

Chris Kate, just leave –

Kate You walked from the quarry to Lough Anna?

Rose Yes.

Kate Did you meet somebody there?

Rose Yes.

Kate Had you arranged to meet somebody there?

Rose I had arranged to meet Danny Bradley there, Kate. He brought me out in his father's blue boat. *(to Maggie)* I don't want anything to eat, Maggie. I brought a bottle of milk and a packet of chocolate biscuits with me and we had a picnic on the lake. *(to Agnes)* Then the two of us went up through the back hills. He showed me what was left of the Lughnasa fires. A few of them are still burning away up there. *(to Kate)* We passed young Sweeney's house – you know, the boy who got burned, the boy you said was dying. Well, he's on the mend, Danny says. His legs will be scarred but he'll be all right. *(to all)* It's a very peaceful place up there. There was nobody there but Danny and me. *(to Agnes)* He calls me his Rosebud, Aggie. I told you that before, didn't I? *(to all)* Then he walked me down as far as the workhouse gate and I came on home by myself. *(to Kate)* And that's all I'm going to tell you. *(to all)* That's all any of you are going to hear.

*She exits, her shoes in one hand, the poppy in the other.
Michael enters.*

Kate What has happened to this house? Mother of God, will we ever be able to lift our heads ever again . . . ?

Pause.

Michael The following night Vera McLaughlin arrived and explained to Agnes and Rose why she couldn't buy their hand-knitted gloves any more. Most of her home

knitters were already working in the new factory and she advised Agnes and Rose to apply immediately. The Industrial Revolution had finally caught up with Ballybeg.

They didn't apply, even though they had no other means of making a living, and they never discussed their situation with their sisters. Perhaps Agnes made the decision for both of them because she knew Rose wouldn't have got work there anyway. Or perhaps, as Kate believed, because Agnes was too notionate to work in a factory. Or perhaps the two of them just wanted . . . away.

Anyhow, on my first day back at school, when we came into the kitchen for breakfast, there was a note propped up against the milk jug: 'We are gone for good. This is best for all. Do not try to find us.' It was written in Agnes's resolute hand.

Of course they did try to find them. So did the police. So did our neighbours who had a huge network of relatives all over England and America. But they had vanished without trace. And by the time I tracked them down – twenty-five years later, in London – Agnes was dead and Rose was dying in a hospice for the destitute in Southwark.

The scraps of information I gathered about their lives during those missing years were too sparse to be coherent. They had moved about a lot. They had worked as cleaning women in public toilets, in factories, in the Underground. Then, when Rose could no longer get work, Agnes tried to support them both – but couldn't. From then on, I gathered, they gave up. They took to drink; slept in parks, in doorways, on the Thames Embankment. Then Agnes died of exposure. And two days after I found Rose in that grim hospice – she didn't recognize me, of course – she died in her sleep.

Father Jack's health improved quickly and he soon recovered his full vocabulary and all his old bounce and