

And about three weeks before we got that wireless, my mother's brother, my Uncle Jack, came home from Africa for the first time ever. For twenty-five years he had worked in a leper colony there, in a remote village called Ryanga in Uganda. The only time he ever left that village was for about six months during World War One when he was chaplain to the British army in East Africa. Then back to that grim hospice where he worked without a break for a further eighteen years. And now in his early fifties and in bad health he had come home to Ballybeg – as it turned out – to die.

And when I cast my mind back to that summer of 1936, these two memories – of our first wireless and of Father Jack's return – are always linked. So that when I recall my first shock at Jack's appearance, shrunken and jaundiced with malaria, at the same time I remember my first delight, indeed my awe, at the sheer magic of that radio. And when I remember the kitchen throbbing with the beat of Irish dance music beamed to us all the way from Athlone, and my mother and her sisters suddenly catching hands and dancing a spontaneous step-dance and laughing – screaming! – like excited schoolgirls, at the same time I see that forlorn figure of Father Jack shuffling from room to room as if he were searching for something but couldn't remember what. And even though I was only a child of seven at the time I know I had a sense of unease, some awareness of a widening breach between what seemed to be and what was, of things changing too quickly before my eyes, of becoming what they ought not to be. That may have been because Uncle Jack hadn't turned out at all like the resplendent figure in my head. Or maybe because I had witnessed Marconi's voodoo derange those kind, sensible women and transform them into shrieking strangers. Or maybe it was because during those Lughnasa weeks of 1936 we were visited on two occasions by my father, Gerry Evans, and for the first time in my life I had a chance to observe him.

*The lighting changes. The kitchen and garden are now lit as for a warm summer afternoon.*

*Michael, Kate, Gerry and Father Jack go off. The others busy themselves with their tasks. Maggie makes a mash for hens. Agnes knits gloves. Rose carries a basket of turf into the kitchen and empties it into the large box beside the range. Chris irons at the kitchen table. They all work in silence. Then Chris stops ironing, goes to the tiny mirror on the wall and scrutinizes her face.*

Chris When are we going to get a decent mirror to see ourselves in?

Maggie You can see enough to do you.

Chris I'm going to throw this aul cracked thing out.

Maggie Indeed you're not, Chrissie. I'm the one that broke it and the only way to avoid seven years' bad luck is to keep on using it.

Chris You can see nothing in it.

Agnes Except more and more wrinkles.

Chris D'you know what I think I might do? I think I just might start wearing lipstick.

Agnes Do you hear this, Maggie?

Maggie Steady on, girl. Today it's lipstick; tomorrow it's the gin bottle.

Chris I think I just might.

Agnes As long as Kate's not around. 'Do you want to make a pagan of yourself?'

*Chris puts her face up close to the mirror and feels it.*

Chris Far too pale. And the aul mousey hair. Needs a bit of colour.