

The Forester's Daughter

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Deegan, the forester, is not the type of man to remember his children's birthdays, least likely that of his youngest, who bears a strong, witch like resemblance to her mother. If occasional doubts about his daughter cross his mind he does not dwell on them for, in fairness, Deegan has little time to dwell on things. In Aghowle there are three teenagers, the milking and the mortgage.

Some of Deegan's hardship he brought upon himself. When his father passed away and left the place to his sons, Deegan, who was not yet thirty at the time, borrowed money against the place and bought them out. His brothers, who had other ambitions, were glad of the money and went off to make lives for themselves in Dublin. The night before the bank took over the deed, Deegan walked the fine, south facing meadows. It broke his heart to mortgage the place but he could see no other way. He bought a herd of Friesians, put electric fences round the land and installed the milking parlour. Shortly afterwards, he drove to Courtown Harbour to find a wife.

He found Martha Dunne on a Sunday afternoon in the Tara Ballroom. Deegan, sitting there in a blue pinstriped suit with his beard trimmed, watched this broad hipped woman making bold figures of eight within a stranger's arms. Her skin was smooth as a plate and her scent, when they waltzed, reminded him of the gorse when it is on fire.

While the band was playing the last tune, Deegan asked if she would meet him again.

"Ah, no," she said.

"No?" Deegan said. "Why not?"

"I don't think so."

"I see," Deegan said.

But Deegan didn't see and for this simple reason, he persisted. The following Sunday he went back to Courtown and found Martha in the hotel, eating alone. Without asking, he sat down and kept her company. While she ate, he steered the conversation from the fine weather through the headlines and wound up talking about Aghowle. As he described his home, he began to imagine her there buttering turnips, patching his trousers, hanging his shirts to dry out on a line.

Months passed and through nothing stronger than habit, they kept meeting. Deegan always took her out to supper and to dances, making sure to pay for anything that passed her lips. Sometimes, they walked down to the sea. On the strand, gulls' footprints went on for a while then disappeared. Deegan hated the feel of sand under his feet but Martha's stride was loose, her brown gaze even. She strolled along, stooping every now and then to pick up shells. Martha was the type of woman who is content in her body but slow to speak. Deegan mistook her silence for modesty and, before a year of courtship ended, he proposed.

"Would you think of marrying me?"

While the question was in mid air, Martha hesitated. Deegan was standing with his back to the amusement arcade. With all the lights behind him she could hardly make him out; all she could see were slot machines and shelves of coins that every now and then pushed a little excess into a shoot to let somebody win. At a van a child was reaching up for candy. The crowd was getting smaller; summer was coming to an end.

Martha's instinct told her to refuse but she was thirty years of age and if she said no this question might never be asked of her again. She wasn't sure of Deegan but none of the others had ever mentioned marriage, so Martha, with her own logic, concluded that Victor Deegan must love her, and accepted. In all the years that followed, Deegan never thought but he did love her, never thought but he showed his love.

The following spring, while birds searched for the perfect bough and the crocus laboured through the grass, they married. Martha moved into the house Deegan had described at length but found Aghowle to be a warren of dim, un-lived-in rooms and unsteady furniture. Dirty nylon curtains clung to the panes. The wooden floors were bare of rugs, the ceilings full of woodworm but Martha, being no housekeeper, didn't really care. She rose late, drank her tea on the doorstep and threw meals together same as she was packing a suitcase. Often Deegan came home from work expecting her to be there with a hot dinner but more often than not his house was empty. He'd stoop and find the big enamel plate with fried potatoes and a pair of eggs dried out in the oven.

Martha preferred to be out in Wellingtons lifting a drill for onions or slashing the nettles along the lane. The forester brought her seedlings he'd found in the wood, sycamores and horse chestnuts which she staked about the land in places where the hedges had been broken. For company she bought two dozen Rhode Island Red pullets and a cock. She sometimes found herself standing in the barn watching her fowl pecking the seed, feeling happy until she realised she wasn't.

Before a year had passed the futility of married life struck her sore: the futility of making a bed, of drawing and pulling curtains. She felt lonelier now than she'd ever felt when she was single. And little or nothing was there around Aghowle to amuse her. Every week she cycled to the village but Parkbridge was just a post office and a public house cum shop whose keeper was inquisitive.

Is Victor well? There's a great man, a great worker. You'll not find the grass growing under his feet."

"You must like living up there now, do you? A fine house it is."

"Where did he find you anyhow? Courtown? Didn't he go far enough for you?"

One Thursday, as she was about to cycle out for groceries, a stranger appeared with a trailer. A big blade of a man with a thick moustache, he parked in the centre of her yard and strode up to the door.

"Have you any interest in roses?"

There, in the trailer, the stranger had all types of plants: rosebushes, budding maples, Victoria plum trees, raspberry canes. It was the end of April. She said it was getting late for planting but the salesman said he knew that, and would not go hard on her. She asked how much he wanted for the roses, and his price seemed fair. Over tea, they talked of vegetables, how lifting the potato stalk was magic for you never really knew what it would yield. When he left, she collected hen dung with the shovel and planted the rosebushes deep in rows at either side of the hall door where she could train them to climb up around the windows.

When Deegan came home she told him what had happened.

"You spent my money on roses?"

"Your money?"

"What kind of fool did I marry at all?"

"Is it a fool I am?"

"What else?"

"I suppose I was fool enough to marry you."

"Is that so?" Deegan grabbed the end of his beard as though he might tear it off. "The hard times aren't over. It's all very well for you sitting here day in, day out. You didn't bring so much as a penny into this place. And a working man needs more than dried-out spuds for his dinner."

"You don't look any the worst for it."

And it was true: Deegan had put on weight, had the bloom on him that men have after they marry.

"If that's the case, it's not your doing," Deegan said, and went out to milk the cows.

That summer her roses bloomed scarlet but long before the wind could blow their heads asunder, Martha realised she had made a mistake. All she had was a husband who hardly spoke now that he'd married her, an empty house and no income of her own. She had married a man she did not love. What had she expected? She had expected it would grow and deepen into love. And now she craved intimacy and the type of conversation that would surpass misunderstanding. She thought about finding a job but it was too late: a child was near ready for the cradle.

The children Martha bore, she reared casually, never threatening them with anything sharper than a wooden spoon. When her first born was placed in her arms her laughter was like a pheasant rising out of the bushes. The boy, a shrill young fellow, grew tall but it soon became apparent that he had no love of farming; when the boy sat in under a cow, the milk went back up to her horns. He looked up to his uncles whom he visited every now and then in Dublin, and it was hardship to make him do a hand's turn. He would get away just as soon as he saw the opportunity.

The second child was a simpleton: a beautiful, pale boy with a pair of green eyes staring from a shell of dark brown hair. He did not attend school but lived in a world of his own and had a frightening aptitude for speaking the truth.

It was the girl who had the brains, the girl who travelled through youth same as youth was a warm stretch of water she could easily cross. She finished her homework before the school bus reached the lane, refused to eat meat and had a way with animals. While others were afraid to enter the bull's field, she could walk up and take the ring out of his nose. And she had taken a liking to her brother, the simple one. Always she was urging him on to do the things nobody else believed him capable. She'd taught him how to knot and cast the hook, how to strike a match and write his name.

Seldom did neighbours come into that house but whenever they did, Martha told stories. In fact, she was at her best with stories. On those rare nights they saw her pluck things out of the air and break them open before their eyes. They would leave remembering not the fine old house that always impressed them or the man with the worried look that owned it or the strange flock of teenagers but the woman with the dark brown hair which got looser as the night went on and her pale hands plucking unlikely stories like green plums that ripened with the telling at her hearth. After these stories they were sometimes too frightened to go back out into the night, and Deegan had to walk them as far as the road. After such nights, he always took his woman to bed to make not only her but himself sure that she was nobody's but his. Sometimes he believed that was why she told a story well.

But in that household as in any other, Mondays came. Whether the dawn was blood red or a damp, ash grey, Deegan got up and placed his bare feet on the cold floor and dressed himself. Often his limbs felt stiff but, without complaint, he milked, ate his breakfast and went to work. He worked all

day and some days were long. If, in the evenings, his eyes of their own accord were closing while he'd yet again the cows to tend, it was a solace to drive over the hill and see the lighted windows, the tusk of chimney smoke, to know his work was not for nothing. Before he retired, the bank would give back the deed and Aghowle would, at last, belong to him.

The fact that it stood in a hollow, that the walls within it were no thicker than cardboard didn't matter. Now that his parents were dead and his brothers had gone, Deegan was becoming sentimental. He remembered not how his mother had spent so much of his youth in bed with the curtains drawn or the nights when his father took down the strap saying he couldn't have it all his own way, but simpler things, plain facts. The line of oaks on Aghowle's lane were planted by his great grandfather. No matter how hard or high his children swung, those limbs would never break. Secretly, he knew that the place gave him more satisfaction than his wife and children ever would.

Deegan is now middle aged. If it is a stage when some believe that much of life is over, and assume that what's left is a downhill slope to be lived within the restraints of choices made, for Deegan, it is otherwise. For him, retirement will be the reward for all the risks he's ever taken. By the time his pension comes, his children will be reared. He envisages himself in Aghowle with one Shorthorn for the house. He will get up when it suits him, sort through stones and repair the orchard walls. He will take out the spade, plant more oaks on the land. He can already feel the dry stone, the oaks' blue shade. The eldest boy will marry, have children, and carry on the name. But in the meantime, before he can take his early retirement and retreat into this easy life he craves, there are children to finish rearing, bills to pay and years of work yet to be done.

One wet day while he is working beyond Coolattin pruning a line of Douglas fir, Deegan stumbles across a gun dog. The retriever has sheltered for the night under the trees and the forester has, in fact, roused him from a dream of ponies chasing him through a bog. Puzzled at first by the presence of a stranger, the retriever looks around and then remembers yesterday. O'Donnell tried to shoot him but then O'Donnell's rage was always sharper than his aim. It was, quite simply, a case of the bad hunter blaming his dog. Now this bearded stranger whose scent is all resin and cow's milk is standing over him, offering buttered bread. The dog eats it and lets the stranger stroke him.

Deegan does this knowing he will someday, if no owner comes looking get a nice turn, for the dog is handsome. Waves of white gold run down the retriever's back. His snout is cold, his eyes brown and ready. Come evening, Deegan doesn't have to coax him into the car. The dog jumps in and puts his paws up on the dash. With the sunlight striking his coat and the wind in his ears, they travel down hills towards Shillelagh and the open road.

When they reach Aghowle, Deegan is glad, as usual, to see his house with its chimney sending smoke up to the heavens not that he believes in heaven. Deegan is not a religious man. He knows that beyond this world there is nothing. God is an invention created by one man to keep another at a safe distance from his wife and land. But always he goes to Mass. He knows the power of a neighbor's opinion and will not have it said that he's ever missed a Sunday. It is autumn. Brown oak leaves are twisting in dry spasms around the yard. Exhausted, Deegan gives the dog to the first child he sees. It happens to be his youngest and it happens to be the girl's birthday.

And so the girl, whose father has never given her so much as a tender word, embraces the retriever and with it the possibility that Deegan loves her, after all. A wily girl who is half innocence and half intuition, she stands there in a yellow dress and thanks Deegan for her birthday present. For some reason it almost breaks the forester's heart to hear her say the words. She is human, after all.

"There now," he says. "Aren't you getting hardy?"

"I'm twelve," she says. "I can reach the top of the dresser without the stool."

"Is that so?"

"Mammy says I'll be taller than you."

"No doubt you will."

Martha, throwing out barley to the hens, overhears this conversation, and knows better. Victor Deegan would never put his hand in his pocket for the child's birthday. He's picked the retriever up some place as winnings in one of his card games or maybe it's a stray he's found along the road. But because her favourite child seems happy, she says nothing.

Martha is still young enough to remember happiness. The day the child was conceived comes back to her. It started out as a day of little promise with clouds suspended on a stiff, February sky. She remembers that morning's sun in the milking parlour, the wind throwing showers into the barn, how strange and soft the salesman's hands felt, compared to Deegan's. He had taken his time, lain back in the straw and told her her eyes were the colour of wet sand.

She has often wondered since then, where the boy was, for her thoughts, that day, were fixed on the prospect of Deegan coming home. When he did come home, he sat in to his dinner and ate as always, asking was there more. Martha waited for the blood but on the ninth day after it was due she gave up and asked the neighbours in and told a story, knowing how the night would end. That part wasn't easy.

But that's all in the past. Now her daughter is sitting on the autumn ground, looking into the retriever's mouth.

"There's a black patch on his tongue, Mammy."

That she is a strange child can't be doubted. Martha's youngest holds funerals for dead butterflies, eats the roses and collects tadpoles from the cattle tracks, sets them free to grow legs in the pond.

"It's it a boy or a girl?"

Martha turns the retriever over. "It's a boy."

"It'll call him Judge."

"Don't get too fond of him."

"What?"

"Well, what if somebody wants him back?"

"What are you talking about, Mammy?"

"I don't know." Martha says.

She throws what's left of the barley on the ground and goes inside to strain the potatoes.

While the Deegans eat, Judge explores the yard. No doubt the place is fine. There's a milking parlour whose steel throws back his reflection, an empty henhouse with one late egg, and a barn full of hay. He walks down the lane, urinates high on the trunks of the oak trees, shits, and kicks up the fallen leaves. His urge to roll in the cow dung is almost irresistible but this is the type of house where they might let a dog sleep inside. He stands a long time watching the smoke, considering his circumstances. O'Donnell will be out looking for him. Judge picks up a sod of turf and carries it into the house. The Deegans, who are eating in silence, watch him. He drops the sod in the basket at the hearth and, before they can say a word, goes out for more. He does not stop until the basket is full.

The Deegans laugh.

"You'd have to see it to believe it," says Deegan.

"Where did you find him anyhow?" says Martha.

Deegan looks at her and shakes his head. "Find him? I bought him off one of the forestry lads."

The girl gives Judge a slice of birthday cake and mashes butter into the leftover potatoes, feeds him on the doorstep.

While they are down the yard, milking, Martha comes out. The evening is fine. In the sky a few early stars are shining of their own accord. She watches the dog licking the bowl clean. This dog will break her daughter's heart, she's sure of it. Her desire to chase him off is stronger than any emotion she has felt of late. Tomorrow, while the girl is in school, she'll get rid of him. She will take him up the wood, throw stones, and tell him to get home. The retriever licks his lips and stares at Martha, grateful. He puts his paw up on her knee. Martha looks at him and fills his bowl with milk. That night, before she goes to bed, she finds an old eiderdown and makes a bed under the table so nobody can walk on his tail.

Judge lies in his new bed, rolls onto his back and stares at the drawers under the table. This is a different sort of house but Deegan will sell him just as soon as he finds the opportunity. The woman he understands: she is just the protective bitch minding her pup. The eldest fellow keeps to himself. The middle boy's scent is unlike any he has ever encountered. It is something close to ragweed, closer to plant than animal like the roots you'd bury something under. Judge, being wary in this strange place, fights sleep for as long as he is able but the kitchen's darkness and the fire's heat are unlike any comforts he has ever known and his will to stay awake soon fades. In sleep he dreams again of finding milk on the second teat. His mother was champion retriever at the Tinahely Show. She used to lick him clean, carry him through streams, proud that he was hers.

The next morning the simpleton, who sleeps odd hours, is the first to rise. Judge wakes, stretches himself and follows the boy out to the shed. They carry withered sticks in and the boy, knowing Judge expects it, does his best to light the fire. He arranges the sticks on yesterday's ashes and blows on them. He blows until the ash turns their faces grey. When the girl comes down she does not laugh at her brother; she simply kneels and, in her teacher's voice, shows him how it's done. She twists what's left of Sunday's newspaper, cocks the withered timber, and strikes a match. The boy watches and is intrigued. The strange blue flame grows bigger, changes and, at a certain point, turns into fire. Something about it makes him happy, makes him wonder. He has a capacity for wonder, sees great significance in common things others dismiss simply because they happen every day.

When Martha comes down, the door is wide open and there is no sign of the dog. She had hoped, the night before, that he would somehow run away. A cold wind is coming in. She shuts the door and walks into the scullery to fill the kettle. There on her sink is the retriever and with Deegan's good china cups, her two youngest stand rinsing the suds off his back. She doesn't really care but the girl sees her and Martha feels compelled to scold.

"Did I say you could wash that dog in here?"

"You said nothing about Judge."

"Judge. Is that his name?"

"I called him that yesterday."

"You'll not bathe him in that sink again. Do you hear?"

"He's my birthday present. At least Daddy bought me a dog. You bought me nothing."

"Are you jealous?" asks the boy.

"What did you say?" asks Martha.

"Who cares?" he says. It's a phrase he's heard a neighbour use which he thinks is worth repeating.

"I care," says the girl, reaching again for water.

Martha takes her tea out to the yard where things always seem a fraction easier. She looks down the lane. The oaks are losing their leaves so quickly now. She drinks her tea, takes the stake off the henhouse door and opens it wide. Her fowl rush past in a sweep of red feathers and dust, racing for the feed and the open air. She stoops and reaches into their nests for eggs.

She strides back in to make the breakfast, feeling treacherous. She often feels treacherous in the mornings. She wishes her husband and her children were gone for the day. Always a part of her craves the solitude that will let her mind calm down and her memory surface.

On a hot pan she watches the eggs grow white and harden. Never has she been able to eat them. This morning she longs again for sheep's liver or a kidney. She's always had a taste for such things but Deegan won't have it. What would the neighbours think? The Deegans never ate but the best and he'll not see his wife standing at the butcher's stall, ordering liver. She stands there in her apron on a Tuesday wishing she'd married another man, a Dubliner, perhaps, who would stroll down to a butcher's shop and buy whatever she craved, a man who couldn't care less what neighbours think.

With the pan spitting, she walks outside and at her loudest, shouts. The desperation in her voice travels all the way down into Aghowle's valley, and the valley sends back her words.

"My God," says Deegan when he comes in from the milking, "we'll be lucky if we don't have the whole parish here."

The Deegans eat and, with full stomachs, go their separate ways. The eldest cycles off to the Vocational School. He has just the one year left and will then become apprentice to his uncle, the plasterer who lives at Harold's Cross. The simpleton heads off to the parlour, gets down on his knees and sets to work on his farm. So far he's built a boundary with dead fir cones and marked out the fields. Today he will start on his dwelling house. Before the week comes to an end, he'll have it thatched. Judge walks with the girl down the lane to the school bus. When he gets back, Martha places the frying pan on the kitchen floor and watches while he licks it clean. Without so much as a wipe she hangs it back up on its hook. Let them all get sick, she thinks. She doesn't care. Something has to happen.

She takes Judge to the wood. The sun is striking against the hazel. It is almost ten. Martha can, by now, tell what time it is without ever glancing at the clock. A blue sky is shedding rain. Some things she will never understand. Why is the winter sun whiter than July's? Why hadn't the girl's father ever written? She had waited for so long. She shakes her head at the absurd part of her that hasn't given up, and shelters for a while under the chestnut.

Judge is glad he cannot speak. He has never understood the human compulsion for conversation: people, when they speak, say useless things that seldom if ever improve their lives. Their words make them sad. Why can't they stop talking and embrace each other? The woman is crying now. He licks her hand. There are traces of grease and butter on her fingers. Underneath it all her scent is not unlike her husband's. As he licks her hand clean, Martha's desire to chase him off evaporates. That desire belonged to yesterday, has become yet another thing she may never be able to do.

Back home, she lathers her underarms and shaves them, cuts her toenails, brushes her hair and fixes it into a wet knot at the back of her skull, same as she is going somewhere. Then she finds herself on her bicycle pedaling herself all the way to Carnew in the rain. In Darcy's she buys a royal blue blouse off a rail, whose buttons look like pearls. Why she buys it she doesn't know. It will be wasted in Aghowle. She will wear it to Mass on Sunday and another farmer's wife will come up to her at the meat counter and tell her where she bought it.

When she gets back she changes into her old clothes and goes out to check her hens. Jimmy Davis had three lambs taken, and lately she feels afraid.

"Coooooo! Cocoooo!" she cries, rattling the bucket.

At her call they come, suspicious as always, through the fence. She counts them, goes through their names, and feels relieved. Then she is down on her knees plucking weeds out of the flowerbeds. All the flowers have by this time faded yet there is no frost in the mornings. The broom's shadow is bending onto the second flowerbed. It is almost three. Soon the children will be home, hungry, asking what there is to eat.

As she is bringing the fire back to life, Judge comes in and paws her leg. His tail is wagging. Several times he paws her before Martha realises there's something in his mouth. She kneels down and opens her hand. He drops something onto her palm. Her hand knows what it is but she has to look twice. It is an egg without so much as a crack in the shell.

Martha laughs. "Aren't you some dog?"

Martha gives him milk from the saucepan and says the girl will soon be home. They go down the lane to meet her. She climbs down from the school bus and tells them she solved a word problem in mathematics, that long ago Christina Columbus discovered the earth was round. She says she'll let the Taoiseach marry her and then she changes her mind. She will not marry at all but become the captain of a ship. She sees herself standing on deck with a storm blowing the red lemonade out of her cup.

Back home, the simpleton is getting on well. In the parlour he has planted late, brown paper oaks to shelter his dwelling house. The boy likes being alone and doesn't mind the fact that people sometimes forget he's there.

The eldest returns from the Vocational School stinking of cigarettes. Martha tells him to brush his teeth, and puts the dinner on the table. Then she goes upstairs. She has things to think about. What she is thinking isn't new. She takes her wedding coat out of the wardrobe, opens the seam and looks at her money. She doesn't have to count it. She knows how much is there. Five hundred and seven pounds so far, she has saved, mostly housekeeping money she did not put on the table. No longer is it a question of if or why. She must now decide when, exactly, she will leave.

Deegan comes home later than usual. "You couldn't watch that new man. He'd be gone by three if you didn't watch him." He eats all that's placed before him, rises, and heads out for the milking. The cows are already at the field gate, roaring.

That night he goes to bed early. His legs are sore from walking the steep lines and his feet are cold but before he can turn over he is asleep. In sleep he dreams he is standing under the oaks. In the dream it isn't autumn but a fine, summer's day. A gust of wind blows up out of the valley. It is so hard and sudden whatever way this gust is, it frightens Deegan and the oaks flinch. Leaves begin to fall. It all seems wrong but when Deegan looks down there, all around his feet are twenty pound

notes. Towards the end of the dream he is like a child trying, without much success, to catch them all. Finally he has to get a wheelbarrow. He fills it to the brim and pushes it all the way to Carnew. As he wheels it along the roads, neighbours come out and stare. The envy in their eyes is unmistakable. A few notes flutter from the barrow but it doesn't matter: he has more than enough.

When he wakes he gets up, goes to the window and looks out at the oaks. They are standing there, as always, in the dark. Deegan scratches his beard and goes over his dream. Dreaming has become the closest thing to having someone to talk to. He looks at Martha. His wife is fast asleep, the pale breast pressed against the thin cotton of her nightdress. He would like to wake her and tell her now of his dream. He would like sometimes to carry her away from this place and tell her what is on his mind and start all over again.

During this mild winter, Christmas comes. The frost is brittle, the birds confused. By this time Judge's coat is immaculate, his shadow never too far from the girl's. Deegan's humour improves for he's worked overtime and caught thieves stealing Christmas trees. The Forestry Department give him a bonus cheque which he spends on new ceiling boards for the house. All through the holidays he measures and saws, hammers and paints. When he's finished with the last coat of varnish, he takes Martha to the hardware and makes her choose wallpaper for the kitchen. She picks out rolls depicting woodbine whose pattern is wasteful and hard to match.

Neighbours come to the house that Christmas and remark on how, each time they visit, the house has improved.

"Oh, an auld house is impossible to keep," Deegan protests. "You could spend your whole life on it and see no difference." But he is pleased, and hands round the stout.

"Easy knowing you have a good woman behind you," they say. "Doesn't a woman make a place?"

"That's for sure."

Martha is quiet. She smiles and drinks two large hot whiskeys but, despite all coaxing, refuses to tell a story.

For Christmas the girl gets an Abba record which she plays twice and commits to memory. "Waterloo" is her favourite song. Santa slides down the chimney and leaves a second hand bicycle for the middle child. He'd hoped for machinery for his farm a harrow to put in the early wheat or a harvester, for his sugar beets near ready for the factory. Sometimes he wishes for rain. Their leaves, which he made out of bicycle tyres, seem dry and are not getting any taller.

The eldest goes off to Dublin for the holidays. Deegan gives him a little money so he will not be beholden to his uncles. It doesn't matter that his eldest boy's mind is on the city. Deegan has willed him the place and knows that Aghowle will someday draw him back. To his wife he presents a sewing basket and, with egg money, Martha buys her husband a pair of Clark's plaid slippers.

On Saint Stephen's night, a fox comes into the yard. Judge can smell him, detects his stink on the draught under the door before he reaches the henhouse. Judge gets up but the door is bolted. He goes upstairs and pulls the quilt off the girl's bed. The girl gets up, takes one look at him, and wakes her mother. Martha hears the commotion in the henhouse and shakes Deegan who comes down in his pajamas and loads the gun. The retriever's excitement grows. He hadn't known Deegan owned a gun. Together they run out to the yard. A white moon is spinning, shredding the light between the clouds. The taste on Judge's tongue is hot like mustard but they are too late: the henhouse door stands ajar and the fox is gone. He has killed two hens and taken another. Their young look

demented. In the chaos they keep searching but every wing they find is not their mother's. Judge stares at Deegan but all Deegan does is fire a few shots off in the air as though that would make any difference to a fox.

The next morning the forester goes out to pluck the hens. He looks up at the beam where he hung them but there's nothing there, just the bits of baling twine he strung them up with. Martha is already burying them in the garden. Her eyes are red.

"Such waste," Deegan says, and shakes his head.

"We'd be hard up if we had to eat Sally and Fern. You dig them up. You eat them. I'll make the sauce."

"You never in your married life made sauce."

"Do you know, Victor Deegan, neither did you."

The nights between Christmas and the New Year are long. The simpleton, with bits of ceiling boards, builds haysheds for his farm, which he crawls through. The girl writes down her resolutions and with her brother's sense of wonder reads the chapter entitled "Reproduction" in the eldest's new biology book. Aghowle stinks of varnish and there isn't much money. Deegan is uneasy. He keeps having the same dream: every night he puts his hand in his pocket and there, his wallet, bulging with all the money he's ever earned, is cut in two. All the notes are in halves and he can convince neither shopkeeper nor bank clerk that they are genuine. Towards the end, all the neighbours stand there laughing, saying there will be no improvements now.

He dreams a strange dream also; of coming home through a blue evening feeling anxious because no smoke is rising, of walking inside and his house being empty. There is a note that makes him sad for a while but the sadness doesn't last and in the end he is a young man again on his knees, lighting the fire. After this dream he wakes and, in an attempt at intimacy, tells his wife.

Martha, still half asleep, says, "Why would I leave you?" and turns over.

Deegan straightens himself. Such a strange thing to say. He never thought she'd leave him, never thought such a thing had crossed her mind. The house itself seems strange tonight. Martha's roses have, through the years, crawled up along the walls and, in the wind, paw the windows. On the staircase, a green shadow like water trembles. He goes downstairs feeling brittle, to get a drink. Some day it will all be over. He will get back the deed, buy a steel box and bury it under the oaks. Without Aghowle to worry about, his future will be an open hand. Martha, the mother of his children, will be happy, for there will be nights in B&Bs and brand new clothes. They will travel to the West of Ireland. She'll eat liver and onions for her breakfast. They will walk again on a warm strand and Deegan won't care about the sand under his feet.

He takes his drink in the parlour. The retriever is lying on the hearth rug, soaking up what is left of the heat. Deegan never found anyone who'd buy him. The dog is wearing a jacket of red velvet which Martha, to please the girl, has sewn during the holidays. His wife has stitched a zip along the belly and trimmed the sleeves. Deegan shakes his head. In all their time together, never once has she sewn so much as a patch onto his trousers.

He opens the ledger and looks over the bills. The price of schoolbooks is beyond reason. The thermostat in the cooler will have to be replaced. There is house insurance to renew but he can leave that for another while as he has the car to tax. He totals his income and the outgoings, sits back and sucks a breath in through his teeth. The spring will be lean but he'll be careful and get through it as

he always does. One thing the neighbours can't say is that Victor Deegan is a bad provider. There isn't so much as a lazy notion in that man's head. Fifty nine more payments. He does the arithmetic in his head. Five twelves are sixty It will take almost five years but won't the years pass anyhow? Deegan looks again at the numbers, sighs.

The boy, who has all this time been lying inside his hayshed, looks out. "Is it money, Daddy?"

"What?"

"Mammy says you think of nothing else."

"Does she now?"

"Aye. And she says you can sew your *own* arse into your trousers. Why would you sew your arse into your trousers?"

"You watch your tongue," Deegan says but he laughs all the same. The boy, like much else in life, has been a disappointment. He gets up and opens the curtains. The sky looks clear, the moon changeful. The holly this year was red with berries. He predicts a bad year and draws the curtains closed again. On the sideboard lie the girl's new copybooks, her name written neatly on their covers. Victoria Deegan. The child's name gives him pride; it is so much like his own. A cold feeling crawls up his back. He tries to think of nothing but instead he thinks of Martha saying, "I won't leave you." With bills, school uniforms and a wife's unspoken desire to leave, another year begins. Martha's desire to leave wanes when a flu clouds up her head and returns just as soon as she gets well again. Judge follows the girl everywhere. When one night she runs a bath without bolting the door, the retriever gets up on his hind legs, looks over the edge of the tub and sniffs the water. It smells strange but it is warm. Before the girl knows what he's doing, he's in beside her.

In January, Dublin shops advertise their sales. Martha takes the bus to O'Connell Street but she does not go near the shops. She walks past Clery's, on down across the Liffey and winds up in a D'Olier Street cinema eating boiled sweets, crying while a tragedy concerning an Irish girl who left for America flashes across the screen. She comes back with her eldest boy and bags of rock candy, disillusioned with her thoughts of leaving. Where would she go? How would she earn money? She remembers the phrase, "better the devil you know", and becomes humour some. Deegan puts it down to the fact that she is going through the change of life, and says nothing. He has become more than a little afraid of his wife and, to feel some kind of tenderness, often sits his daughter on his knee.

"Tutners," he calls her. "My little Tutners."

One Friday evening when he is low, feeling the pinch, Deegan drives down to the neighbor's house to play forty five. He thinks it might cheer him up to see the neighbours and play cards but when he gets there he cannot concentrate. After five games he's lost what he normally doubles in the night, and so he gets up to leave. The neighbours do their best to make him stay but Deegan insists on going, and bids them all goodnight.

When he is getting into his car, a stranger who holds his cards close to his chest approaches.

"I understand you have a dog you'd sell."

"A dog?" says Deegan.

"Aye," he says, "a gun dog. Do you still have him?"

"Well, I do," Deegan is set back on his heel but he recovers quickly. "I bought him last September but I've little time for hunting and it's a shame to see him wasted."

Deegan goes on to describe a retriever. He begins to talk easily about pheasants and how his dog can rise them, how the pheasant soup tastes finer than anything you can find in a hotel. He talks about the turf basket and how it is never empty since the dog came to the house. As soon as he mentions turf, the man smiles but Deegan does not notice, for he is remembering the girl on her birthday and how she and the retriever now bathe in the same water. But it is too late to back down.

"How much would you be asking?"

"Fifty pound," says Deegan. It is a crazy price he will be lucky to get the half of it, but the man doesn't flinch.

"If he is what you say, I might be interested. When can I see him?"

Deegan hesitates. "Let me think."

"Would now suit you?"

"Now? Aye. I suppose it would."

"Right. I'll follow you, so."

That night Judge recognises O'Donnell before he comes through the door. He always leads with his bad foot and the foot always hesitates before crossing the door. If there is any speck of doubt in Judge's mind, it vanishes when he gets the hunter's scent. It is a mixture of silage and some kind of oil he uses to keep his hair in place. Deegan comes in first. Judge leaps up and rips his velvet jacket on the corner of the armchair.

"Well, look at you in your finery." O'Donnell says, and begins to laugh.

Deegan, feeling slightly embarrassed, joins in the laughter. "Tis only a thing the child put on him."

Judge does his best to escape but every door off the kitchen is closed and it is only a matter of time before the two men catch him and place him, whimpering, in the boot of O'Donnell's car.

"There now," says Deegan. It is all he can do not to hold out his hand. "You won't be sorry you bought him."

"Bought him?" says O'Donnell. "When did you ever hear of a man buying his own dog?"

As Deegan watches the tail lights sailing down the lane he tries not to think of the girl in her yellow dress, thanking him. He tries not to think of her sitting on his lap. He tells himself it doesn't matter, that there is nothing he could have done. When he turns to go inside, something above him moves. He looks up. Martha is standing at their bedroom window in her nightdress, watching. She raises her hand and Deegan, feeling surprised, raises his. Maybe some part of her is glad the dog is gone. While he stands there watching, his wife's hand closes into a fist and her fist shakes. So, it is all out in the open.

Needless to say, the girl wonders why Judge doesn't wake her the next morning.

"Where's Judge?" she says when she comes down. She looks at her parents. Deegan is sitting at the head of the table forcing hard butter into a slice of white bread. Her mother is holding a cup of black tea to her lips staring at her husband through the steam.

"Ask your father," Martha says.

"Daddy, where is he?" Her voice is breaking.

Deegan coughs. "A man came looking for him."

"What man?"

"His owner. His owner came looking for him."

"What do you mean, his owner? I own him. You gave him to me."

"In truth," Deegan says, "I didn't. I found him in the wood and brought him home, that was all."

"But Judge is mine! You gave him to me."

She runs and calls his name. She searches the land and all their hiding places: "The Spaw" where he buries his bones, the tunnel in the hayshed, the grove beyond the hazels where the pheasants sleep. She searches until the knowledge that he is gone sinks in and changes her state of mind. Her father never loved her, after all. She decides she will run away but finds she isn't even able to go to school. She eats little more than a sparrow. By the time a week has passed she has stopped talking. Every evening she goes out on the bicycle calling his name:

"Judge! Judge!" is heard all around that parish. "Judge!"

Deegan knows the girl has gone a bit mad but the girl will get over it. It is only a matter of time. Everything else in Aghowle stays much the same: the cows come down to the gate to be milked, the milk is put in creamery cans and collected. Martha's hens peck at the seed, roost for the night and lay their eggs. The pan is taken down early in the mornings, put back on its hook and taken down again. And the boys fight as always over what is and isn't theirs.

Sometimes, sitting in the wood with his flask and sandwiches, Deegan regrets what happened with the dog but most of the time it doesn't cross his mind. The consequences, not their origin, strain him most for his wife no longer speaks to him, no longer sleeps at his side.

Sometimes Martha sees herself back in that morning in the wood, throwing stones at Judge. His tail is between his legs and he is running away. He is looking back and she is feeling sorry but she knows she is doing the right thing. So much of her life has revolved around things that never happened. She grills cheese on toast but the girl won't have it. Martha sits on her bed and tries to convince her that she should get another dog, a little pup who can be the girl's own, a dog that she can love.

"We can look at the paper. There's a litter for sale outside Shillelagh. Jim Mullins has them. You'd love a."

"What would you know about love?"

This strikes her sore. "I do know about love," Martha insists.

"You don't even love Daddy. All ye care about is money."

One evening when Deegan is crossing the hill, more smoke than usual is rising. Deegan sees it. Somehow he had almost suspected it. In the yard, eleven cars are parked. He recognises every one. He has never known so many neighbours to come in the one evening, nor any to come so early. Davis is here, and Redmond. And Mrs. Duffy, the "Evening Herald". The maroon hatchback belongs to the priest.

When Deegan steps over the threshold, a massive fire is throwing waves of heat across the kitchen floor. Deegan, feeling fragile in his old clothes, bids them all good evening and takes his hat off.

"Ah, there's the man himself!"

"No man like the working man!"

"Have you enough space to get in there for your bit of dinner, Victor?"

"We're intruding on ya."

"Not at all, sure weren't ye asked?" says Martha.

She puts a warm plate down in front of him. There's a well done sirloin, roast potatoes, onions, mushrooms. A bowl of stewed apples is brimming with custard. Deegan sits in to his dinner, blesses himself, picks up the knife and fork. He doesn't know how to eat and be hospitable at the same time. There is no sign of the children. His wife is handing round the stout, the Powers, smiling for the neighbours.

"Drink up!" she says. "There's plenty. Wasn't it awful about that young Morrissey chap?" Her voice is strange. Her voice is not the one she uses.

The neighbours sit there chatting, talking about the budget, the swallows and the petrol strike. They are warming up, ripe for an evening's entertainment. A little gossip begins to leak into the conversation. Redmond starts it, says he went up to the Whelan sisters for the lend of a scythe after he broke the handle on his own and caught them eating off the one plate. "Dip to your own side, Betty!" he mimics. There is a little laughter and, in the laughter, a little menace.

The shopkeeper tells them how Dan Farrell came down and ate five choc ices, standing up. "Five choc ices! Wouldn't he have a nice stool? And then, when he'd slathered the last, he tells me to put them on the book!"

Martha smiles. She seems genuinely amused. She reaches for a cloth, takes tarts and queen cakes out of the oven. The pastry is golden, the buns have risen.

"Would ya look at this?" Mrs. Duffy says. "They'd win prizes at the show. And there was me thinking you didn't bake."

Martha stacks them high on Deegan's best serving plates and hands them round. She's acting, Deegan realises. She's acting well. Who would believe this didn't happen every day? The cows stand bawling at the gate to be let in but Deegan cannot move. Everything in his body tells him to get up but his curiosity is stronger than his common sense. He crosses his legs and accidentally kicks the boy who is sitting, attentive, in Judge's old bed.

"Sorry," he says.

At the sound of his voice the neighbours turn, remembering he is there.

Davis says he walked all the way to Shillelagh but by the time he got there one of his feet got terrible sore. He took his boot off and there, inside, was a big spoon.

"Not a small spoon but a big spoon!"

"You're joking!" Sheila Roche says. It's what she always says after hearing something she doesn't believe.

Tom Kelly says he's going to do away with the milking parlour, that there is no money in milking any more. "The farmer's days are numbered," he says, and shakes his head. "Sure isn't milk the same price now as it was ten year ago?"

That subject keeps them going for a while but some time later the subject of farming dwindles and comes to a halt. A few balls of speech are kicked out into the dwindling conversation but nothing catches; they roll off into silence. The neighbours get more drink and begin to look at Martha. They turn quiet. Someone coughs. Davis crosses his legs. Because the priest is there, the request is left to him:

I've heard you're a great woman for a story, Mrs. Deegan," he says. I've never had the pleasure."

"Ah now, Father, I'm not at all," says Martha.

"Aye. Spin us a yarn there, Martha!"

"God be good, nobody can tell them like her."

"All she needs is a bit of coaxing."

"Ah, I'll not." Martha swallows what's left in her glass. Tonight, she needs a drink. Her mother always said that her father's people had tinker's blood and that this tinker's blood would take them to the road. More than once she has been mistaken for a tinker. She settles down, knowing the story she'll tell. It is only a matter of deciding where, exactly, she should start.

"Ah, you've heard them all before."

"If you don't tell us a yarn, we'll all go home!" Breslin shouts.

"That's no way to persuade the woman," says the priest.

Martha concentrates on the room. She has a way about her that is sometimes frightening. She looks at her feet and concentrates. Before she can begin she must find the scent; every story has its own, particular scent. She settles on the roses.

"Well, maybe I could tell ye this one."

Deegan's wife pushes her hair back and wets her lips.

"Now we're in for it!" Davis rubs his hands.

She waits again until the room turns quiet. She has no idea what she will say but the story is there; all she has to do is rake it up and find the words.

"There was this woman one time who got a live in job in a guest house by the sea." Martha says. "She wasn't from there. She was a Bray woman who had gone down south to look for work. The house she worked in was a bright, new bungalow much like the ones you see down in Courtown. Nothing fancy but a clean and tidy place. Mona was a big, fair skinned woman. She was tall and pale, freckled. People sometimes mistook her for a tinker but, despite what people thought, she hadn't a drop of tinker's blood. She was a postman's only daughter and one of the things she could do well was dance. That woman could swing on a thrupenny bit and not step on the hare's ear."

"That's a lovely type of woman," Breslin says quietly, remembering something of his own.

"In any case, she went off this one night to a dance. It being the summertime, there was a great big crowd in the ballroom. She wasn't really looking for a man but this night the same farmer kept asking her out to dance. He was a wiry fellow with a big red beard but he was light on his feet. He led her across the floorboards same as a cat's tongue moves along a saucer of cream. They talked but the farmer could talk about nothing only the place he owned. All the acres, the trees along the lane, how fine the house was. He talked about the new milking parlour and the orchard and the big high ceilings. For the want of a better name, I'll call him Nowlan.

"Now Nowlan asked the woman if she'd meet him again and she said no but Nowlan wasn't the type of man to take no for an answer. Being the eldest boy, he was used to getting his own way. He followed the woman here, there and yon. One time she looked up from eating her bit of dinner and there he was, looking in at her through the window. He hounded the woman and the woman gave in. In the end it was easier to court him than to not court him, if you know what I mean. But he was good in his own way, would buy her cups of tea and scones, would never let her put her own hand in her pocket. And, always, they danced.

"They danced the foxtrots and the half sets and the waltzes same as they were reared on the same floor but in her heart Mona didn't really take to him. He smelled strange, like pears that are near rotten. His sweat was heavy and sweet. Really, he was past his prime. Everything was all right when they were dancing but as soon as the band stopped and he went to put his lips on hers, the woman knew the match wasn't right. But like every woman, she wanted something of her own. She thought about living in the place Nowlan had described. She could see herself out under the trees sitting on a bench in the shade, reading the newspaper of a Sunday after Mass. She could see a child there too, playing in the background, banging two lids the way children do.

"One night Nowlan asked her if she'd marry him. "Would you think of marrying me?" He said it with his back to the light so she couldn't see him properly. They were close to the sea. Mona could hear the waves hitting the strand and the children screaming. It was the end of summer. The woman didn't really want to marry him but she wasn't getting any younger and knew, if she refused, that his offer might be the last."

"Now we're getting down to it." says Redmond.

"Well, to make a long story short."

"Ah, what hurry is on us?" says the priest. "If it's long don't make it short."

"Isn't that the very opposite of what we say about your sermons?" Davis is getting full. He has taken over the whiskey bottle, giving himself the best measures while it lasts.

The priest lifts a shoulder, lets it fall.

"My stories aren't a patch on your sermons, Father." Martha says and looks across at Deegan. Her husband's arms are frozen across his chest. She sees the boy under the table but it's too late to back down now. She remembers the girl and the report she got from the school and carries on.

"Well, this woman, Mona, accepted his proposal. She married this man and went off to live on the farm. She thought by all his talk that the place would be a mansion so she got a terrible shock when she walked in through the door. The only thing you could say about that auld house was it wasn't damp. Nowlan had a herd of cows, all right, and a milking parlour but the furniture was riddled with woodworm and there was crows nesting in the chimneys. She made every attempt to clean the place but when she found two pairs of dentures in with the spoons, she gave up. On her wedding night she felt springs coming up like mortal sins through the mattress. And wasn't it all she could do some days not to cry.

"Nowlan spent every day and half the nights in the fields. You see, as soon as he'd won her, he paid her little or no attention. Most of the time he was gone. Where he went, Mona didn't always know. It wasn't that she thought he'd be off with other women. She'd seen him look at other women during Mass but she knew he'd never lay his hand on anyone, only herself. If he laid his hand on another woman, the neighbours would find out. It would be common knowledge and Nowlan, above all things, feared the neighbours.

"Every evening he'd come in complaining of the hunger, looking for his dinner. Mona didn't care much for food or the niceties of it but always she had a few spuds with a steak or a stew. A few years passed in that place and still there was no sign of a child. The neighbours began to wonder. They began to talk. A few comments were passed, a few dirty remarks. One man, a shopkeeper, asked her where they met and when she told him, he said, "Didn't you go far enough for a rig?" Some began to feel sorry for Nowlan. And Nowlan, knowing what people were saying, began to feel

sorry for himself because saving your presence, Father he thought, like many a man who hasn't a babby, that his seed was falling on bad ground. Naturally, he blamed his wife for, no matter how many times they."

"I think there must be nothing worse then being married and not being able to have a child," says Mrs. Duffy. I've often thought, since I had me own, that I am blessed."

"And aren't you?" says Sheila. "Sure haven't you the finest children that ever walked through the chapel gates?"

"Ah, now, I wasn't saying that."

"Tis the truth all the same."

"Shut up, will ye?" says Davis. "Why won't yez all shut up and let the woman tell it? I've been waiting for this one."

"Sure wasn't I only chipping in?" says Mrs. Duffy.

"Isn't that what it's all about?" says Martha.

Martha looks again at Deegan. His eyes are asking her to stop. She puts her head down and waits for the silence to rise again so she can go on. Now she is determined. She thought she'd tell it in disguise and make the disguise as thick as possible. Now she isn't sure.

"Where was I?"

"I wouldn't blame you for not knowing where you were," says the priest.

"Oh, aye," says Martha, who knows exactly where she is. "They were married. They were married six years with no sign of a babby and then one day when Mona was on her own who comes up the front door with rosebushes only a stranger. Mona had never before laid eyes on him, didn't think he looked like anybody in that parish. Nowlan was away that day buying seed in the co-op and whenever he went to the co-op he never came back in a hurry. Mona had grown a little thinner by now. There, at the front door, stood this salesman."

"Oh, what was he selling?" Davis whispers.

"Shut up, Davis, will ya?"

Martha pauses and lets her anger rise. They all sense it. Mrs. Duffy gives her a look of sympathy but Martha isn't interested in sympathy any more.

"Roses!" she almost shouts it. "He was selling roses. "Would you be interested in roses?" he asked her. He was a good looking fellow, tall and clean shaven. He didn't have that dirty beard Nowlan had and Mona was able to get a good look at his chin. She wanted to reach up and touch his chin but he was a good many years younger than herself."

"A mere child!"

"She was robbing the cradle!"

"In the back of his van this stranger had all kinds of rose bushes and fruit trees, everything under the sun. She bought every last one of his rosebushes and took him inside for the tea. As she was scalding the pot, he asked if she was married.

"I am but my husband is gone off to get seed."

"Has he no seed of his own?" the salesman asked. He was talking about potatoes, but then the woman looked at him.

"No," she said honestly. "He has none of his own."

"The way she said it made the salesman nervous. He got up and went over to the window. He said her hydrangea was the bluest he had ever seen. He went out and touched the bloom. It was the sun, shining on the man touching the hydrangea that attracted the woman. When she went near him, her hand touched his throat and then his thumb came up and stroked her lips. His hands were soft compared to Nolan's.

"Your eyes are the colour of wet sand," he told her."

Under the table the boy is concentrating on his mother's words. This is a different kind of story. This story is what really happened for he remembers the man, and the hydrangea. And then there are those things his sister taught him at Christmas, the things she read in the biology book. He wants his mother to go on, to finish it. He likes the people in the kitchen. He wishes they could be this happy all the time.

"The woman planted the rosebushes outside the hall door." Martha continues. "Late that night when Nowlan came home he called her a fool for spending all his good money. "What kind of a woman spends all the money on flowers?" Not only that, but he accused her of never making him a decent bit of dinner. "Spuds and cabbage is no dinner for a working man."

"It's spoiled, he was!"

Deegan cannot stand it any more. There are some things he doesn't need to hear. She will bring in the dog, the girl. God only knows where she will stop. The neighbours are listening in a way they have never listened, as though it is the only story Martha has ever told. He stands up. As soon as he stands, the neighbours turn to look at him.

"I can't listen to them poor cows bawling any longer," he says. "You'll have to excuse me."

The neighbours push their chairs out of his way. The wooden legs screech on the floor as they let him through. When he reaches the door he doesn't know where he gets the strength to open the latch. Outside, he manages to close it behind him. He leans against the wall and does his best not to listen. In his heart he has always known the girl was not his own. She was too strange and lovely to be his.

He listens for a while to Martha's voice, trying not to hear the words. But he cannot help himself, he wants to hear the details. He strains to catch the words. Something about the way it's told tells him Martha knows he's listening. Finally, he hears his son, the simpleton, shout, "Mammy had a boyfriend!"

Deegan's feet carry him down the yard, his hand rises to switch on lights and somehow, one by one, he gets the cows into their stalls, finds the clusters, and milks them. He is not taking his time; neither does he hurry. He is thorough, that is all. As he is finishing his work, the neighbours come out. They are leaving, coming through his front door. He had other ambitions for his front door but they don't seem to matter now. He waves to a few and they wave back but not one of them calls out.

Deegan stays for a long time in the milking parlour. He scrubs the aisles with the yard brush, rinses dung off the stalls. He puts fresh hay into the troughs, replaces a loose link on a chain. For a long time he has been meaning to do this.

Finally, he goes in. It is his house, after all. Martha hasn't gone to bed. She is still there, sitting at the fire. All around her are the vacant chairs, the empty glasses. He looks under the table but the boy is no longer there.

"Are you happy now? he says.

"After twenty years of marriage, you're finally asking."

"Was that all you wanted?"

Martha raises a glass of whiskey and stares at her husband.

"Happy birthday, Victor," she says. "Many happy returns."

A lid of silence comes down on the Deegan household. Now that so much has been said there is nothing left to say. The neighbours stay away these times. Deegan gives up going to mass; he no longer sees the point in going. He works later, eats, milks the cows and throws money on the table every Thursday.

Martha doesn't cook a breakfast any more but Deegan doesn't care. The girl goes back to school and although she gets on well, she isn't the same. There's no more talk of being the captain of a ship, of marrying the Taoiseach. The simpleton is the only one who's happy. He has turned the whole parlour into a farm. His sheds are bedded, his combine parked against the skirting board. The fields have completely taken up the floor. At the edges of his land, the nylon curtains come down like sheets of rain.

One night when he is herding his cattle, the boy hears something outside the window. It's the wind nudging the rosebushes. Or maybe it is a mouse. The boy gets up and wonders if he would be able to kill it. He has twice seen his father break a rat's back with a shovel. They are easy to kill. He stands holding the poker and goes quietly as he can towards the door and listens. He can hear the claws. When he opens the door, a dog is standing there, a stray.

Something about him suggests something else. The boy strokes him, feels the bones under the dirty coat. The dog is shivering.

"Come in to the fire," he says, with a sweep of his hand. That's what his mother said to the stranger and the stranger followed her. Now the stray follows him, down the steps and on into his home. The boy is the man of the house now. He closes the door and tries to remember how to light a fire. It cannot be hard. Hasn't he built a whole farm by himself? He takes newspapers out of the scuttle and twists them. His sister taught him how to do this. He places the papers on the hearth of his house, where the carpet meets the plywood. It takes a long time but finally he manages to strike one of the matches.

"Damp," he says. "They're damp."

The paper oaks catch fire and the boy piles high the hedges.

"It's all right," he says to the dog. "Come up to the fire and warm yourself."

Intrigued, the boy watches the flames. They turn the paper black and cross into the hay barn, set fire to his roof and spread on up through the nylon sheets of rain. This is the loveliest thing he has built. He opens the door to let the draught blow it up the chimney. Some small part of the boy is upset yet he stands back, and laughs.

He looks around but the dog is gone up the stairs. When he jumps on the bed he lands on Martha.

"Judge," the girl says. "Judge."

There is the smell of smoke coming up the stairs. Martha gets it too. Deegan is in the far room. He is such a heavy sleeper.

"Daddy!" the girl shouts.

Smoke is crawling through the rooms, filling up the house. The boy is standing with the doors open watching the blue flames cross the ceiling boards, intrigued. Martha, in her nightdress, drags him out. Deegan doesn't want to get up. Through sleep he looks at the dog. For some reason he is glad to see him back. He turns over and tries to sleep again. An age, it seems, passes before he will admit that the house is on fire and he summons the courage to get down the stairs.

When they are all out they can do nothing more than stand staring at the house. Aghowle is in flames. Deegan breaks the parlour window to throw water on the fire but when the glass is broken, the flames leap out and lick the eaves. Deegan's legs don't work. He looks at the children. The boy is all right. The girl has her arms around the dog. There is a minute during which Deegan still believes he can save his home. The minute passes. The word insurance goes through his head. He sees himself standing out on the road but that, too, passes. Deegan, in his bare feet, goes over to his wife. There are no tears.

"Are you sorry now?" he says.

"Sorry for what?"

"Are you sorry now you strayed?"

He looks at her and it dawns on him that she isn't the slightest bit sorry. She shakes her head.

"I'm sorry you took it out on the girl," she says. "That's all."

"I didn't know what I was doing." It's the first admission he's ever made. If he starts down that road there might be no end to it. Even in his surest moments Deegan never really believed there would be an end to anything. They stand there until the heat becomes too strong and they have to back away.

They must now turn their backs on Aghowle. To some the lane has never seemed so short. To others it is otherwise. But never has the lane been so bright: sparks and ash are flying through the air. It looks as though the oaks, too, could catch fire. The cows have come down to the fence to watch, to warm themselves. They are ghastly figures and yet they seem half comic in the firelight.

Martha holds on to her daughter's hand. She thinks of her money, the salesman and all those obsolete red roses. The girl has never known such happiness; Judge is back, that's all she cares, for now. It hasn't yet occurred to her that she's the one who taught her brother how to light a fire. The guilt of that will surface later. Deegan is numb and yet he feels lighter than before. The drudgery of the past is gone and the new work has not yet started. In the lane, the puddles are reflecting fire, shining bright as silver. Deegan grasps at thoughts: of having work, that it's just a house, that they are alive.

It is hardest for the boy whose farm is gone. All his work, through his own fault, is wasted. Nonetheless he is intrigued. He looks back at his creation. It is the biggest fire anyone has ever built. At the foot of the lane the neighbours are gathering, coming on slowly towards them. Now they are closer, offering beds for the night.

"Who cares?" he keeps whispering as he goes along. "Who cares?"