

26th June, 1982

You needed to pee but you didn't want your da to stop.

You jammed your knees together in anticipation of the next bump. They walloped the car like big concrete waves on these coast roads. Your da said that drumlins made the bumps and when you asked him what drumlins were he explained that they were Irish goblins.

Another concrete wave slipped under the windscreen and *whumph*, your tuppence tickled.

'Boun-seeeeeeeeeeeee!' you screamed.

'These roads are getting worse,' your mammy said.

But you knew they just got better. She probably got a bouncy too because girls have tuppences and your mammy was a girl. You dug your hands into your skirt pockets to hold your pee in.

'How far now, Da?'

'Not long now, Roach.'

'Her name's Roisin,' said your mammy. 'We

christened her Roisin Mary Jocepta McKay and that's how she'll be referred to.'

Your mammy never called you Roach. That was just between you and your da.

'OK then. Would you like another bouncy, Roisin Mary Jocepta Toyota Sultana Banana Havana Anaglypta McKay?'

'Aye Da,' you laughed.

'Roisin, would you stop bending your father's ears when his eyes are on the road.'

'Ach leave the wee girl alone, Dympna.'

You liked it when your da took your side. He pointed out the window: 'Look. See what's up ahead, Petal?'

And it was great when he called you Petal. He never called your three big brothers Petal. He sometimes called them the Three Stooges but you didn't know what that meant.

You rested your chin on the hot grey plastic of the passenger seat. It sort of burned so you sat forward and nuzzled into your mammy's shoulder. Her jumper tickled. She wore an identical jumper to the one she'd knitted for your fifth birthday, only bigger. Your mammy could make wool go far.

'Well, do you see it, Petal?'

'It's a archway,' you offered.

'An archway,' said your mammy. She was always correcting you like that.

You scratched your chin. The rocky arch spilled out of the mountain to your left and fell over the road in front of you like a big hooked finger. Northern Ireland had a hooked finger on the map. This must be it, you thought. A shadow ripped through the car as you sped

under its bony knuckle and on along the Antrim coast.

‘Who built the archway, Da?’

Your da said that the sea built it and you laughed because he surely meant the man in the sea, with the coral crown and the big fork. The man in the sea was tall and silvery-green and you had seen him fight Sinbad on telly at Christmas.

The road became less bumpy but you could still hear the tent poles clanking on the roof rack. You had already bagsied the foot-pump and appointed yourself to the position of Chief Lilo Filler. Your tongue tensed as you imagined licking the nozzle and the short sharp shot of air if you jumped on the pump with both feet. The air would taste of ground sheets, packet bacon and gas.

You went camping every summer. You camped at the best place in the world: Gaeltacht. The people that lived in Gaeltacht spoke Irish and you had to pretend you understood them, even when you couldn’t. It didn’t matter anyway because you got to do Irish dancing in your new dress that your mammy had made. Everybody understood Irish dancing, so that was OK. Your brothers stayed back on the farm because your da said they could barely speak English, never mind Irish.

‘And what’s that, Roach?’ Your da was doing his pointing thing again.

‘It’s a horsey.’

‘No, it’s not a horsey,’ said your ma.

Well it had a long nose and a mane and you were sure your mammy was mad.

‘*Ta se an capall,*’ she said. ‘Say it Roisin, *an capall.*’

‘A crapper.’

Your da nearly burst himself laughing and you knew

you'd said the Irish all wrong. Just wait till I show him my dancing, you thought, angry with yourself.

'Ah Jeez, that's priceless that is. *A crapper*. She's her daddy's girl, aren't you Roach?'

'Daddy, sing the non-iron song.'

They had been playing the non-iron song all day on the car radio. That was because last night, Northern Ireland had beaten Spain at football to win the World Cup. Your da had allowed you to stay up and watch it.

'OK love, the non-iron song it is.'

Your da slapped the steering wheel as he sang: 'When yer man gets the ball, Non Iron beat them all -'

'Michael, stop acting the goat and keep your hands on the wheel. Any more of that carry-on and we'll be fish food.'

Your mammy was afraid that the car could easily topple off the edge of Northern Ireland, down through the circling gulls and into the sea.

You weren't scared. You would have been had you looked down to your right. The car skirted another bend on the steep coast road. You pressed your lips to the window and puffed out your cheeks. The glass tasted of coins. The car turned inland, where the rocks became hedges and the sea, fields.

You slid along the plastic seat and a sunny patch scalded your legs. That was your mammy's fault. She had told you to wear a skirt because it was hot and trousers would only bring on your heat rash. Sweat creased the backs of your knees. Your da was sweating too, but that was OK because when Georgie Best Superstar was in your toilet he had dark red sweat patches under his arms. It meant you were cool. Your

mammy didn't like your da having a picture of Georgie Best in her toilet. She took it down and replaced it with a picture of the baby Jesus. Your da said the Son of God didn't look as good as his father and put 'Our Lord Georgie' back up again.

'How far now Da?' You felt tired. Your eyes were going.

'Half as far as the last time you asked.'

'How far was it the last time I asked?'

'Twice as far as it is now.'

'You're dead clever, Da. Mammy, isn't Da clever?'

'Your father isn't dead anything, darling, but he will be if he keeps driving like an eejit.'

'Sure I must be clever, Roach. I married your mammy, didn't I.'

Your da put his hand on your mammy's knee. She kept her eyes on her map.

Your da *was* dead clever. He could make his thumb come apart and put it back together again. He could play tunes on a blade of grass, any tune, just by blowing on it. If you asked him how he did it, he would grab you and rub his beard in your face. Your cheeks would sting but it would be a good sting. It was worse when he was just starting a beard. Your mammy didn't like him with a beard. She said it made his head look upside down. That was because your da was bald. She said he was bald because of something called *hairheadity* and this meant that your brothers would go bald too.

You examined his head, with its eyes on the road and its ears bent. It looked like a hunk of Coleraine Cheddar, beading in the heat.

You peeled your legs off the seat and turned round to

look out the back window, balancing on your knees. This way you could see where you'd been. The parched road whizzed out from under you and split the fields in two. Cows just stood, dumb and baking in the sun. That's why some meat you buy is ready-cooked, you thought.

Sunlight splintered off the chrome window frame onto the tartan rug that was draped across the boot. You were worried the rug might catch fire, like a beetle under a magnifying glass. Your brothers had taught you how to do that. They said that if you sunbathed wearing your glasses, your eyelashes would catch fire.

Your brothers were dirty wee liars.

The air *whumphed* in through the small windows either side of you. It sucked at your ears and your hair did an Irish dance. You weren't getting any cooler. You could fry an egg in here, you thought, but you couldn't fry eggs. You once made your ma a wee cuppa tea with hot water and milk. Just hot water and milk. Well, you were only five, how were you to know?

'Hold on tight Roach, here comes another bump. Bounsee—'

At first you just felt your knees buckle a little. Then your head whacked against one of the small windows and your left ear filled up with something very warm. That's the biggest bouncy ever, you thought, as the car flipped upside down and your da's severed head landed on the tartan rug.

Like when you sometimes woke up in the tent to find that your lilo had gone down during the night. That's

how you felt with your cheek biting on the tarmac. Dust was hanging in your nostrils. Your pants and legs were soaking wet.

The car wasn't car-shaped any more. It was on its side. That's what bombs did to Ulsterbuses on UTV, you thought.

You managed to stand upright. You were almost as tall as the car was wide. The door above your head was heavier this way, but somehow you managed to push it open. You stood a leg on your mammy's shoulder. Even though she was dead, she gave you a foot-up and you climbed out into the sunshine. Your other leg wasn't working too well.

You lay down on the side of the car. It was difficult to get comfortable. The petrol cap was sticking into your back. You felt like the princess who slept on the pea.

You closed your eyes, but the horror wouldn't go away. The explosion replayed itself on the back of your eyelids in frightening technicolor. You opened them again and let the sun boil the salt from your tears.

The car was hot. You could smell petrol. It had soaked into your skirt. You knew you could catch fire. You thought of those beetles again, the ones under your magnifying glass. You knew you had to move, but it was a big drop down to the road. You turned onto your tummy and edged your legs over the side of the car. You held onto the rear wheel and slowly lowered your hips, then your chest, until you were hanging and kicking and calling for your da to scoop you up in his big hairy arms. You let go. But he wasn't there to catch you.

Your legs gave way and the road took the skin from

your knees. You didn't have time to cry. You had to get away from the car.

You saw a dead horse by the side of the road and you decided to go over and lie against it instead. The wee girl beside it didn't mind. She was dead too.