpled newspapers that make a squeaking sound like wild dogs barking far away in the hills, my mother says. The windows were so clean that we thought we were outside and there was no glass at all. After that it was hard to breathe, because the sound of the wild dogs got into my chest. I had to stay in bed listening to them howling all day and all night. My mother came with plasticine and cars. She bought a new colouring book and new pencils, but my fingers were soft and I couldn't draw. She came in with a tray, but I could not even eat the biscuits, so she made me sit up and drink the lemon tea, at least one sip for your mother, she said.

At night she left the door wide open and the light coming up the stairs, but I was still afraid. The window rattled and there was a large piece of wallpaper hanging down on the far side of the room which looked like a man with a hat coming in sideways through the wall from next door. At first I laughed and said he was only a piece of wallpaper. But he just looked at me with one eye and kept coming with his shoulder held forward. A light from the street shone into the room and sometimes the man stepped right into the light, then moved back into the darkness again. I was very hot and shivering at the same time. I put my back against the wall and started shouting at him to stop, until my mother came running up and sat on my bed. She said I was soaked with sweat and brought in a warm towel to wipe my chest. She said I was afraid of my own imagination. My father came up and stuck a piece of folded paper in the window to stop the rattling. He put on the light for a minute to prove that there was no man coming through the wall, then he smiled and kissed the top of my head. He listened to the howling in my chest and said it didn't sound as bad as before. Then he went downstairs again and my mother stayed sitting on my bed to tell stories.

'I don't want to be a Nazi,' I told her.

'But you're not a Nazi,' she said.

She smiled and tucked the blankets in around my neck.
so that only my head was out. I told her what the boys outside the shop were saying about us.

'I don't want them to call me a Nazi,' I said.

'Ignore them,' she said. She looked at me for a while and said they were the real Nazis. She said I shouldn't worry about it so much, because it was usually people who had something to hide who called other people Nazis. 'They want to make everybody believe that they're innocent. So they call other people Nazis, as often as they can. It's the same the world over.'

She stroked my forehead. She said it was not important what the boys outside the shop said. If I was a real Nazi, then I would know it myself. Maybe you can hide it from other people by pointing the finger somewhere else, but you can't hide things like that from yourself. What's inside your head is what matters.

'But that won't stop them.'

'You can't,' she said. 'You can't go around telling the whole world what you're not. That would be ridiculous.

I can't send you down the road to the shop with a sign around your neck saying 'I'm not a Nazi.'"

It was time to concentrate on good things. Soon I would be better again, running around like before with no dogs howling in my chest. And my father has a new plan, she said, a plan to make money, so that we can take the wallpaper down. Sometimes he is very hard, she said, but he knows what's good for Ireland. He doesn't mean to be angry, but he has a lot to worry about and he's doing his best. And the next day he was busy downstairs starting a new business that would make us rich, so we could take down the old wallpaper. He bought a desk for the front room. He put the telephone on it and a desk-light so he could sit down and have his own office. He bought lots of stationery, too, and gave the business a name. Kaiser and Co., he called it, because that was my mother's name and her family had been in business for a long time in Kempen before they went bankrupt. He got a machine that printed the name on to paper, so he wouldn't have to write it out every time. And when the business was set up, he sat at his desk waiting for phone calls and saying there should be less noise in the house, because he had to try and guess what the people of Ireland needed most at that moment.

My mother said I was getting better. She let me go downstairs to the front room to see the new office. My father was out buying stamps and I lay on the sofa with all the cushions and blankets while my mother sat at the desk with her diary, writing in all the things that were happening in our family. She glued everything in, like photographs and locks of hair and tickets to the zoo. She wrote in lots of stories, like me not giving the right answer and Franz going to bed every night, laying out his socks in the shape of a crucifix. She also put in things that were happening outside in the world, like the photograph from the newspaper of the tanks in Hungary, and a photograph of the Irishman, Ronnie Delaney on his knees thanking God for winning the race at the Olympics in Melbourne, Australia. Then she went into the kitchen and it was our turn to play office. Maria started drawing a picture on the wall and Franz found a matchstick.

'Light it,' I said. But I didn't even have to say that, because the match was saying it himself with his little red head, asking to be lit. Franz struck it along the wall and it flared up. He blew it out straightaway, but my father must have heard it. His good ear can hear things from miles away. He asked if we had lit a match. He called my mother in because she has a good nose and between them
they were able to prove it. She said that's why people get married, because one person has a good ear and the other has a good nose, and hopefully we would have both and that would help us not to do anything in our lives that we would regret later.

Sometimes my mother was able to talk around trouble. Sometimes you couldn't stop things happening so you tiptoed around them instead, she said. Even when there should be real trouble and my father should be much more angry than ever before, she was able to find another way out. My father proved that we had lit a match but he had other things to get angry about. He saw what Maria had done. She had taken a crayon and drawn lines all along the wall, right around the room.

'Look at that,' my mother said, and my father was frowning hard. But then she had an idea to stop him getting angry. She clapped her hands together and said it was the most beautiful drawing she had ever seen in her life and they had to take a photograph of it for the diary.

It was a drawing of my mother with her arms stretching all the way around the four walls, embracing everyone who came into the room. And anyway, she said, there should be no more anger in our house, because we had a big plan for the business, Kaiser and Co. My father thought of something that the Irish people needed most. They were going to import crosses from a famous place in Germany, hand-carved wooden crosses from Oberammergau.

I was still sick. The howling dogs came back again, and something started happening to one of my legs as well. It swelled up bit by bit, until it was twice the size of the other one. Onkel Ted came to make the sign of the cross and Dr Sheehan came too, because I was still a Nazi and I knew it. He called me 'young man' and said it was serious this time. My leg was about to explode. I had to go to hospital and an ambulance came. I couldn't walk, so the men came up the stairs and wrapped me up in a red blanket, then carried me down, through the hallway and out the door, past the people on the street standing around the gate. My mother was crying and the neighbours said I would soon be better again, please God. They would all pray for me every day and every night.

Inside the ambulance I couldn't see where I was going, so I tried to follow the streets in my head, around each corner, past the church and past the people's park. But then I got lost and I was blind with my eyes wide open and I knew they were taking me to a different country again where they spoke only English. I could smell the hospital and the doctors and nurses were standing all around me looking down. They listened to my chest and heard the dogs howling. They looked at my leg and measured it. Every day, new doctors came to examine it and stick needles into it. Some of them said it was a mystery. It made them scratch their heads, because nothing like that had ever happened before in the medical books and they had no way of making it better. And then one day, the howling stopped. The swelling in my leg started going down again, and my mother came to visit me with a new toy car and said I was getting better. The nurse showed me the measurements on the chart. The doctors were amazed and said my leg would be famous and would enter into history, if only they could explain it. The nurse said I was famous already, because I was a German-Irish boy and everybody knew me. At night I begged her to let me go home. She smiled and stroked my head and said I still had to stay in hospital until the doctors said I was fully back to normal.

'I'm good again,' I said.
'You mean you're better,' she said.
'Yes, I'm better,' I said. 'I'm too better.'
'Of course you are, love,' she said. But still she could not let me go until the doctors said so. Everybody was gone and the hospital was quiet. All lights were switched off except for the small one at the door. The nurse was tidying up all around me and not saying very much. Her white shoes were making tiny squeaks on the floor.
'I'm not a Nazi,' I said.
Then she looked up and smiled.
'I'm not German,' I said. 'I promise.'
'I know that, love. I believe you.'

Twelve

It should be easier to sell a crucifix in Ireland. My mother closes the front door and stands in the hall with her coat still on, looking up at the picture of the Virgin Mary. She throws her arms up in the air and says she can't understand it. She has been to every church and every convent and every hospital in Dublin. We went with her on the bus one day and a priest gave us a sweet each, a satin cushion. He smiled and nearly said yes to the cross, but then he shook his head at the last minute. Beautiful hand-carved oak crosses from Oberammergau and nobody wants them, my mother says. It's hard to believe, when you think of everyone in Ireland praying twice a day at least and all they still have to pray for.
'Surely somebody needs a crucifix,' she says.
That's the whole idea of my father starting a business, to sell something the Irish people really need, something you believe in yourself. We believe in crosses, so we kneel down every night and pray that we will have God on our side as a partner in business. But in the end, nobody wants them and my mother sits down in the kitchen without even taking her coat off, shaking her head from side to side and breathing out slowly as if she wants to be the best at not breathing in again until you have to. Maybe they're too expensive, she says. Maybe it's too late and there are
too many crosses in Ireland already. Or maybe they’re the
wrong kind of crosses and Irish people only like the ones
where Jesus has blood on his hands and feet and there’s a
gash in his side and a scroll at the top saying INRI.

She doesn’t understand Ireland sometimes, because they
like strange things like pink cakes and soft ice cream and
salt and vinegar. They spend all their money on First Holy
Communion outfits. They don’t like serving people and
they don’t like being in a queue either, because when the
bus comes, they forget about the rules and just rush for
the door. The bus drivers in Ireland are blind and the
shopkeepers don’t want to sell things to you. The butcher
has a cigarette in his mouth while he’s cutting the meat,
and nobody knows how to say the word no. In Ireland,

they nod when they mean no, and shake their heads when
they’re agreeing with you. She says it’s like in the films,
when somebody looks up with a worried face and says one
thing, it means that the opposite is going to happen. When
somebody says nobody is going to come out alive and that

they’re all going to die, then at the last minute somebody
comes along to the rescue. And when everybody at the bus
stop begins to say that the buses have stopped running,
along comes the bus at last and they all rush forward
to get on.

Sometimes Irish people don’t understand my mother
either. When she’s trying to be helpful, they think she’s
interfering and being nosy. When she tries to warn some
of the other mothers about their children eating too many
sweets or crossing the road without looking, they say they
don’t want some German woman telling their kids what to
do. One day, there was a woman outside the shop with a
brand new pram with big wheels. It had the word Pedigree
written on the side and the woman was very proud of it,

because it was like a new car. My mother admired the new
pram, but she warned her to be careful it didn’t fall over
with the baby inside. So then the woman called her a Nazi
and told her to mind her own business.

Nobody knows what my mother is trying to say some-
times. And nobody has any idea where Oberammergau is
either. She tells them it’s a place in Bavaria, where they have
the crucifixion every ten years, a bit like going up to Croagh
Patrick. They nod and say yes and look very interested, so

why don’t they buy hand-carved oak crosses with no blood,
just nails and the rest left up to your imagination?

‘It’s the shoes,’ she says at last.

Nobody will buy anything if you don’t look half-decent.
You can tell a person’s character by their hands and their

shoes, she says, because that’s what Ta Maria always said.
Even though Onkel Gerd always said the opposite, that
it’s only what’s inside your head that makes you either
a scoundrel or a saint. But when you’re trying to sell
something, my mother says, it doesn’t matter if you’re

a scoundrel or a saint, because what you’re wearing is all
they look at. You have to be honest, she says, but you can’t
let people know that the wallpaper is hanging off the walls
at home.

Then we head off into the city so she can get a pair

of decent shoes. I swing around the bus stop and climb
up as far as I can until the bus comes. We fight over
the window seat, and over who gets the ticket, until
my mother says that’s enough, it’s not important to
win. Everybody on the bus turns around to look at us

because we’re German again. Then we have to behave
and sit quietly and bless ourselves whenever we pass by
a church, to prove that the Germans are decent people
and we did nothing wrong. I pretend to be Irish and
look at the IMCO building passing by like a white ship.

My father says the Irish people can’t live on their imagination for ever. They need money in their pockets now. It’s time to work hard so we can be free and so that nobody will ever starve or be poor again like all the people in west Cork were. He doesn’t want the song about emigration to go on for ever, so it’s time to speak Irish and make Ireland a better place to live. He tells us how his mother Mary Frances spent all her money on putting him through university in Dublin while she fasted and hardly had anything to live on herself. He tells us exactly how much he had to spend each week on food and lodgings, and how he had two pennies left over, one for the Mass on Sunday and one for a razor blade. He sent his washing home by post and cycled all the way home to Leap at Christmas because he could not afford the train or the bus. He had no way of borrowing from a bank, and if it wasn’t for the Jesuits who lent him the money for the final year, we wouldn’t be here now but in America or Canada maybe.

He paid back the money as fast as possible when he got his first job as an engineer in Dublin, making matches with Maguire and Patterson.

Even when my father started sending money home, Mary Frances was not able to spend it on herself, because Irish people didn’t know how to do that yet. All she wanted in her life was to make sure that her two sons were educated, one an engineer and the other a Jesuit. And that was the happiest day of her life, when my father came home to Leap with initials after his name. Better than that, the Jesuits even allowed Onkel Ted to go home for a day to see her for the first time in seven years. So she sat looking at her two sons together in the kitchen for a few hours at least, until Onkel Ted had to leave again very early in the morning to get back to the seminary in the Bog of Allen.

His father died in Cork and the navy refused to give them a pension at first. His mother spent all she had on getting the body home for burial in the mountain graveyard above Glandore. After that she could no longer pay the rent and the landlord wanted her out of the house. A letter went to the local police station telling them to ‘proceed with eviction forthwith’, so she walked up to the church and told the priest she was going to bed. She was not a political person, and some people didn’t mind all too much one way or another who was in the government, because it didn’t make a bit of difference to them. Some people in Ireland had no time for guns either, only education. But everybody hated landlords. So she took her two boys upstairs and got into bed. If they were going to evict her, she said, they would have to drag them out of the bed.

It was not the first time something like that happened in Ireland either. Her uncle was put out of his home and the cottage burned down because he refused to pay rent to the landlord any more. He had nowhere to go after that and if it wasn’t for the local people who built him a tiny cottage to stay in, he would have become a traveller with no place to settle any more, like all the people on the move after the famine. We would have been travellers, too, moving around from one place to another all our lives and knocking on doors to sell carpets, my father says, so that’s why he gives them money when they come to the door and say ‘God Bless.’ In the end, her uncle went to America. But before he left Ireland he made one great speech for the Land League on a platform in Skibbereen. He stood up and said it was time to wipe landlords off the face of this earth. Then he swung his right arm over the crowd and knocked
the hat off the priest sitting down behind him as he was doing it, so that everyone laughed about that story, long after he was gone. There were lots of people put out of their homes, my father says, until Michael Collins stood up for them and started the resistance.

Sometimes my mother goes over to the neighbours for coffee mornings. Mrs Corcoran invites all her friends around for sandwiches and cakes and gossip. They think my mother is very posh and unfriendly, because she has no gossip and speaks in a German accent all the time. My mother says Mrs Corcoran has a funny accent, too, because she and her friends all speak English like no other Irish people. My father says it's the famine. Even the people with money to burn and accents that hurt your mouth are still afraid of the famine. They speak like that because they're afraid of the Irish language coming back and killing everybody in the country this time. He says Irish people drink too much and talk too much and don't want to speak Irish, because it stinks of poverty and dead people left lying in the fields. That's why they speak posh English and pretend that nothing ever happened. My father talks about people dying on coffin ships going to America and my mother talks about people dying on trains going to Poland. My father talks of evictions in Leap and my mother talks of evictions in Kempen. My father says our people died in the famine and my mother says those who died under the Nazis are our people, too. Everybody has things they can't forget.

My mother likes Irish people, but she doesn't want to go to any more coffee mornings. They talk about going on holidays all the time and about new things like cars and washing machines. Mrs Corcoran talks about where she has been in the summer and shows the souvenirs she brought back, like the black bull from Spain and a big bowl with zigzags from Greece. This time, my mother says, she was in South Africa and brought back lots of wood carvings. But that's not all she brought back either, because right in the middle of the coffee morning, Mrs Corcoran started saying that black people would never be the same as white people. They would never catch up no matter how much education they got.

In the shoe shop, we sit in a line and get a liquorice shoelace each while my mother tries on shoes for a long time. She taps the heels together to hear what they sound like. She says it's as hard to buy shoes in Ireland as it is to sell a crucifix. Sometimes you have to beg people to sell you something. At first the assistant smiled and said every pair of shoes looked gorgeous. She thought people from Germany had to try on every pair in the shop before they could make up their mind. My mother started imagining shoes that didn't even exist, shoes from Italy, great shoes she had seen in the past sometime. My mother and the assistant didn't understand each other. In the end, she went for the dark blue pair that matched her blue dress with the white squiggles, the shoes that made her feet look smallest of all. She walked up along the floor one last time, turned in front of the mirror, then came back and paid.

Now my mother can sell anything. Franz carried the box with the new shoes and we walked across O'Connell Street holding hands in a chain. When you look up at Nelson's Pillar you sometimes think the white clouds are standing still and the city is moving, running fast out to the sea.

If you close your eyes you can hear the sound of footsteps and buses and cars all around you. Seagulls, too. There were seagulls on the roof of the GPO and seagulls standing on the shoulders of Daniel O'Connell.
My father took a half-day and came to meet us in the restaurant. He looked at the new shoes and said they were beautiful. He said it was a great day for us because we would soon be in business, making a profit. There was a big smile on his face. He has lots of straight teeth and when he starts talking, he sometimes sounds like he’s making a speech. He starts blinking and speaking fast, as if he’ll never catch up with all the things he wants to say. My mother says there are lots of men who like to turn things into a joke and make people laugh. She says it’s good to laugh, but my father has a different way of doing things. He can laugh too, until the tears come into his eyes. But then he’s always serious again afterwards, because he is a man with ideas. A man, my mother says, who could never live for himself, only for his children and his country. That’s why he frowns, even when he’s not angry, because he’s in a hurry to do all the things that are still left unfinished in Ireland.

My mother said we could have a cake each, but not one of the pink ones because they’re too sweet and leave nothing to the imagination. My father didn’t want a cake because they were nothing like hers. He said people would fight each other over my mother’s cakes, and anything else that she put her hands to. Then he took her hands and held them up in the air for everyone in the restaurant to see. My mother smiled and got embarrassed. It looked like he was going to stand up and make a speech to the whole restaurant about her. My mother says you can sometimes be overcome by the smell of coffee. His eyes were soft. He said they were precious hands. He said it didn’t matter that we were left with hand-carved wooden crosses from Oberammergau all over the house, because there were plenty of new ideas. He mentioned other things that the Irish people needed very badly. Like umbrellas. And Christmas-tree stands.

And German toys. We would sell things that were so well made and so beautiful that people would fight each other to buy them.

Afterwards my father bought hurling sticks, but said he would take them off us again if we used them as swords for fighting. It was dark by the time we went home and my father showed us the glass of whiskey that kept filling up again and again on the side of the building. There was a packet of cigarettes too that kept disappearing and lighting up again slowly, bit by bit. The seagulls were not there any more, but there were men shouting the names of newspapers on the street like seagulls. Herald-a-Press. Herald-a-Press. On the train, everybody was looking at us because we were the Germans with the hurling sticks. My mother told us the story about Rumpelstiltskin, who gave away his secret in the forest when he thought nobody was listening. Everybody on the train was listening to her. They all surrendered to the story, even though it was in German. One man was already asleep and Maria was trying hard to keep her eyes open. At the end of the story my mother always says the same thing: ‘and if he isn’t dead yet, then he must be still alive’. So I think about that for a while and look out at the lights of the city, moving along and blinking.
That summer the garden was full of flowers. There was so much fruit, too, raspberries and blackcurrants and plums, that my mother started making jam again. And there were so many tomatoes in the greenhouse that we had to give lots of them away to the neighbours. There were flowers on the table every day and my father said we should keep bees. He started buying books on beekeeping and said it would make sense to put a few hives on the roof of the breakfast room where they could fly straight out to collect the honey and pollinate the fruit trees.

The same things were forbidden in our house as always. There was a song on the radio that said we had all the time in the world in the deepest voice in the world. My mother liked the song too, but only when my father was out at work. Ita started saying ‘good morning’ to all the people on the street, and when there was nobody else to say good morning to, she said it to the lamp-posts and the gates, all day until she was back in the kitchen saying ‘good morning’ to the cooker and the washing machine as well. My father said the rules had to be obeyed even though she was still a baby. So then there was trouble because Ita went on hunger strike and wouldn’t eat or speak any more, and my father had to hold her head with one hand and try to force her mouth open to push the spoon in with the other.
time she was shaking her head and I thought it was funny because Ita was winning. But my mother didn't want us to see what would happen next, so she closed the doors and brought us outside and told us to run down to the shop to buy ice cream until it was over and Ita stopped crying.

My father said he couldn't understand why the stick wasn't working any more. He said he was doing his best. Everything was for us. He made the trolleys, he made a wooden see-saw, he was even building a real puppet theatre, and if we kept on breaking the rules he would have to find new ways of punishing us that would hurt more. Sometimes I tried to punish Franz and Maria to see if they would feel pain, so my father said anything I would do to them he would give me back a hundred times, and I said anything he would do to me I would give back to Franz and Maria a hundred times, until nobody could feel any more pain. He brought me upstairs and we kneeled down again to pray in front of Our Lady that he was doing the right thing. But that didn't work so he had a better idea, something that would make me ashamed. He confiscated the braces on my lederhosen and I had to go down to the barber to get my hair cut, holding my trousers up with my hands in my pockets.

In the barber shop we sat on the wooden bench reading the comics. Most of them were torn and falling apart, but it was good to see them, even the ones I had read before. I didn't like the comic called Hotspur as much as the Dandy, and I didn't like it either when somebody was punished and put across the teacher's knee. There were lots of other boys waiting and reading comics, too, but none of them noticed that I had no braces and couldn't walk around without my hands in my pockets. The barber kept clicking the scissors all the time, even when he was not cutting hair, and there was a huge pile of hair swept into one corner on the floor. We waited and read as many comics as we could and pretended that we were Irish and spoke English like everyone else, even though everybody could see that we were from a different country.

When we came out I tried to speak English to Franz but he was afraid. The barber, Mr Connolly, always gave every boy back a penny, so you could buy a toffee bar. But that day we put our pennies together, along with other pennies that Franz still had from Tante Lilly, and we bought a brand new comic called the Beano. We took turns reading it and spoke Irish to each other in between. My mother said it was good to buy something that lasts longer, not like a liquorice pipe that's gone within minutes and can't be remembered, but there would be trouble if we brought the Beano into the house. So we pretended it wasn't our Beano and hid it in the hedges of Miss Hart's garden.

At night I thought of Mr Connolly still clicking his fingers, even when he was having his tea and there were no scissors in his hand. I thought of all the hair mixed together in a large wig, like the mane of a buffalo. I thought of Mr McNally reading his paper with crooked glasses held up only by one stick over his right ear, and I thought of Mr Smyth from the vegetable shop getting undressed and going to bed with only one arm. Downstairs my father was building the puppet theatre and my mother was making the costumes and the curtains. Outside it was raining and I thought of the Beano getting wet and all the colours washing out.

After that, my mother said we were all starting to go crazy because one day I told Maria to climb up on the wall in the front garden and show her backside to the wind. She did it because she trusted everything I said, even things she

188
didn't want to do, even things she knew were not right. I promised that we would do the same after her, but she had to go first because she was younger and everything in our house was always done from the youngest to the oldest. So Maria stood on the wall and laughed with her backside to the wind for everyone to see. Then one of the neighbours came over and told my mother it was not very nice to do that in front of Irish people, Catholic or Protestant. So we all had to stay inside for a day and my mother said we were living on our own imagination too long and we needed friends to play with.

My father said we could only play with children who could speak Irish. He contacted lots of people and first of all we played with a boy nearby whose name was Seán Harris, the son of a painter and decorator, but their Irish wasn't good enough. Then one day my father bought us across the city on the bus to Finglas and we played with a boy called Naoise. Once or twice, children were brought over to our house by bus from other parts of the city, and there were some older boys who came to play in German but didn't say much. They stood around looking at our things and not even playing with them, just eating the biscuits that my mother made. There were some boys from our school who came over too, but even they thought it was stupid to play in Irish and didn't want to come back again, even for the biscuits. You couldn't be cowboys in Irish. You couldn't sneak up behind somebody or tie somebody up to a chair in Irish. It was no fun dying in Irish. And it was just too stupid altogether to hide behind something and say 'Uuuggh' or 'hands up' in Irish, because there were some things you could only do in English, like fighting and killing Indians. My father was no good at making friends, so my mother took over and told us to join the altar boys. But they only wanted to kill Germans, so we served Mass and just went home again.

One day I was playing with the umbrella in the hallway, trying to kill all the coats with one arm behind my back, and Franz was outside on the street with his scooter. He was listening to the trains pulling into the station, waiting for my father to come home. But then he saw some other boys playing on the street with sticks and guns. They ignored him and didn't call him any names, so he stood there with one foot on and one foot off the scooter, looking at them from a distance, even though he couldn't join in. They were cowboys fighting and killing Indians. Franz was pretending that his scooter was a horse and that he had a real gun in the side pocket of his lederhosen, until my father came around the corner with his limp and his briefcase swinging. Then Franz turned around and tried to scoot back to the house as fast as he could, but it was already too late. I heard the key in the door and I saw Franz coming in with nothing to say. I saw my father turning around to look at the boys on the street before he closed the door and put his briefcase down. My mother came to kiss him, but that didn't stop him saying that Franz had to be punished for pretending to be with the other boys on the street.

‘Now why is that?’ my mother asked.

‘He was listening to them in English,’ my father said.

‘My God,’ she said. ‘Are you not taking this too far?’

My father shook his head. She tried everything she could to stop it. She tried to distract him by saying it was the feast of St Brigid and that the curtains were finished for the puppet theatre and that she got a letter from her sister Marianne. She tried to say that we should phone Onkel Ted and see what he would say. And when my father still shook his head...
she tried to put her arm around Franz to stop him from feeling pain. 'Not with violence,' she begged him. 'Please, not with violence.'

So instead, my father confiscated the scooter and carried it upstairs. That meant there were now two scooters in my father and mother's bedroom. My scooter was there for days because I was listening to songs on the radio.

'Two horses up there eating grass,' she said to us afterwards.

I knew she was making a joke because there was no other way out of it. But I knew it wasn't over with the scooters either and after dinner, when we were gone to bed already, my mother tried to get my father to put on some music and pour a glass of cognac. They were talking for a long time and he said he was not going to be tricked into changing his mind, because that was like going backwards and letting the strongest languages win over the weakest. She said that punishing the innocent and confiscating things was going backwards.

Then she laughed and asked how anyone was going to be able to sleep with two horses in the bedroom. But he just got angry again and she asked him to go up and give us a sign that everything was still positive in our family. She wanted him to go up and kiss us on the forehead.

'I love each one of you,' he said, and I could smell the cognac on his breath. 'You are like no other children in the world.'

And some time in the middle of the night, my mother got up and brought the scooters back down the stairs, one by one, because they were there in the hallway the next morning waiting for us. It didn't mean everything was all right again, but at least we had our horses back and soon we would be starting swimming lessons.

After that my mother kept asking people in the shops if there were any children that we could play with and one day she met Dr Sheehan and he had a boy called Noel who had red hair and glasses that were wrapped around his ears. So she brought us down to his house to play in a huge garden beside the church with bulldogs and apple trees. He was our friend and his house was the best place in the world to live. There were bicycles that we could ride around the path like a racetrack, and we could reach up from our saddles and pick apples from the trees above us any time. Sometimes the bell from the church rang and you could hear nothing at all except one of the dogs howling. One time Franz found a tap in the garden and drank some water, but then his mouth was full of earwigs and he thought he would die. And one time we found a wasps' nest and started throwing stones at it until they got very angry. We played in English all day until Noel's mother asked us to stay for tea. She had trouble with breathing and spoke very gently to say that she had phoned my mother. There was nothing my father could do to stop it. Even when we were walking up the road on our way home at the end of the day, Franz and me still kept talking English as far as we could, until the last lamp-post.

Then my father wanted to know if Noel could speak Irish. Before he could come and play in our house, he would have to sit an exam first in the front room. Next Saturday, my father asked him lots of questions in Irish, like what his name was and how old he was and what his father did for a living. We stood around watching and hoping that Noel could answer them, wishing that we could whisper and help him, but he knew no Irish at all. He just kept
smiling and blinking behind his glasses and repeating the only thing he remembered from school.

'Níl a fhios agam,' he said. 'I don't know.'

That was the oldest answer in Ireland and my father started shaking his head. It was not good enough, he kept saying. But then my mother had a great idea.

'He wants to learn Irish,' she said. 'Dr Sheehan wants him to learn. It's his only chance.'

My father looked very cross, but my mother kept trying. She said Noel was not so good at Irish yet, but he would soon become a native speaker if he was allowed to come to our house. And then who knows, maybe his family would then become a full-Irish fireside and maybe even Dr Sheehan would begin to speak Irish to his patients and then everybody in Dublin would love their own language.

It would be a pity to miss this opportunity.

So then we had a friend for life. We learned swimming and diving and went down to the public baths every day for the whole summer. We saved up and bought goggles so that we could dive down underwater and have contests picking up pennies from the bottom of the pool. We would throw the penny into the deep end and watch it turning as it sank out of view. Then we dived down to reach it underwater, where there was no language only the humming bubbles all around. We timed each other to see who could stay down for the longest and I was nearly always the winner because I could stay under until my lungs were bursting, until I nearly died and had to come up for words. I was the champion at not breathing. Sometimes the three of us went down together and shook hands, and it looked like you could live down there, just sitting on the bottom of the pool signalling to each other. When we got out of the water, our knees were purple. We had purple hands and purple lips and our teeth were chattering. Then it was time to go home and we bought chewing gum. Noel found there was still water in one ear and he had to lean over on one side to let it pour out like a jug. We were friends for life and walked home with our towels around our necks, slapping the swimming trunks against the walls and leaving wet marks behind, like signatures all the way home. Then we waited till we got to the last lamp-post before we stopped speaking English.