

Smithson novels for you, Agnes.

AGNES. Ah. Thanks.

KATE. *The Marriage of Nurse Harding* — oh, dear! For you, Christina. One teaspoonful every morning before breakfast.

CHRIS. What's this?

KATE. Cod-liver oil. You're far too pale.

CHRIS. Thank you, Kate.

KATE. Because you take no exercise. Anyhow I'm in the chemist's shop and this young girl — a wee slip of a thing, can't even remember her name — her mother's the knitting agent that buys your gloves, Agnes —

AGNES. Vera McLaughlin.

KATE. Her daughter whatever you call her.

ROSE. Sophia.

KATE. Miss Sophia, who must be all of fifteen; she comes up to me and she says, 'I hope you're not going to miss the harvest dance, Miss Mundy. It's going to be just *supreme* this year.' And honest to God, if you'd seen the delight in her eyes, you'd think it was heaven she was talking about. I'm telling you — off its head — like a fever in the place. That's the quinine. The doctor says it won't cure the malaria but it might help to contain it. Is he in his room?

CHRIS. He's wandering about out the back somewhere.

KATE. I told the doctor you thought him very quiet, Agnes. *(AGNES had stopped knitting and is looking abstractedly into the middle distance.)*

AGNES. Yes?

KATE. Well, didn't you? And the doctor says we must remember how strange everything here must be to him after so long. And on top of that Swahili has been his language for twenty-five years; so that it's not that his mind is confused — it's just that he has difficulty finding the English words for what he wants to say.

CHRIS. No matter what the doctor says, Kate, his mind is a bit confused. Sometimes he doesn't know the difference between us. I've heard him calling you Rose and he keeps calling me some strange name like —

KATE. Okawa.

CHRIS. That's it! Aggie, you've heard him, haven't you?

KATE. Okawa was his house boy. He was very attached to him. *(Taking off her shoe.)* I think I'm getting corns in this foot. I hope to God I don't end up crippled like poor mother, may she rest in peace.

AGNES. Wouldn't it be a good one if we all went?

CHRIS. Went where?

AGNES. To the harvest dance.

CHRIS. Aggie!

AGNES. Just like we used to. All dressed up. I think I'd go.

ROSE. I'd go, too, Aggie! I'd go with you!

KATE. For heaven's sake you're not serious, Agnes — are you?

AGNES. I think I am.

KATE. Hah! There's more than Ballybeg off its head.

AGNES. I think we should all go.

KATE. Have you any idea what it'll be like? — Crawling with cheeky young brats that I taught years ago.

AGNES. I'm game.

CHRIS. We couldn't, Aggie — could we?

KATE. And all the riff-raff of the countryside.

AGNES. I'm game.

CHRIS. Oh God, you know how I loved dancing, Aggie.

AGNES. *(To KATE.)* What do you say?

KATE. *(To CHRIS.)* You have a seven-year-old child — have you forgotten that?

AGNES. *(To CHRIS.)* You could wear that blue dress of mine — you have the figure for it and it brings out the colour of your eyes.

CHRIS. Can I have it? God, Aggie, I could dance non-stop all night — all week — all month!

KATE. And who'd look after Father Jack?

AGNES. *(To KATE.)* And you look great in that cotton dress you got for confirmation last year. You're beautiful in it, Kate.

KATE. What sort of silly talk is —

AGNES. *(To KATE.)* And you can wear my brown shoes with the crossover straps.

KATE. This is silly talk. We can't, Agnes. How can we?

ROSE. Will Maggie go with us?
CHRIS. Will Maggie what! Try to stop her!
KATE. Oh God, Agnes, what do you think?
AGNES. We're going.
KATE. Are we?
ROSE. We're off! We're away!
KATE. Maybe we're mad — are we mad?
CHRIS. It costs four and six to get in.
AGNES. I've five pounds saved. I'll take you. I'll take us all.
KATE. Hold on now —
AGNES. How many years has it been since we were at the harvest dance? — at any dance? And I don't care how young they are, how drunk and dirty and sweaty they are. I want to dance, Kate. It's the Festival of Lughnasa. I'm only thirty-five. I want to dance.
KATE. (*Wretched.*) I know, I know, Agnes, I know. All the same — oh my God — I don't know if it's —
AGNES. It's settled. We're going — the Mundy girls — all five of us together.
CHRIS. Like we used to.
AGNES. Like we used to.
ROSE. I love you, Aggie! I love you more than chocolate biscuits!
(*ROSE kisses AGNES impetuously, flings her arms above her head, begins singing "Abyssinia" and does the first steps of a bizarre and abandoned dance. At this KATE panics.*)
KATE. No, no, no! We're going nowhere!
CHRIS. If we all want to go —
KATE. Look at yourselves, will you! Just look at yourselves! Dancing at our time of day? That's for young people with no duties and no responsibilities and nothing in their heads but pleasure.
AGNES. Kate, I think we —
KATE. Do you want the whole countryside to be laughing at us? — women of our years? — mature women, *dancing*? What's come over you all? And this is Father Jack's home — we must never forget that — ever. No, no, we're going to no harvest dance.

ROSE. But you just said —
KATE. And there'll be no more discussion about it. The matter's over. I don't want it mentioned again.
(*Silence. MAGGIE returns to the garden from the back of the house. She has the hen bucket on her arm and her hands are cupped as if she were holding something fragile between them. She goes to the kite materials.*)
MAGGIE. The fox is back.
BOY. Did you see him?
MAGGIE. He has a hole chewed in the henhouse door.
BOY. Did you get a look at him, Aunt Maggie?
MAGGIE. Wasn't I talking to him. He was asking for you.
BOY. Ha-ha. What's that you have in your hands?
MAGGIE. Something I found.
BOY. What?
MAGGIE. Sitting very still at the foot of the holly tree.
BOY. Show me.
MAGGIE. Say please three times.
BOY. Please — please — please.
MAGGIE. In Swahili.
BOY. Are you going to show it to me or are you not?
MAGGIE. (*Crouching down beside him.*) Now, cub, put your ear over here. Listen. Shhh. D'you hear it?
BOY. I think so ... yes.
MAGGIE. What do you hear?
BOY. Something.
MAGGIE. Are you sure?
BOY. Yes, I'm sure. Show me, Aunt Maggie.
MAGGIE. All right. Ready? Get back a bit. Bit further. Right?
BOY. Yes.
(*Suddenly she opens her hands and her eyes follow the rapid and imaginary flight of something up to the sky and out of sight. She continues staring after it. Pause.*)
What was it?
MAGGIE. Did you see it?
BOY. I think so ... yes.
MAGGIE. Wasn't it wonderful?
BOY. Was it a bird?