

Like A Tree Cut Back

Like A Tree Cut Back

Part History • Part Memoir • Part Meditation

Michael McCarthy

smith|doorstop

the poetry business

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Contents

xi *Preface*

Part One – Rerahanagh: Growing up Among Ferns

3	The Accident
7	The Bedroom
13	The Sycamore Tree
16	The Miracle
20	Going to Mass
24	Christmas
29	School
33	School Continued
37	First Holy Communion
40	More Tales from School
43	The Geese
47	Rabbits and Other Animals
50	The Master
53	Killing the Pig
57	The Thrashing
61	The Horses
65	The Steamroller
68	Cutting the Hay
70	Getting Older

Part Two – Beyond Childhood

75	Farna (1958–1963)
79	Carlow College (1963–1969)
83	Killeshin Churchyard
84	The Morning Bobby Kennedy Died
86	7th June 1969

Part Three – A Chink of Light

- 91 James Keeffe (1702–1787)
93 Carlow College
95 John Joseph Therry (1790–1864)
 Massacre at Carlow
 Student Report
 The Janus
 Captain Mowatt
 The Voyage
 Governor Macquarie to the Rev. John Joseph Therry
 Crossing the River
 John Therry to Governor Darling (I)
 Prison Officer William Kelly to John Therry
 John Therry to Governor Darling (II)
 Governor Darling to Colonial Secretary Earl Bathurst
 Prison Officer to John Therry
 Samuel Chipp, Prisoner, to John Therry
 Prisoner John Wall to John Therry
 Prisoner Charles Hunt to John Therry
 John Therry to Colonial Secretary Alexander Mc Leay
 Alexander Mc Leay to Rev. Mr John Joseph Therry
 Parramatta
 John Therry to Governor Darling (III)
 John Therry to Governor Darling (IV)
125 The Apostle of Australia

Part Four – A Tree Cut Back

- 131 The Church in the World
133 A Change of Status for Carlow College, 1994
135 Poet-in-Residence (September–December 2017)
135 Monica

138	Passports
139	Moriarty Hall
140	Theology
141	Custody of the Eyes
142	The Handball Alley
143	Another Country
145	Into the Future

Part Five – My Journey of Conversion

149	Intimations
151	Transfiguration
156	The Gift
161	In Memoriam

PREFACE

*L*ike *A Tree Cut Back* combines two biographies in one: it interweaves the life of Michael McCarthy and the history of Carlow College, St Patrick's, in Ireland. The College motto, *rescissa vegetior assurgit* – 'that which is cut back burgeons forth more abundantly' – encapsulates essential features of both.

The book opens with 'The Accident' that cut short the young life of Michael's brother, James, leaving an indelible mark on the lives of his family members. Overshadowing Michael's early years in 1950s Ireland, it is also the tragedy that renders sweeter and all the more delightful the innocent pleasures of rural childhood, a 'Growing up Among Ferns'. James's death remains a backdrop in 'Beyond Childhood', through the triumphs, trials and tomfoolery of Michael's young adulthood and his studies at Carlow College. Later on, after Michael has been ordained a Catholic priest, the childhood trauma continues to make its presence felt, manifesting itself in a sense of inferiority and deep-rooted anxiety offset only by acute powers of perception and an eloquent humour that sets him apart from the rest. In 1990s Chicago, Michael finally turns to confront the unspent grief of the little boy he was. He finds, as he does so, a gift for poetry and new access to the healing power of the written word.

That gift finds full expression in the poems of his four previously published collections, written after the Chicago sojourn, some of which are reproduced here. We are grateful to Bradshaw Books for permission to republish ‘The Gift’, from *Bird’s Nests and Other Poems* (2003); to the *Queen’s Quarterly: A Canadian Review*, for ‘The Handball Alley’ (2018); to Smith|Doorstop Books for ‘The Morning Bobby Kennedy Died’ and ‘Transfiguration’ from *At the Races* (2009); and to the same press for ‘Monica’ and ‘In Memoriam’ from *The Healing Station* (2015). Michael puts his gift to new form in the autobiographical sections of this book, his first adventures in prose; and it burgeons forth abundantly in the two historical sections relating to Carlow College.

Before meeting his own history backwards, surrendering to the moment and embracing his younger self in ‘A Tree Cut Back’, Michael reflects on the two-hundred-year history of Carlow College in ‘A Chink of Light’. He merges historical materials archived in the College’s O’Keefe Library with new poems generated by the encounters and conversations that enriched the period he spent as poet-in-residence at his alma mater in 2017. Mining the biography of one of its first students, Fr John Joseph Therry, he orchestrates a chorus of voices that testify to the horrors of penal colonies in nineteenth-century Australia and Van Diemen’s Land. First published in Rev. Eris M. O’Brien’s book, *Life and Letters of Archpriest John Joseph Therry, Founder of the Catholic Church in Australia* (1922), Therry’s correspondence becomes the raw materials for ‘found poems’, as Michael calls them, which give voice to convicts and to others who sought, in the hours before death, the ‘consolation of Religion’. These poems bear witness, too, to the threat to authority posed by figures like Therry: they show colonial secretaries and governors conspiring against him and his support for the poor and downtrodden. Noteworthy, here, is the alignment not so much of Irish versus English or of Catholic versus Protestant in the penal colony as of powerless versus powerful. Noteworthy, too, is the absence of voices from those positioned even lower down that social scale, the ‘Aboriginal youth’, represented here only as Therry’s prospective charges or

as the ‘Black Native’ that one of the convicts confesses to having murdered. Offering a messier picture than we are perhaps used to seeing in our history books, ‘A Chink of Light’ brings to life the desperate struggles that pitted the nineteenth-century poor against the ruling classes and their administrators across the colonial globe.

Michael’s diagnosis with incurable pancreatic cancer in April 2018 threatened an untimely truncation of *Like A Tree Cut Back*. Fortunately, as he wrote in an unpublished letter to Fr Conn Ó Maoldomhnaigh, he was blessed in his last months of life, not only with ‘a calm spirit and a deep gratitude for the life I have been given’, but also with ‘a burst of creative energy’. He thought of this as the upside to a terminal diagnosis and wished for ‘the necessary time and the creative clarity’ to ‘pull it off’. Michael found the time: he rested his pen on a complete typescript on Friday, 8th July, just three days before he died. The creative clarity left little for those he asked to look after the project – Peter and Ann Sansom, Richard Scholar and me – to do. ‘My Journey of Conversion’, the last part of the book, offers an eloquent retrospective on the entire process of Michael’s turning to poetry and evolving spirituality, as well as on the book.

For the benefit of that PhD student of 2116 imagined in ‘In Memoriam’, who is studying Michael’s work among that of other ‘Forgotten Irish Poets’, we declare that we did make one change to the order of sections in his final draft. The July 2018 typescript opened with ‘A Chink of Light’, moving on to the current parts 1, 2, 5 and 4. We feel justified in re-ordering things both by the permission he gave us to ‘follow your literary instincts’ and by an email he wrote in May 2018 after a sleepless night in hospital. In a burst of that creative energy he had hoped for, he envisaged a new structure for his book: for reasons we hope will be clear, we have reverted to that. All other aspects of the text remain as Michael left them: his extraordinary testament to an ordinary life well lived.

Ita Mac Carthy

Durham and Reenroe, March 2020



Part One

RERAHANAGH
GROWING UP AMONG FERNS

THE ACCIDENT

It's eleven o'clock on Saturday morning. But I don't know this. The day and time are all the same to me because I'm only four.

Georgie Chambers is ploughing the big field at the cross. There is sudden commotion. My mother is shouting and she's running out of the house. Something is after happening above on the road. My brother Ando is running after my mother. I'm running after my sister Nora. She's heading for the house of our neighbours Danny and Mrs Mahony. I can't keep up with her. Suddenly she's not there.

I'm standing at the bend on the road at the top of the hill, and I can't see where she has gone. What I can see is the way the grass covers the ditch. And the stones coming through the grass. I can see each individual stone clearly. I can see each bit of grass. I wait a long time. There is no sign of my sister. Something has happened, but it must have happened somewhere else.

I'm in the garden in front of the house. I'm looking through the gap in the hedge. I see my father walking slowly. He is carrying my brother James in his arms. Another man, taller than my father,

is carrying my brother Tim. Tim is draped over the man's shoulders. The man and my father carry the two of them into the house.

I'm sitting on the settle in the kitchen with my brother Ando. Something is going on below in the parlour. We're not supposed to go down there. People keep coming from the parlour. They come through the kitchen, and out to the back kitchen and out the back door. My mother comes through with my uncle. My uncle has his arm around my mother's shoulder. My mother is crying. Then my uncle goes back into the parlour. He comes out again. This time he has his arm around my father's shoulder, and my father is crying.

My brother is counting people as they go past. Some of them are crying, and some of them are not crying. My mother is crying the most, then my father. My brother says he cried when he saw the cart turned upside down on the road. I didn't cry at all.

My sister Kathleen comes home from school and she is crying. Danny Mahony is there, and Mary Jerry Connie, and the doctor, and the priest. Then my godfather Jerome comes in a motor car. People are taking pillows and a rug to the motor car. Jerome and my father take Tim away in the motor car, and everything is very quiet.

Georgie Chambers and his son are standing near the water tank at the gable end of the house. Georgie Chambers says it is a sad day. The two of them walk away from the house. They are carrying ploughing tackle: a horse's collar and harness. The way they walk is what a sad day looks like.

My cousin Rosemary comes and my mother takes her upstairs. I follow them up. James is lying on the bed. He is not moving. He looks the same as a statue. I ask my mother why he looks like a statue. My mother says it is because he is in heaven. Rosemary starts to cry.

Mary Jerry Connie washes the blood out of the pillowcases. She cleans the house, dusting it and getting it ready for all the people coming. She washes the cups and saucers and the Holy Pictures. She is washing the statue of the Sacred Heart. I tell her: 'Don't tickle him neck.'

There are people and more people coming and coming. The house is full of people. There are many more people outside the house. Some of the people are in the shed where the cart with the broken shaft is. People are looking at the cart with the broken shaft. People are looking at the dents in the milk churns. People are telling each other what happened.

Everybody goes away and all the horse and carts go to the funeral. Mary Jerry Connie minds me and my brother.

Paddy and Liam come, and my father tells them for God's sake to take away the black mare. A man comes to fix the shaft of the cart. He puts steel bands around where it is broken. The churns can't be fixed. The dents will have to stay on them. The pillowcases are clean now, but you can see the marks where all the blood was.

People come to the house and say to my mother and father: 'I'm sorry for your troubles.' Whenever we say the rosary my father says we must pray for Tim in hospital, and poor James in heaven.

I hope Tim is having a nice time in hospital. I hope James is having a nice time in heaven. I think they should come home soon because everybody is lonesome. Everybody cries because they are lonesome. I am lonesome but I do not cry.

When we meet people in town, or after Mass, they come up to my mother and father and talk about poor James. They ask them how Tim is. My mother tells them he is in the Mercy Hospital. He has a fractured skull. The doctor says to be prepared for the worst.

After a long, long time my mother tells us that Tim is coming home from hospital.

My father has gone with Jerome in the motor car to bring him home. Everybody is very excited. When Tim arrives home he comes into the kitchen and everybody is laughing and crying, and fierce excited. I go all shy because I haven't seen him for such a long time. I run and hide in the corner beside the dresser. I cover my face with my hands.

Tim says he has brought me a present but I'll have to come and get it. I won't come because I'm too shy. I peep out from between my fingers. I see that he has Cadbury chocolate bars.

They are wrapped in purple and there is a big pile of them. I keep my face hidden in the corner, but in the end I stretch out my hands behind my back. Tim puts the chocolate bars into my hands and I run upstairs and begin eating them.

When Tim comes up to go to bed I hide my face under the clothes. I peep out now and then. I'm watching him, to see what he looks like. He pretends not to notice. After a while I get braver. And then I'm sitting up in the bed, looking across the room at him in the other bed. He begins talking and asking me questions. I start telling him the news, and about all the things that have been happening while he was in hospital.

Now when we meet people in town and they ask how Tim is doing, my mother and father say 'he is doing fine, thanks be to God'. Then they talk about 'the little boy'. They say they prayed for us. Sometimes they start crying. Sometimes my mother starts crying as well. Sometimes coming home from town in the trap my mother and father talk about poor James. Sometimes my mother starts crying again.

My brother Tim goes back to school. My father tells him to be very careful. He tells him to mind himself. Soon he is himself again. Soon he is riding horses again. My father is pleased to see him riding a horse. Seeing him on a horse frightens my mother.

My father and mother say James was an angel and that was why he went to heaven. Sometimes I wish he hadn't gone to heaven. And sometimes I wish he'd come home.

Sometimes I wonder if I went to heaven would they be lonesome after me like they are after James. They keep saying that James was a good boy. I'm getting tired of everybody being lonesome for James and no one being lonesome for me.

THE BEDROOM

I climb the stairs, lingering as long as I can on each step. I examine the shine on the brass stair rods that I watched my sister polish, the way they neatly tuck into the tarpaulin. On the landing I look out through the back window. I see where the pigeons live in the trees. Beyond the trees, cattle are grazing in the fields that slope all the way down to the river. The summer sky is still a clear blue but I've been told it is past my bedtime.

To the left, three steps up and straight ahead, that's my parents' bedroom. To the right, three steps up and straight ahead, the girls' bedroom. The door on the right, before the girls' bedroom, is the boys' bedroom. That's where I'm heading because I'm a boy.

In our bedroom there are two double beds. My two brothers sleep in the bed at the far end. I share the bed nearest to the door with my uncle. I sleep on the inside, next to the wall. There are blankets and a patchwork quilt on each bed. My brother, one year older, will be sent to bed before too long. My brother, nine years older, won't be coming to bed until much later. My uncle will come later still.

There is a curtain on the window but it is not drawn. I like to see the daylight for as long as I can. There is candle grease on the stone plinth at the bottom of the window. A leftover from the Christmas candle, when every window in Ireland has a candle in it so the Holy Family can find their way to Bethlehem.

The walls are painted yellow. The floor is covered in brown tarpaulin with faded yellow squares on it. A corner has curled up where the leg at the top end of the bed keeps getting pulled across it. There is a hole where the leg at the bottom of the bed has worn through. There are white enamel pots for peeing, with handles on them under each bed. There is a picture of the Sacred Heart on the wall.

The shape of the ceiling over the stairs protrudes between the beds, half dividing the bedroom. It gradually slopes upward and then has two steps at the top which are used as shelves. One has blankets on it. The other has a wooden money box my big brother made. It is painted green and nailed onto the shelf. There's a lock on it but I know where he hides the key. My big brother has also invented an electric light for himself, a used radio battery with a piece of wire coming out of it. The wire is pinned along the groove of the shelf and attached to a bulb from a flash-lamp over the bed. There is a switch half way between the battery and the bulb. We're not allowed to touch it because we'd only wear out the battery. Sometimes we switch it on when he's not there.

Looking up at the white ceiling I trace the lines between the ceiling boards. Here and there I can see spaces between the boards. I try to see through these cracks, but it's no good because it's dark up there and all I see is the shadow of darkness. I wonder about the world up there because sometimes after dark I can hear mice running along the ceiling boards having fun. The sudden patter they make is like the patter of raindrops when it's just starting to rain.

I like looking at the knots on the boards. They are still visible even though the ceiling has been painted many times over. These knots have interesting shapes. One looks like a spinning top. There is a small perfect roundness at its centre. I imagine it spinning, and

decide that I'll ask for a real spinning top for Christmas. Another one is the shape of a pear or a kangaroo depending on which way you look at it. Another has no shape at all that I can think of.

When my brother comes to bed we tell each other stories. I wonder out loud what else lives above the ceiling. What my brother is more concerned about are the creatures under the bed. The ones that come out in the middle of the night. He tells me how once he woke up to find his leg had slipped down inside the bed and something had got a hold of his foot. All he knew for certain was that his foot was 'between teeth.'

My mother shouts up the stairs: 'Will ye stop talking and go to sleep.' We don't take much notice. It's hard to sleep on these long summer nights when it isn't even dark yet. Later on, my father shouts: 'Go to sleep this minute.' That quietens us all right. In a while we begin to whisper again until eventually we drift off to sleep. Sometimes we are still awake when my big brother comes up. We watch him as he switches on his electric light to see if it is still working, and then gets into bed. Occasionally we are still awake when my uncle comes up. Sometimes we ask him questions and get him to tell us stories. He tells us the names of stars, and all about the Comet with its long bushy tail. It will be in the sky every night until it disappears, and then it won't come back for another hundred years. My favourite thing in the sky is the Rory Bory Alice because it has such a nice name.

Sometimes gravity rolls me into the hollow in the middle of the bed and my uncle tells me to 'push in out of that'. On one occasion when I'm a little older and he's not in a good mood he says, 'shove in will you. You're taking up half the bed.' I say: 'Let you take up the other half.' I overhear him later telling this story. It makes all the big people laugh. I realise everybody thinks I'm a very funny and clever boy. I like that.

My uncle gets up early to bring the cows in for milking. My big brother gets up a little later and goes out to the stall to milk. Sometimes I hear them and wake up. Sometimes I go back to sleep again. On a Saturday night my uncle shaves. He gets a basin of water, then rolls up his sleeves and stands in front of the

shaving mirror. He dips the furry shaving brush into the basin, rubs the shaving stick on it and lathers up his face. Then he goes at it with his cut-throat. You can hear the scrape of the razor on his hairy stubble. He is very careful but sometimes he cuts himself. He puts little pieces of newspaper on his face to stop the bleeding.

When he's finished shaving he spends a long time polishing his strong black shoes until he is entirely satisfied with the shine. On Sunday morning he gets up early for going to Mass. All he has to do is put on his shirt and tie and his blue suit, and then his socks and shoes. Sometimes he finds a hole in a sock and says: 'Well blasht it for a story.' The last thing he does is put on his bicycle clips, then he's out the door and gone. We won't see him again until dark night.

I'm supposed to be asleep while all this is going on, but the noise wakes me and I find it all very interesting. Once, I interviewed him.

'Where are you going?'

'I'm going to Mass.'

'What are you doing?'

'I'm putting on the style.'

'What style?'

'The style that Mary sat on.'

'And did Mary sit on your style?'

There is a skylight out on the landing. You can see it through a space on the top corner behind the door. There is a similar space into the girls' bedroom. Sometimes you can see their outlines reflected in the glass of the skylight.

When my other uncle the Priest comes to stay, things are rearranged. He sleeps in the girls' room. A curtain is put across the boys' room and the girls sleep in my brothers' bed. My two brothers come in with me, and my uncle goes out to the hay shed. When this happens we have to be very quiet because my uncle is home from the missions and he finds it very hard to sleep. We can hear him saying his prayers. Sometimes he gets up in the middle of the night and goes out walking because he can't sleep.

He tells us great stories about what China was like, and the

different ways they had for torturing people. When he gives a sermon about it during Mass he gets very excited and shouts. All the big people talk about it afterwards and some of the women start crying and the men shake their heads in wonder. They give him money for the missions. He gets lots of letters from the postman and nearly all of them have money in them. My brother says he'll be a priest too when he is big enough, and he'll sit in the parlour all day reading letters and counting money. I want to be a priest too when I grow up because I was called after my uncle, and as well as having the same name we have the same birthday as well. He says I'm very clever and witty because the big people have told him what I said about the style that Mary sat on. I'll be a priest for sure. Being in China is very exciting.

The other thing I remember about the bedroom is the day I got the measles. My big brother was putting up a wire fence and I was holding the bag of nails for him when I began to feel all funny. I could see the wind blowing through the grass like it often did but somehow it was different. It had a sort of yellow colour and it looked very hot. The next thing, I had pains in my legs. Marmalade was the cause of it. I could feel the briars from the marmalade inside in my legs and they were hurting me. I tried to explain to my mother but she just kept asking, 'what marmalade are you talking about, child?' I didn't know what she meant because there was only one marmalade and the briars from it were hurting me inside in my legs. When the doctor came he lifted up my shirt. I was covered all over with spots. He said I had the measles and I'd have to stay in bed until I got better. He said the marmalade in my legs was only growing pains.

The last thing I remember about the bedroom is the day I ate my big brother's sweets. He went to the fair with my father and after they had sold the heifers he bought some sweets for himself. I was busying around the bedroom minding my own business when I accidentally brushed up against his coat. I heard the rustle of the paper bag the sweets were in and I had a look in his pocket to see what sort of sweets they were. They were toffees. The wrapping paper had partly come off one of them and rather than going

to all the trouble to wrap it up again I thought the best thing was to eat it. I put the wrapping paper back in the bag so it would take up the same amount of space. Later I went back to make sure everything was alright and I found another sweet that was peeping out of its wrapper. I fixed it the same way as the first one, making sure the bag was still full. Later on again, I went to check that everything was ok and I found another one. I thought it was only fair that my middle brother should have some sweets as well. I wouldn't tell him where they came from because he'd only take some himself and not even make sure the bag was still full.

Later that evening when my big brother came in he went upstairs. He was very cross when he came down. He said: 'Who stole my sweets?' My mother asked him what did he mean and he showed her the bag with all the sweet papers and only a few sweets left. I said I didn't know anything about them, but my middle brother said I gave him sweets. He said he didn't know where I got them. I tried to explain that I was only trying to make the bag tidy and keep his pocket from bulging, but he kept throwing it in my face for a long time saying: 'You stole my sweets.'

THE SYCAMORE TREE

There's this tree around the corner from our house. It is a sycamore tree. It is very leafy, and the leaves have the same number of fingers as I have, only their fingers are much bigger than my fingers. The tree has a fork you can sit up on like a saddle. I'm wondering what it would be like to climb up and sit on it. Is it the same, or different from being on a horse? It's different. The bark is not smooth like a horse but it's exciting. I'm not supposed to be up here and that's part of the excitement. I can hear the birds singing and the wind blowing. Then I take off my trousers and I am just like the birds except I have no feathers. I can feel the bark of the tree against my bare bottom, and the breeze blowing around my bottom, and it is very exciting.

Everything is going grand until my big sister comes around the corner. I try to put my trousers on before she sees me, but it is no good. She says she won't tell anyone, but the way she says it worries me. It's a lot worse than saying she'll tell on me, because she can threaten me with it any time she likes. And how can I be sure she won't tell on me whenever she feels like it.

Then I begin to worry in case she saw me that other time up in the field near Mahony's house. All I was doing that time was finding out what it was like being like the pigs. I went along the ground on my knees to be about the same height as a pig. Then I took off my trousers so I could feel the wind on my bottom the same as the pigs. I liked the wind blowing around my bottom, and I knew the pigs liked it as well.

I didn't like the rooting on the ground though because it was very cold and my nose hurt. The part I liked best was when the wind was blowing around my bare bottom. But I didn't think I was supposed to be doing it. That was all part of the fun of it until my sister saw me up on the tree and said she wouldn't tell.

If any of this ever comes out I don't know what will happen. Maybe the next time they are cutting the bonhams they'll mix me up with them. I can smell the disinfectant already, and the bowl of boiling water. I can see my uncle holding the bonhams on his knees with their back legs held out, and my father dipping the penknife in the boiling water and cutting them. I don't like the way they squeal when he cuts them.

Then the postman comes. He has a parcel for me. When I open it up it is a horse from my aunt in California. My aunt is a nun. It is a lovely bay horse and it has a shine on it. It has a white blaze on its forehead and a flowing mane. It has four white legs but one of them has got broken in the post. I blame the postman. My brother says it's no bother to fix it with glue, and it will be as good as it ever was. Still, I wish the leg wasn't broken. He fixes it all right, but ever after there is a weakness in that leg so that it breaks easily. He might get fed up fixing it.

I overhear my mother talking to Mrs Mahony. They are comparing each other's children. My mother says that when I was small you couldn't keep trousers on me. She said as soon as she'd turn her back she'd find my trousers hanging from the apple tree. My sister must have told on me. My mother shouldn't be telling this to a complete stranger. I run away and hide behind the turf rick. How can I ever go to Mahony's house again? I hope they don't find out about the pigs.

I soon forget all about it though because Jo Mahony is much more fun than anyone in our house. She's younger than me, and I don't know anybody else younger than me anywhere. I go there first thing in the morning and I stay until Mrs Mahony sends me home. And as soon as I get home I want to be off there again but my mother won't let me.

'Don't be bothering Mrs Mahony every minute of the day,' she says. So I sneak off when no one is looking, and where do I go? Mahony's. But I pretend to myself that I am going somewhere else, and it just happens by accident that I end up at Mahony's. I play with Jo for hours and hours. Mrs Mahony disappears for a while, and when she returns my big brother is with her. He says I have to come home.

This puzzles me because, strictly speaking, I'm not at Mahony's at all. I'm somewhere else. So if I'm not here in the first place I can't go back with my brother because I am somewhere else. This however, doesn't seem to work. My brother insists that I must go home at once and when I'm not making any move he says that if I don't go home with him now I'll have to stay forever. Mrs Mahony says: 'Where will he sleep? The only thing I can think of is he'll have to sleep with Jo.' This is very worrying. I've never slept in a stranger's house, never mind sleeping in a stranger's bed. Mrs Mahony and my brother are laughing at me and I don't like it. It's like the time my mother told Mrs Mahony about my trousers.

THE MIRACLE

My father comes home from the creamery. He empties the separated milk from the creamery churns to the old churns where the milk will turn sour and my uncle will feed it to the pigs. You can see the dents in one of the old churns from when James was killed. My father un-tackles the horse, lets him take a drink of water and then puts him out in the field. My father is thirsty after all this and my mother brings him a drink of sour milk from the kitchen. Then she brings a bucket of scalding water and a scrubbing brush and washes the creamery churns so that tomorrow's milk won't go sour. While she is doing this my father tells her all the news and interesting stories from the creamery.

One day it doesn't happen like this. Instead my mother is standing by the hedge waiting for him. He ties the horse to the wall and comes straight over. They have a short conversation, then they both turn and walk towards the house. When they get as far as the pillar my father puts his arm around my mother's shoulder. They hold each other and then they walk towards the front door with their arms around each other. They are both crying. It doesn't look the same as lonesome.