RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

Firefly Summer

Maeve Binchy

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About the Book

Kate and John Ryan are happy in Mountfern, a peaceful and friendly village – and, for their four young children, an unchanging backdrop to a golden childhood. The summers are long and hot, and the twins Michael and Dara, and their siblings Eddie and Declan have, in the ivy-clad ruins of Fernscourt, the once-grand house on the bank of the river burned down during the Troubles, a place to play like no other.

Then Patrick O'Neill, an Irish American with a great deal of money in his pocket, buys the ruins of Fernscourt. No-one in Mountfern could have guessed what Patrick's dream would mean for their small village, and it's not until the very end of this tale of love won and lost that Patrick O'Neill himself will understand the irony and significance of his grand dream for Fernscourt . . .

About the Author

Maeve Binchy was born in Dublin, and went to school at the Holy Child Convent in Killiney. She took a history degree at UCD and taught in various girls' schools, writing travel articles in the long summer holidays. In 1969 she joined the *Irish Times* and for many years she was based in London writing humorous columns from all over the world. She is the author of five collections of short stories as well as twelve novels including *Circle of Friends*, *The Copper Beech*, *Tara Road*, *Evening Class* and *The Glass Lake*. Maeve Binchy died in July 2012 and is survived by her husband, the writer Gordon Snell.

Visit her website at www.maevebinchy.com

Also by Maeve Binchy

Fiction

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Nights of Rain and Stars

Non-fiction

Aches & Pains

Firefly Summer

Maeve Binchy

arrow books

I want to thank all my friends for their support and encouragement, particularly Rosie Cheetham and Chris Green. And to Gordon Snell, who has made my life so good and so happy, I would like to dedicate Firefly Summer with all my gratitude and all my love.

London and Dublin,
summer 1987

PART ONE

1

THE SUN CAME in at a slant and hit all the rings and marks on the bar counter. Kate Ryan managed to take a cloth to them at the same time as she was kicking off her house shoes and pulling on her wellington boots. She tucked her handbag under the counter and in almost the same movement opened the kitchen door to make sure that Eddie and Declan weren't torturing the new girl. The new girl had red eyes and a sad face and was missing her farm home. She might run back to it if Eddie and Declan were at their worst. But mercifully the appeal of the tortoise was still very strong even after three weeks. They lay on their stomachs and fed it stalks of cabbage, screaming with delight when it accepted them.

'John,' she shouted, 'will you come down to the bar, I have to go across the river and see what's keeping the twins. They have to be polished and smartened up for the concert and there isn't a sign of them.'

John Ryan groaned. His train of thought was gone again. He had thought he would manage an hour or two on his own, struggling with his poetry. 'Give me a minute,' he called, hoping to catch the idea before it was gone.

'No, they'll be late as it is. Listen, bring your paper and pencil down, there's likely to be no one in, but there has to be someone behind the counter.'

The door banged behind her and John Ryan saw, through the bedroom window, his wife run across the small footbridge opposite the pub. She climbed over the gate like a girl instead of a woman in her thirties. She looked altogether like a girl in her summer dress and her boots as

she ran lightly across to the ruined house, Fernscourt, to find the twins.

He sighed and went down to the pub. He knew there were poet publicans, he knew there were men who wrote the poetry of angels in the middle of the stinking trenches of war. But he wasn't like that.

John Ryan moved slowly, a big man with a beer belly that had grown on him sneakily during the years standing behind a bar, jowls that had become flabby at the same trade. His wedding picture showed a different person, a thinner more eager-looking figure, yet the boyish looks hadn't completely gone. He had a head of sandy brown hair only flecked with grey and big eyebrows that never managed to look ferocious even when he willed them to, like at closing time or when he was trying to deal with some outrage that the children were reported to have committed.

Kate had hardly changed at all since their wedding day, he often said, which pleased her, but she said it was just a bit of old plamas to get out of having to stand at the bar. It was true, though; he looked at the girl with the long, curly dark hair tied back in a cream ribbon that matched her cream dress and coat. She looked very smart on that wet day in Dublin, he could hardly believe she was going to come and live with him in Mountfern. Kate hadn't developed a pot belly from serving drinks to others, as she often told him sharply. She said that there was no law saying you must have a drink with everyone who offered you one or pull a half pint for yourself to correspond with every half-dozen pints you pulled for others.

But then it was different for women.

John was the youngest of the seven Ryan children and the indulged pet of a mother who had been amazed and delighted at his arrival when she had been sure that her family was complete. He had been overfed and given fizzy drinks with sweet cake as long as he could remember. As a lad the running and leaping and cycling miles to a dance

had kept him trimmer. Now, between sessions of writing his poetry and serving in his bar, it was a sedentary life.

He didn't know if he wanted it for his sons; he had such hopes for them – that they might see the world a bit, study maybe and go on for the university. That had been beyond the dreams of his parents' generation. Their main concern had been to see their children well settled into emigration; the church had helped of course, educating two nuns and two priests out of the Ryan family. John didn't see any vocation amongst his own offspring. Michael was dreamy and thoughtful: maybe a hermit? Or Dara a resourceful Reverend Mother somewhere? Eddie was a practical child, possibly a missionary brother teaching pagan tribes to build huts and dig canals. Declan the baby. Maybe they could make a curate out of him near home where they could keep an eye on him.

This was all nonsense, of course. None of them would end up within an ass's roar of a religious life. Still, John Ryan never saw the future standing surrounded by three sons and possibly his daughter all in the trade.

There would never be enough business, for one thing. Like many Irish towns Mountfern had the appearance of having far too many pubs already. If you went down the main street, Bridge Street, there were no less than three public houses. Foley's at the top of the town, but that was hardly a pub at all these days, just a counter really and a few friends of old Matt Foley drinking at night, they'd hardly know how to serve a real customer. Then there was Conway's which was more a grocery but it had the bar at the back. Conway's had a clientele of secret drinkers, people who didn't admit to any kind of drinking, who were always going out for a packet of cornflakes or a pound of flour and would toss back a brandy for their health. Often too, it had a funeral business since old Barry Conway was the undertaker as well. It seemed only right to come back to his place to drink when someone had been buried up on the hill. And Dunne's

was always on the verge of closing. Paddy Dunne never knew whether to reorder supplies, he always said that it would hardly be worth it since any day now he'd be going to join his brother who ran a pub in Liverpool. But then either there would be a downturn in the fortunes of the Liverpool pub or an upswing in the drinking patterns of Mountfern. There was an unsettled air about his place and constant speculation about how much he would get if he were to sell his licence.

John Ryan's pub had its rivals then, three of them in a small place like Mountfern. Yet he had all the business that came from the River Road side of the place. He had the farmers on this side of the town. It was a bigger and better bar than any of the other three, it had not only more space but it had more stock. And there were many who liked the walk out along the river bank.

John Ryan knew that he was a man who had been given a great deal by fate. Nobody had gathered *him* up to swoop him off to a religious order when he was a young impressionable boy. Neither had he been sponsored out to a life of hard graft in America like two of his elder brothers. By all their standards he had a life of ease and peace where he should well have been able to run his business and write his poetry.

But he was a man time, almost overmethodically, too predictable sometimes for his wife who felt that people should be able to fire on several cylinders at the same time.

John wanted time to write or time to serve drink, he couldn't switch from one mode to another like lightning. Like Kate. He couldn't switch towards the children like she could as well. Either they were good or they weren't. He wasn't able to see the swift changes of mood like Kate was. He would not be cross and then smile minutes later. If he was cross he was very cross indeed. It was rare but it was all-embracing when it happened. One of Daddy's great angers

was remembered long, whereas Mammy had a dozen quick and easily forgotten angers in a week.

John sighed again at his wife's swiftness and the annoyance at having to leave his work, his real work, just at that time. He knew that in this pub fate had handed him something that many a man in Ireland would envy mightily. It didn't bring in enough money for them to employ another pair of hands, but it wasn't so slack that a man could sit at the counter and write undisturbed. John Ryan hadn't brought his paper and pencil with him, any more than his thoughts. If customers saw you with paper and pencil they thought you were doing the accounts and making a small fortune. Anyway what would have been the point? There was Jack Coyne from the garage who had just sold a heap of rusty metal to some unsuspecting farmer and they were in to seal the bargain with a pint.

Jack Coyne had a face like a ferret and two sharp eyes looking round him for a bargain or a business deal. He was a small wiry man equally at home underneath a car, covered in grease and shouting out about the extent of the repairs, or in a suit showing off his newly acquired vehicles which was what he called his second-hand stock. Everything about him seemed to be moving, he never stood still, even now at the bar he was shifting, moving from foot to foot.

'Great day, John,' said Jack Coyne.

'It's been a great day all the time,' said John, preparing to pull the pints.

'Bad for the crops,' the farmer said.

'When were you lot ever pleased with the weather?' Jack Coyne laughed, the happy sound of a man who could sell second-hand cars no matter what the weather did.

The children of Mountfern had a place to play like no other children in the land. It was Fernscourt, the ruined house on the bank of the River Fern. It had been burned down one day forty years ago in 1922 during the Troubles. The Fern

family had not been there on the day of the fire, they had been gone for many months before.

The children often asked their grandfathers about the fire but found a strange lapse of memory. The passions that had run so high in those years had settled down as time went by. The Ferns and all they symbolised had been forgotten. Their house stood as a beautiful ruin, where once it had stood as a beautiful big empty shell anyway. Now as a place to spend the long summer days it was quite simply perfect.

The orchards that the Ferns had asked their gardeners to plant all those years ago still grew wild and plentiful. The apple trees didn't know that the Ferns had gone. Their old gnarled branches bent to the ground, sometimes making even more places for the children to play.

There was thick trailing ivy everywhere over the walls that remained of the house. The outhouses which had once been the stableyard had survived better than the main house. Here there were still rooms with roofs to run through, here there were limestone arches and well-made stone walls. In the days when Fernscourt had been built people saw the stables as being very important; guests would expect them to be of the same high standard as the rest of the house.

As Kate Ryan marched through the laurels that grew wild now on each side of the path up from the river she could hear the cries and the laughter. She thought back on her own childhood in a small silent house in Dublin, her mother always an invalid. She had not had brothers and sisters to play with; friends were frowned on and kept well away from the home.

These children had a wild, free life by comparison.

Fernscourt belonged to the group that were here today. Those who were the right age for it. It had always been like that. You were too young if you were Eddie and Declan's age, you were hunted away and sent about your business, which was anywhere but here. Then the older boys and girls went to the bridge and showed off to each other. Where

boys dived from the ledge to oohs and ahhs, where girls were sometimes pushed in horseplay and had to climb up the bank with wet dresses clinging.

But if you were in Fernscourt, no other world existed. It had been a fine summer and as soon as any work that had to be done in the various homes in Mountfern was finished they gathered, coming in dribs and drabs across the fields, up the River Road and across the footbridge in front of Ryan’s, or some of them braving the brambles and briars on the towpath at the other side of the river, a disused way that saw no traffic these days.

Fernscourt belonged to all the children but it was Dara and Michael’s special home. The twins had their own place, a pretend-house. They played there even when none of the others came up to join them. They had an old table and two broken stools from the bar. There was cutlery too, a twisted fork and a rusty knife, and some chipped plates. These were for private feasts. Ever since they had been old enough to go across to Fernscourt alone the twins had said that this is where they would live when they were grown up.

It would be nice and near home, they said reassuringly, but it would be theirs. They would buy the whole place and have a boat and go everywhere by river instead of by road.

It would be their palace, their castle, their home.

It was because they lived so close to the place, because they could see it from their windows over the pub, and they could go there every day winter and summer, that they felt it was their own.

But of course they didn’t want to own it exclusively. Fernscourt was also for everyone, particularly during the long summer holidays when no day was long enough for the games they all played there.

There was no form to the games, but the huge mossy stones, the crumbling walls, the great fronts of ivy hanging down like curtains, and the window and doorway gaps in

half-standing walls meant there were plenty of places to climb, to perch, to jump, to sit and giggle.

The girls had made a makeshift home in the old clock tower which still stood in the stableyard, though the clock and dome were long gone. The boys would use the long shallow steps that were now almost indistinguishable as steps, so overgrown with weeds and moss had they become, and arrange a jumping competition that was a cross between a longjump and a chicken run. They would all gather to see who could jump down the greatest number of steps; it was the sissy who would opt out of the jump that seemed likely to break a limb.

Yet they had ways out of being a softy. It was always time to go home or to milk the cows or to go for a swim. The boys of Mountfern had no death wish as they played in their own magnificent ruined house.

Kate saw that some of the children were already heading for home where they would be ill-received because of the need to smarten up for the concert. She saw Tommy Leonard racing down to the towpath – it would be a bit quicker that way for him. Leonard's paper shop was near the big bridge, he would do the distance faster than by crossing over to the River Road where there was a proper surface to walk on. At Tommy's age children didn't mind having half their clothes and even bits of their arms torn and scratched by the thorny branches, Kate thought in wonder. Little Maggie Daly, who was Dara's great friend, was heading towards the laurels and Kate.

'Just running, Mrs Ryan,' Maggie said, knowing well that the twins' mother was not coming to pay a social call. 'I think Dara and Michael are just finishing up now.'

'I'm sure they are,' Kate was grim. Maggie Daly had big anxious eyes, she always looked startled by the most ordinary things. She was terrified of Leopold, the pub's big harmless dog. When poor Leopold stretched his misshapen

body in the sun, little Maggie Daly would look at him fearfully as if he were about to go for her throat.

And Maggie's older sister Kitty, who was nearly grown up enough for the crowd on the bridge, was sauntering down the laurel path too. Kitty was too mature to scuttle, she was being bored this summer, bored by Fernscourt and the games they played, bored by having to go home and dress up for the concert. Bored by being neither one thing nor the other. Neither a real person of fifteen who could have a smart red bathing costume and be able to sit on the raft having a crowd laughing and admiring; too old to find fun every day climbing up to an old room in a ruined clock tower, or squeezing through the chinks in the mossy walls. Kitty Daly sighed heavily as she passed Kate Ryan.

'I suppose you're coming to beat their heads in,' she said as if this was the usual practice of elderly parents when they arrived in Fernscourt.

'Not at all,' Kate said brightly, 'I came to wonder was there anything they'd like, afternoon tea on a tray maybe, I'd be delighted to . . . my beloved twins . . .'

Kitty moved on hastily.

Dara and Michael had taken after their mother. No sandy brows like John Ryan – those only seemed to come out in Eddie. They were thin and wiry too, but of course their father had been as a boy. But Kate realised that in their strong dark good looks they didn't have the Ryan laugh lines either, the face that always seemed to smile even when nobody was watching. All the Ryans looked like that – even the disapproving old mother-in-law who hadn't thought Kate a suitable wife for her favourite son, she had had a face that seemed to smile. Dara and Michael often looked solemn, their eyes big, dark and too concentrated. Like her own. Whenever Kate saw a photograph of herself she would scream and say she looked like the hag of Bearra or an avenging angel. She always seemed to be burning with intensity rather than smiling at the camera.

Nobody else noticed it at all.

And everyone always said the twins were a handsome pair, particularly in the summertime when, tanned and eager in their shorts and coloured shirts, they roamed the countryside far and wide and explored every corner of Mountfern and its environs.

Kate wondered briskly how they would accept the blame today. They should have been home a good half hour ago to get smartened up for the school concert. She was annoyed but she would try not to show it, otherwise they would be mutinous about the washing and brushing and maybe less sure in their party pieces. Dara had a poem in Irish to recite and Michael with the boys from the brothers would be singing Moore's melodies.

Young Miss Lynch up at the school had been so enthusiastic and given so much of her free time to organising it that everyone in Mountfern had been drawn into the whole thing unwillingly. Normally the convent and the brothers had few joint undertakings but old Canon Moran thought it seemed a much better notion to have one concert rather than two, and everyone agreed with them so Nora Lynch had won the day; it was being held in the church hall and all participants had to be there in their finery at five o'clock. The concert began at six o'clock sharp and promised to be finished by eight.

Kate was nearly at the house now. In the old days it must have been an impressive place: three storeys tall but with high, high ceilings, big rooms and tall windows. The Fern family who had lived here, different generations of them for over a century, surely loved this home. Kate wondered if any of them had ever paused in their gracious way of life to imagine that one day it would be a ruin played in by all the children of the village who would never have got inside the walls except to carry scuttles of coal or great jugs of water in the old days.

The children had all scattered. Only her own two were inside. What could they be doing that made them stay when all the others had gone? A wave of annoyance came over Kate at their disregard for any kind of order in life. She pushed through the hanging wall of ivy and saw them: sitting on a great fallen pillar and looking ahead of them through the gaps in the wall.

They looked at something in the distance with a caution that was more like fear than anything else.

Below them two men with instruments mounted on tripods peered and wrote notes in their pads. Then they would replace the tripods and start again.

Kate came up behind the twins.

‘What are they?’ Michael asked in a whisper.

‘They’re called theodolites,’ Kate said, ‘I know that word, it’s always very useful in crosswords.’

‘What do they do?’ Dara wanted to know.

‘It’s a sort of survey, you know, getting levels. I’m not totally sure, to be honest.’

‘They shouldn’t be here, the theodalists,’ Michael said, face red with upset. ‘Tell them it’s private land. Go on, Mam, tell them to go away.’

‘No, the things are called theodolites, not the people. The men are surveyors, I suppose. Anyway it isn’t private land. If it was we couldn’t be here.’

‘Could you ask them . . . like will they be coming back again or is it only today that they’re doing their photographing or whatever. You could ask them, Mam,’ Dara pleaded. ‘You’re good at asking people awkward things. Please.’

‘I have one awkward thing to ask at the moment and it’s this: why when I gave you my good alarm clock, and the strictest instructions to be back home at four o’clock, why is it half-past four and we’re all here? That’s the awkward question I’m asking today, and I want an answer to it.’

The twins seemed not to hear the rising impatience in her tone, they barely heeded her.

‘We didn’t really play at all, we’ve been wondering what . . .’ Dara said.

‘And hoping that they’d go away . . .’ Michael finished for her. They often finished each other’s sentences.

‘And not understanding it one bit . . .’

‘And not liking it one bit . . .’

Kate took them by the shoulders and marched them back for the alarm clock and their uneaten lunches, then headed for the footbridge. There seemed to be a commotion on the other side. Eddie and Declan were lying on the edge of the water trying to reach something that was floating downstream on a piece of plywood.

Carrie, the new maid, was standing twisting her hands helplessly as the boys screamed, and Kate realised that Maurice the tortoise was heading off into the unknown.

‘Get the garden rake, and the big sweeping brush,’ she shouted. Michael and Dara raced across to find them, delighted to be released from the pinching grip and abuse. Eddie, who was eight, was scarlet with the knowledge that he would get the blame; Declan was only six and the baby – he got off with everything.

Kate manoeuvred the tortoise ashore and with a face like thunder brought it back to its original home in the turf room. Watched by the four children and the terrified Carrie, she dried the animal with a clean towel and put it in a bed of hay. With a voice that was going to take no argument she said that she would very much like to see Carrie at the kitchen sink washing the faces and hands of Eddie and Declan. She would like to see Michael and Dara in the bathroom and emerging in five minutes with necks, ears and knees all shining. She mentioned knees, ears and necks only because *particular* attention would be paid to those parts but the rest was to be spotless too. A great deal of heavy scrubbing took place, and after inspection Dara and

Michael were allowed to head off towards the hall. An unusually silent Eddie and Declan sat waiting sentence from their mother. They didn't know whether they were going to be barred from the concert . . . which mightn't be a bad thing. Or if there might be a slapping of the legs administered. The slapping wasn't too likely; if it was coming at all it would have been done at the time.

They were unprepared for the severity of it.

'That is no longer your tortoise, Edward and Declan. That is now my tortoise. Do you understand?'

Things were bad when Eddie was called Edward.

'But do you mean . . .?'

'Yes, he's mine now. And I can do what I like with him. I can bring him back to the pet shop where I so stupidly bought him, thinking you were the kind of children who could love a pet. Or I could eat him. I could ask Carrie to serve him for lunch tomorrow.'

They were aghast.

'Well, why not?' she continued airily. 'You tried to drown Maurice, why don't I try to roast him? It's a hard old life being a tortoise.'

Eddie's eyes filled with tears. 'Ma, we weren't trying to drown him. It was to see if he could swim, and when he didn't seem to be managing it too well we got him a raft, then it floated off.'

'Thank you, Edward. You are telling me it was just a careless accident, is that it?'

'Well, yes?' Eddie thought salvation lay this way but he wasn't totally sure.

'Right, well now that he's mine other careless accidents could happen. I could let him fall into the oven or something. Still, that is none of your business now. You are forbidden to go near him in the turf room or the Rayburn or wherever else he happens to be.'

Declan let out a roar. 'Mammy, you wouldn't burn Maurice. Please don't burn my tortoise.'

‘It’s mine,’ Kate said.

‘You’re not allowed to kill things,’ Eddie raged. ‘I’ll tell the guards. I’ll tell Sergeant Sheehan.’

‘Certainly do, and I’ll tell him about the drowning.’

There was silence.

‘Don’t be stupid,’ Kate said. ‘I’m not going to hurt Maurice, but he *is* mine, you know, so you can’t play with him any more. And no ice creams in Daly’s tonight after the concert.’

It was bad but it was better than what might have been. They accepted it.

‘Come on, Carrie,’ Kate said, suddenly pitying the seventeen-year-old spending her first Saturday night away from home. ‘Tidy up your hair a bit and we’re off.’

‘Am I to come with you?’ Carrie’s face lit up.

‘Of course you are, did you think we’d leave you here on your own?’ Kate had only just thought of it, looking at the stricken face of the girl as she had listened to the possible future of the tortoise.

‘You’re a real gentleman, ma’am,’ said Carrie and ran to put on a clean blouse and fix two new slides in her hair.

Canon Moran was small and fussy, a kind man with pale blue eyes that didn’t see very far or very much. He believed that basically most people were very good. This made him a nice change from many other parish priests in the country who believed that most people were intrinsically evil. The word went round for young curates that Mountfern would be a great posting altogether. And the young priest Father Hogan knew he was indeed a lucky man. Once Canon Moran had a nice big chair for the concert and a little footstool because he sometimes got a cramp, then he would be happy. He would clap every item enthusiastically, he would praise all the brothers and the nuns by name, he would know that old Mr Slattery the solicitor had made a contribution so that they could have proper curtains instead of the desperate old screens they used to make do with

before. The canon would thank him briefly because that was all the Slatterys would need, but he would dwell longer on the generosity of Daly's Dairy in providing the cakes for the tea at eight o'clock, and the excellence of the programmes printed free thanks to Leonard's the stationers. The canon began confessions on a Saturday at five, and he would make sure that they were all well completed in time for the concert. Father Hogan knew that Canon Moran believed a kind word of encouragement and a pious hope that things would be better soon helped a lot of his parishioners. And they felt sure, because of his pale dreamy blue eyes, that he was also somehow deaf and wouldn't recognise the voices that whispered their sins.

Father Hogan thought Mountfern was a warm, kind place to live, and though it didn't perhaps offer as much of a challenge as he had dreamed about in the seminary, he followed his canon's belief that there were souls to be saved everywhere, and that running a concert for the people of this place might have equal value in the great scheme of things to working in the missions or running a boys' club for delinquents in a tough city parish.

Miss Lynch was more or less walking out with young Mr Slattery so he had to come to the concert as moral support. He sat beside Kate Ryan and the two chastened small boys, and the girl with reddened eyes called Carrie.

'And how does the master of your house escape this great cultural event?' Fergus Slattery asked with envy.

'Someone has to run the bar. I know it looks as if half the county is here, but you'd be surprised how many men find the excuse for a drink when their children are up here on the stage,' Kate said.

'Well for him, then.' Fergus was genuinely admiring. 'I can't say that I have to work on a Saturday evening, they don't think solicitors work at all, but my office is too near. I'd actually have to be in the window in my shirt sleeves before they'd believe me.'

Fergus grinned boyishly. He was very like a tall gangly boy, Kate thought, though he must be in his mid or late twenties now. She had always thought of him as a kind of irrepressible student home for the holidays. Even though he ran his father's office almost entirely on his own now, it was hard for her to think of him as a grown-up. Maybe it was because he looked untidy; his hair was sort of jutting out at an angle no matter whether he had been to the barber or not. His shirts were perfectly and lovingly ironed by the Slatterys' faithful housekeeper, Miss Purcell, yet the collars sometimes stood at an angle away from his neck. Kate wouldn't be at all surprised if he bought the wrong size or had the button in the wrong place. He had dark eyes and if he had held himself differently and worn long smooth dark coats he might have been thought very handsome and elegant indeed.

But part of his charm was that he would never be elegant; he was totally unaware of his tall, dark and almost handsome looks, and that he had caused many a flutter and several specific hopes around Mountfern.

'You mean you wouldn't want to come – what with that Nora Lynch killing herself to impress you?' Kate was disbelieving.

'Impress *me*!'

'Of course. Why else would that young girl kill herself and show herself to be part of a small backwater like this unless it was to prove to you that she could fit in and be part of it?'

'But why would she prove that to me?'

'Aren't you and she going out?' Kate wondered about men a lot. They couldn't all be as dim as they often seemed.

'Yes, sure, we go out to the pictures and we go to a dance, but there's nothing in it.' Fergus looked baffled and honest.

'What do you mean there's nothing in it, aren't you a right beast to be leading her on and then tell me there's nothing in it? You know, the older I get the more I believe the nuns were right, men are basically wild animals at heart.'

‘But there *is* nothing in it,’ Fergus pleaded. ‘I mean we don’t love each other or anything, or have the same plans or the same hopes. Nothing’s been said or agreed. Truly.’

‘I believe you.’ Kate was cynical. ‘O Lord, protect me or mine from ever falling for a lawyer. You’ll have yourself covered from every angle.’

‘But she doesn’t think . . .’ Fergus began, but at that moment Nora Lynch, resplendent in a new hair-do from the Rosemarie salon, in a new yellow dress short enough to be fashionable but not so short as to cause adverse comment from the canon, the nuns and the brothers, appeared on stage. She said she hoped everyone would enjoy this show, the first combined effort; she thanked the canon, the brothers, the convent and the sponsors, the children and the parents, and knew that everyone would have a wonderful evening. She said that as an outsider she felt very privileged to be allowed to get involved in something as much a part of the community as this was. But then in many ways she felt that she had always been part of this place and always would.

‘How old are you, Fergus Slattery?’ Kate whispered suddenly.

‘I’m twenty-seven,’ he replied, confused.

‘Twenty-seven years in the world and you try to tell me that young woman has no hopes of you. May God forgive you, I mean it, Fergus, may he forgive you and send you some kind of sense.’

‘Thanks, Kate,’ said Fergus, not knowing whether he was being attacked or pitied, and not liking it whichever it was.

Dara Ryan felt as if she had swallowed an ice cream whole; her stomach was cold and heavy and she wondered if she might be sick.

‘I’ll never be able to say it,’ she told Maggie Daly.

Maggie believed Dara could do anything. ‘You’re great, Dara, you never minded saying it at school in front of everyone there.’

‘That’s different.’ Dara hopped around on one leg and looked through the door that they were meant to keep firmly closed, to see how big the audience was.

‘Lord, it’s full of people,’ she said theatrically.

‘They’ll love it.’ Maggie was loyal.

Dara would have fought with her shadow at this stage. ‘No, they’ll hate it, it’s in Irish, they won’t understand a word of it.’

‘But it will *sound* terrific.’

‘Why don’t I just go and make sounds then, nice sounds, or better still take up a gong and just bang it for three minutes and bow to the applause?’

Maggie giggled. Things were all right once Dara started making up outlandish things.

Maggie was not doing any solo piece. She was in the girls’ choir which would sing Gounod’s ‘Ave Maria’, and later on come back and sing ‘I think that I shall never see a poem lovely as a tree’. But Dara would stand in front of the whole of Mountfern and recite ‘Cill Cais’ which Miss Lynch had told them was a lament for an old house, a ruin like Fernscourt, except that it had been a different kind of household who had lived there, an Old Catholic family who used to have mass said in the stately home and everyone would come from far and near to attend it.

‘Dara, you’re on.’

Crossing her fingers and giving Dara a squeeze for luck, Maggie Daly stood and watched her friend walk up on the stage.

Miss Lynch, knowing very well that hardly anyone would get even the vaguest glimmer of what the poem was about without some kind of translation, said that of course everyone knew the story of ‘Cill Cais’, and told it without appearing to. The audience, flattered to be thought of as people who would know this, nodded to each other sagely and waited for the young Ryan girl to tell it to them again in Irish. Dara’s voice sounded confident and she fixed her eyes

on the back of the hall as Miss Lynch had told her to do. There was a storm of clapping and people told each other that she made a very good fist of it, then she was off and it was time for the choir from the brothers'.

Brother Keane had chosen three of Moore's finest Irish melodies. He announced that the boys would sing them in the same magnificent spirit that Thomas Moore had brought to bear when he was writing them. Brother Keane had calculated without the enormously humorous content that the songs seemed to hold for his choir of twelve-year-olds, depleted as it was by six whose voices chose the time of the concert to break.

'Silent, O Moyle, be the roar of thy water.

Break not, ye breezes, your chain of repose.'

Brother Keane loved this above all other of Moore's melodies. He could see none of the allusions to breaking wind, pulling the chains and passing water that the entire group in front of him seemed to see written in letters of fire on their song sheets. He glared at them ferociously as with the most enormous difficulty the forty boys tried to stifle their mirth, and led them into the next song called, unhappily, 'The Meeting of the Waters'. The entire choir seemed to choke with the daring double entendre of the name and Brother Keane resolved to deal with them very sternly in a less public place.

The admission price had included tea, sandwiches and cakes. The sandwiches had been supervised by Mrs Whelan who ran the post office and was generally accepted to be the nicest person in Mountfern. A small wiry woman with a skin that seemed to have been tanned by whatever sun shone intermittently in the Irish midlands or beaten by the winds that blew more regularly from one coast across to the other, Sheila Whelan had three cameo brooches she had bought from a tinker: a pink one, a green one and a beige. She wore them at the neck of her white blouses and had done for as long as anyone could remember. She owned

about three skirts which she must have worn for ever and a series of soft knitted cardigans which she must have made herself. Usually she was knitting for someone else, for the new babies that were arriving with great regularity around Mountfern, or shawls for the old, even school jumpers for the children who might need them. She always managed to have an extra bit of wool which she said it would be a pity to waste. She had a kind, dreamy face and far-away pale blue eyes that were never known to concentrate inquisitively on anything that might not bear too much scrutiny.

She seemed to have no interest in the private lives of the rest of the parish: she never appeared to notice, let alone comment on the emigrants' remittances that came home or didn't come home; nor did she seem to notice the disability pensions for people who were perfectly well, or the dole for those who were obviously working. She was able to discuss the most direct questioning about the whereabouts of Mr Whelan with calm and even with interest, but without ever revealing that he had left her for a married woman in Dublin, and that the two of them now had four children. If anyone asked whether he was coming back, Mrs Whelan was always able to get into the same interrogative mood and say it was very hard to know, wasn't it? She found that some things were almost impossible to work out, weren't they? And somehow the questioner found himself or herself enmeshed in the Meaning of Life instead of the specific whereabouts of Mrs Whelan's husband.

She was the kind of woman you'd go to if you had committed a murder, Fergus Slattery had always said. And oddly, there was one killing near Mountfern. A farmer's son had attacked his father in a drunken fight and killed him. It was to the post office, not the presbytery or the Garda station that he had come, carrying the murder weapon, a pitchfork.

Mrs Whelan had involved the presbytery and the Garda station, but gently and in her own time. Nobody had thought

it even remotely unusual that the demented man had come to Mrs Whelan nor had she made anything of the incident; she said she supposed he was on his way to the canon and her light had been on.

Nobody knew, either, that it was Mrs Whelan who had encouraged the sandwich makers to cut the crusts off and to do just one plate each. That way she was sure of getting what everyone had promised, though it meant much more work for her. Fergus knew, because Miss Purcell had been fussing about whether to have chicken paste or egg and mayonnaise in her offering and this had meant at least three calls to Mrs Whelan for discussion.

‘You are the only sensible woman in this town, Mrs Whelan,’ he began.

‘What can I do for you, Fergus?’ she asked simply.

‘You mean I wouldn’t say it unless I wanted something?’

‘Not at all.’ But she waited.

‘Is my name up with Nora Lynch?’ he asked.

‘Why do you ask?’ she said.

‘Because Kate Ryan, a woman I like and respect, told me it was, and as true as the day is long I didn’t mean it to be.’

‘Well if there’s any misunderstanding I’m sure you’ll sort it out.’

‘But *is* there any misunderstanding, Mrs Whelan? That’s what I’m asking you. I don’t want to go sorting things out if there’s nothing to sort out.’

‘Ah, nobody tells me anything, Fergus.’

‘But I’m only asking you about *me*, not about other people.’

‘As I said, I’ve not got an idea in the wide world, but I know if you think that there’s some confusion you’d be the man to clear it up. One way or another.’

‘By saying something out straight, you mean? Like “I don’t want to marry you”?’

Mrs Whelan’s eyes were shuttered. Open but closed at the same time. They told him he had gone too far in his