

KATE. And beside her two of the most beautiful children you ever laid eyes on. Twins. They'll be fourteen next month. And to see the three of them together — like sisters, I'm telling you.

MAGGIE. Twin girls.

KATE. Identical.

MAGGIE. Identical.

KATE. Nora and Nina.

ROSE. Mother used to say twins are a double blessing.

MAGGIE. Bernie O'Donnell ... oh my goodness ...

KATE. And wait till you hear — they are pure blond! 'Where in the name of God did the blond hair come from?' I asked her. 'The father. Eric,' she says. 'He's from Stockholm.'

AGNES. Stockholm!

ROSE. Where's Stockholm, Aggie?

KATE. So there you are. Bernie O'Donnell married to a Swede. I couldn't believe my eyes. But the same bubbly, laughing, happy Bernie. Asking about everybody by name.

*(MAGGIE goes to the window and looks out so that the others cannot see her face. She holds her hands, covered with flour, out from her body.)*

CHRIS. She remembered us all?

KATE. Knew all about Michael; had his age to the very month. Was Agnes still the quickest knitter in Ballybeg? Were none of us thinking of getting married? — and weren't we wise!

ROSE. Did she remember me?

KATE. 'Rose had the sweetest smile I ever saw.'

ROSE. There!

KATE. But asking specially for you, Maggie: how you were doing — what you were doing — how were you looking — were you as light-hearted as ever? Everytime she thinks of you, she says, she has the memory of the two of you hiding behind the turf stack, passing a cigarette between you and falling about laughing about some boy called — what was it? — Curley somebody?

MAGGIE. Curley McDaid. An eejit of a fella. Bald as an egg

at seventeen. Bernie O'Donnell ... oh my goodness ...

*(Pause.)*

AGNES. Will she be around for a while?

KATE. Leaving tomorrow.

AGNES. We won't see her so. That's a pity.

CHRIS. Nice names, aren't they? — Nina and Nora.

KATE. I like Nora. Nice name. Strong name.

AGNES. Not so sure about Nina. *(To CHRIS.)* Do you like Nina for a name?

CHRIS. Nina? No, not a lot.

KATE. Well, if there's a Saint Nina, I'm afraid she's not in my prayer book.

AGNES. Maybe she's a Swedish saint.

KATE. Saints in Sweden! What'll it be next!

ROSE. Mother used to say twins are a double blessing.

KATE. *(Sharply.)* You've offered us that cheap wisdom already, Rose.

*(Pause.)*

CHRIS. You've got some flour on your nose, Maggie.

MAGGIE. When I was sixteen I remember slipping out one Sunday night — it was this time of year, the beginning of August — and Bernie and I met at the gate of the workhouse and the pair of us off to a dance in Ardstraw. I was being pestered by a fellow called Tim Carlin at the time but it was really Brian McGuinness that I was — that I was keen on. Remember Brian with the white hands and the longest eyelashes you ever saw? But of course he was crazy about Bernie. Anyhow the two boys took us on the bar of their bikes and off the four of us headed to Ardstraw, fifteen miles each way. If Daddy had known, may he rest in peace ...

And at the end of the night there was a competition for the Best Military Two-step. And it was down to three couples: the local pair from Ardstraw; wee Timmy and myself — he was up to there on me; and Brian and Bernie ...

And they were just so beautiful together, so stylish; you couldn't take your eyes off them. People just stopped dancing and gazed at them ...

And when the judges announced the winners — they

were probably blind drunk — naturally the local couple came first; and Timmy and myself came second; and Brian and Bernie came third.

Poor Bernie was stunned. She couldn't believe it. Couldn't talk. Wouldn't speak to any of us for the rest of the night. Wouldn't even cycle home with us. She was right, too: they should have won; they were just so beautiful together ...

And that's the last time I saw Brian McGuinness — remember Brian with the...? And the next thing I heard he had left for Australia ...

She was right to be angry, Bernie. I know it wasn't fair — it wasn't fair at all. I mean they must have been blind drunk, those judges, whoever they were ...

*(MAGGIE stands motionless, staring out of the window, seeing nothing. The others drift back to their tasks: ROSE and AGNES knit; KATE puts the groceries away; CHRIS connects the battery. Pause.)*

KATE. Is it working now, Christina?

CHRIS. What's that?

KATE. Marconi.

CHRIS. Marconi? Yes, yes ... should be ...

*(She switches the set on and returns to her ironing. The music, at first scarcely audible, is Irish dance music — "The Mason's Apron," played by a ceili band. Very fast; very heavy beat; a raucous sound. At first we are aware of the beat only. Then, as the volume increases slowly, we hear the melody. For about ten seconds — until the sound has established itself — the women continue with their tasks. Then MAGGIE turns round. Her head is cocked to the beat, to the music. She is breathing deeply, rapidly. Now her features become animated by a look of defiance, of aggression; a crude mask of happiness. For a few seconds she stands still, listening, absorbing the rhythm, surveying her sisters with her defiant grimace. Now she spreads her fingers [which are covered with flour], pushes her hair back from her face, pulls her hands down her cheeks and patterns her face with an instant mask. At the same time she opens her mouth and emits a wild, raucous "Yaaaah!" — and immediately begins to dance, arms, legs, hair, long bootlaces flying. And as she dances she lolls — sings — shouts and calls, 'Come on and join me! Come on! Come on!' For about ten seconds she dances alone — a white-faced, frantic dervish.*

*Her sisters watch her.*

*Then ROSE's face lights up. Suddenly she flings away her knitting, leaps to her feet, shouts, grabs MAGGIE's hand. They dance and sing — shout together; Rose's Wellingtons pounding out their own erratic rhythm. Now after another five seconds AGNES looks around, leaps up, joins MAGGIE and ROSE. Of all the sisters she moves most gracefully, most sensuously. Then after the same interval CHRIS, who has been folding Jack's surplice, tosses it quickly over her head and joins in the dance. The moment she loses the vestment over her head KATE cries out in remonstrance, 'Oh, Christina — !' But her protest is drowned. AGNES and ROSE, CHRIS and MAGGIE, are now all doing a dance that is almost recognizable. They meet — they retreat. They form a circle and wheel round and round. But the movements seem caricatured; and the sound is too loud; and the beat is too fast; and the almost recognizable dance is made grotesque because — for example — instead of holding hands, they have their arms tightly around one another's neck, one another's waist. Finally KATE, who has been watching the scene with unease, with alarm, suddenly leaps to her feet, flings her head back, and emits a loud 'Yaaaah!'*

*KATE dances alone, totally concentrated, totally private; a movement that is simultaneously controlled and frantic; a weave of complex steps that takes her quickly round the kitchen, past her sisters, out to the garden, round the summer seat, back to the kitchen; a pattern of action that is out of character and at the same time ominous of some deep and true emotion. Throughout the dance ROSE, AGNES, MAGGIE and CHRIS shout — call — sing to each other. KATE makes no sound.*

*With this too loud music, this pounding beat, this shouting — calling — singing, this parodic reel, there is a sense of order being consciously subverted, of the women consciously and crudely caricaturing themselves, indeed of near-hysteria being induced. The music stops abruptly in mid-phrase. But because of the noise they are making the sisters do not notice and continue dancing for a few seconds. Then KATE notices — and stops. Then AGNES. Then CHRIS and MAGGIE. Now only ROSE is dancing her graceless dance by herself. Then finally she, too, notices and stops. Silence. For some time they stand where they have stopped. There is no sound but their gasping*