I Remember

Noëlle Harrison

Published by Pan Books

Extract

First published 2008 by Macmillan
an imprint of Pan Macmillan Ltd
20 New Wharf Road, London N1 9RR
Basingstoke and Oxford
Associated companies throughout the world
www.panmacmillan.com

ISBN 978-0-230-70964-5

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typset by Intype Libra Ltd
Printed and bound in the UK by
CPI Mackays, Chatham ME5 8TD

One

It was her eyes. Just the same as my brother Mattie's, the colour of wet slate; wood-shadows in a child's baby-face, markers of pain, or presentiment. They made me understand why I was meant to be lost in a foreign country, alone apart from her, needing me. Every time I looked at her eyes I knew I was right.

Everything happens for a reason, Mammy used to say before the 'accident'. *There is no such thing as a coincidence.*

I see my mother standing at the kitchen sink, her back turned to me, arms immersed in greasy suds, pausing, looking out the window at the scudding clouds, speaking dreamily and thinking maybe of her gods, only hers.

So clearly these images from my childhood return, like pools of light, sudden illuminations within a very dense wood. And in the darkest corner of the forest that is my memory – its tangled briars still confused – stands little Matilda Finch, with eyes like my brother's, and a name not dissimilar. She was my charge when I was eighteen years and two months old.

I remember the weight of her small hand inside the cup of my palm, and the silhouette of her face against the blinding Mediterranean sun, looking at me. Her head is tilted to one side. Her

gesture says it all, for she points ahead and waits for me to take action.

We are gasping in the heat. Matilda from her condition, and I from the climate, unused to the stifling humidity, for all I have known are the chill, damp summers of home. We are in an unearthly land, halfway between heaven and hell. Water and heat become a hazy sheen, hovering above the flat salt plains. We are two tiny figments floating in this seaside mirage, two outcast angels swallowed by the barren landscape and the heavy sky. We are each other's guardians.

Our bare feet slither across the hot sand dunes, but now we have started we cannot stop. We walk relentlessly. It is the farthest Matilda has walked in two weeks, and we just keep on going. Away, and away, from a place which frightens us both.

Two

I am standing outside 5 Winchester Gardens, tan leatherette suitcase in hand, red bomber jacket zipped up high, my stomach still churning from the rough crossing and rain cascading from the sky. But I don't hurry as I open the wrought-iron gate, walk up the pebble path, up the stone front steps, and rap the royal-blue door with the big brass knocker. Instead I examine my new home. My eyes travel from the big bay window on the ground floor, up the storeys of the red brick house. I count four. Back home, we don't even have a staircase, not any more. I look up at the row of three tiny windows protruding from the slate roof, and hope my bedroom isn't up there. I would rather be down below. Even the basement would do rather than the height, the vulnerability of being way up there. I crane my neck and angle my face up into the sky. The rain pelts down upon my cheeks, yet oddly the sky itself is bright and blue. I see a corner of a rainbow tucked behind the silver roof of the house and descending through the branches of a large horse chestnut tree.

A good sign, Mammy said. *A rainbow always means luck.*

But I feel mounting anxiety. Suddenly I want to go home. I could. There is nothing stopping me. I could turn around and go straight back to the tube station. I could get the train and be in

Holyhead in time for the night crossing. I have enough money to get home.

I pause; lick my lips. Even the rain is different here. Back home it tastes of salt, clings to your skin, like a misty film, lacing your lashes and penetrating your wool sweaters, whereas this London rain is stinging me, slapping off my cheeks, ferocious as a tropical storm, I imagine. It is humid, and I am sweating underneath my pvc jacket. I wish I hadn't worn it now. When I had looked in the mirror in Lyons in Sligo it had seemed the height of fashion. Now I suspect it looks cheap, especially in my present surroundings. I have never walked down such a grand road. Not even in Dublin, the time I had gone up to get my passport.

I move forwards and stand on the first doorstep, looking down at my feet, soaking in my pumps. I can't go back. Not now. Even Mammy had said I should leave. There is nothing left for me at home. No jobs, and my childish world of fairies and woods, bogs and the sea, all my fantasies of living in the wilds up the side of a mountain in love with a young god of a man, all these dreams could never sustain me. Ever since I was nine I have been a prisoner of my past: my mother's daily conversations with the dead a constant reminder; my father's absence another. I could never build a life at home. All possibility of it was burnt to cinders the day our house went up in flames, the day of the 'accident'. I had to go.

I had two choices: America (staying with cousin Deirdre, and working illegally in an ice-cream parlour in Long Island) or England. My Leaving Cert. wasn't going to be good enough to go to college. I couldn't bear the idea of repeating a year and besides I really hadn't wanted to be a nurse anyway.

So why had I chosen this? Fiona's sister, Carmel, had done it for a year and by all accounts had great craic. Her employers' friends all had Irish au pairs, and on their days off the au pairs would get

together for a big session. They met lots of boys; some of them even had English boyfriends.

Carmel had gone on holiday with her family. They had taken her to America, all expenses paid. She had even got to go to Disneyland. That was a couple of years ago but Carmel had never come back to Ireland. She had a good job in Selfridges department store now, was settled in London with a flat and a fiancé. She had a proper life, and was still great friends with her old employers. The children had loved her.

Fiona had told me all this the day we went shopping in Sligo, just after the Leaving Cert. I'd bought a bright pink-and-blue sweatshirt, with bat wing sleeves, with my savings, and Fiona had bought a pair of drainpipe jeans. They looked great on her. She was so skinny.

'If being an au pair is so brilliant, why don't *you* do it?' I said to her.

'Ah no, it's not for me.' Fiona shook her head, pulling the flake out of her 99 and licking it. We were sitting on a bench by the river, watching the ducks and being pestered by sea gulls. 'I *know* what I want to do.'

Fiona had always said she wanted to be a schoolteacher from as far back as I could remember. When we were younger she used to make me play terminally dull games of school, when I had to sit alongside her dolls and teddies as one of her pupils. She even made copybooks for her 'class' with her father's stapler, and had a little blackboard and chalks. It bored me to tears but Fiona was in her element. Never had I met anyone so suited to her calling.

'I suppose,' I replied biting the creamy peak off my ice cream. 'But don't you want to go somewhere else?'

Fiona stopped licking, screwed up her eyes, and looked thoughtfully at a swan gliding confidently upriver.

'No,' she said emphatically and then smiled at me, an ice-cream

moustache framing her pink lips. 'You know I'm a home bird. But not you, Barbara, you don't belong here.'

Suddenly it stops raining. I stand with both feet on the bottom step of my new home, as the sunshine showers me and steam rises off the wet stone. Why do I feel such dread?

Trust your instincts, Mammy used to say.

And just as I have decided to turn around and walk away, to listen to my gut feeling, I notice something out of the corner of my eye. It is a movement behind the windows of the basement. The sunshine is so bright I can't see through the glass, just a reflection of the bustling clouds, and sunlight spilling across the sky, and me, looking at myself, looking in. As I peer over the stone balustrade – my fingers gripping its edge – looking at the bamboo plants shielding the basement windows, I am distracted. In that moment the front door opens, and it is too late, for now I have arrived.

Olivia Finch looks down at me. She says nothing, just stares. Her eyes are startled as if she is surprised but she must have been expecting me. I hurry up the steps, and now I am standing in front of her. I try to smile, but I can feel my lips wobbling with nerves and worry.

'The agency sent me,' I manage to spit out.

She nods, and then looks me up and down. I squirm under her critical glare. She doesn't smile at me. I am not used to this. At home we always smile; even in Dublin, strangers greet each other with a kindly smile. I am at a loss. I do not know what else to say or do.

'How old are you?' she asks me in an accented voice, and I realise she isn't English.

'Eighteen,' I practically whisper.

'Really?' She raises her eyebrows. 'You Irish girls look so young!'

She turns then and walks inside the hall. I hesitate on the

doorstep. She pauses at the staircase and puts her hand on the banister. 'Well, come on in,' she says, her face half turning, her gaze directed at the wall, where a large abstract painting hangs.

I step inside, my hair is dripping wet but I am afraid to shake it, afraid to spatter the pristine cream walls of Olivia Finch's posh London home.

'Close the door,' she directs.

I push it shut, and immediately we are cloaked in shadows. It is a relief to be out of the glare of the sunshine. The house is cool and smells of lilies. A huge vase of them sits on a glass table in the hall. The carpet is pale and plush. I am terrified my wet shoes will make dirty marks on it.

'Come,' she says, walking down the length of the hall and turning at the end at the top of another staircase.

I follow her down to the basement and into the utility room. The only sound is the whirr of the washing machine. She hands me a towel off the shelf. It is pure white and fluffy. I have never touched such a soft towel in my life.

'You got caught in the rain?'

I nod. 'Yes.'

'And it has been so hot,' she continues, 'so humid here. I can't bear to go out when it is like that. Even though it is hotter at home in France, but London is more uncomfortable in the summer. I was glad it rained. So much better for me, and for Matilda.'

She leads me into another room. It is the kitchen, immaculate like the rest of the house, apart from two cups of half drunk coffee on the counter.

'You want a coffee?'

I would prefer a cup of tea but I am too shy to ask, so I say yes, coffee would be nice.

She ignores the coffee machine on the counter, still bubbling

away, and instead flicks on the kettle and takes a jar of Maxwell House out of the press.

'Sit, please.'

Olivia indicates a high stool, opposite the counter. I put my suitcase down on the floor and unzip my jacket. I don't want to take it off, for my t-shirt is clinging to my sweaty skin. I hope I don't smell.

'First thing,' Olivia says, opening a drawer under the counter top and taking out a packet of cigarettes. 'Very important,' she says, slipping the cigarette between her lips and searching in the drawer for a lighter. 'This' – she points at the cigarette – 'you must not tell my husband. OK?' She lights the cigarette and inhales deeply. 'He thinks it's not good for me or for Matilda. So I don't want to worry him. He thinks he is the boss.' She laughs suddenly, taking me by surprise. I press my hands into my lap, my throat dry with nerves. I want to say something: it is all a mistake and I have to leave, sorry but no. I can't stay. If I was different, more confident, sophisticated, I would be able to say something witty, show her I could be a good confidante, and maybe make the first move towards what? Friendship?

Olivia Finch stares at me. She smokes and she stares.

'You look so young,' she says again, shaking her head and pouring boiling water into a mug. She takes milk out of the fridge and passes it to me along with the coffee. She doesn't even bother to offer me sugar. I pour in the milk, my hand shaking, hoping she can't see, and take a sip of my coffee. It scalds my lip. It is bitter, and disgustingly strong. I wonder how I will manage to drink it all.

'So,' she says, inhaling. 'This is your first job as an au pair?'

'Yes, but I have had lots of experience minding our neighbours' children back home.'

'Yes, yes, I have seen the references,' she says, with a bored look on her face. She tips the ash of her cigarette out the open window,

and turns round to face me. She is like a little doll, dressed elegantly, in a pair of tailored black trousers, high heels and white blouse. Her hair is in a dark bob, heavy fringe adding drama to her high cheekbones and large eyes with thickly mascared eyelashes. She looks the height of French chic and makes me feel like a country bumpkin.

'You will do fine,' she says, a little smile playing around her lips.

She puts out her cigarette, puts the end under the tap and throws the butt in the bin, returning the packet to the drawer. She opens the window wider and then comes over and picks up my bag.

'Is that all you have?' she asks, one eyebrow raised.

'Yes.'

'My God! It is tiny. I wish I could travel so light.'

She brushes past me. Her bare arms are cold, icy.

'Come,' she says, ushering me through the doorway. 'I will introduce you to Matilda, your new playmate.'

And she laughs again, but it's not a real laugh, for there is no joy in the sound.

When I first met Matilda I didn't like her. In fact I didn't like her for days.

Her room is the colour of primroses. The curtains are white and light, fluttering inside the room like angels' wings. They are drawn across the large window but still sunshine spills through their thin resistance, making patterns on the carpet and illuminating the little girl, who is sitting up in bed, a large drawing pad on her lap and coloured pencils scattered about her. She is bending over the paper, drawing with fierce concentration.

'Matilda,' says Olivia, walking over to the bed, and sitting on the end of it. 'This is your new au pair . . .' Olivia pauses, shakes her head and looks over at me. 'I am sorry, I forget your name?'

'Barbara.'

'Yes. Thank you.'

She turns back to the child and leans over her, putting her hand over the little girl's wrist, and forcing her to stop drawing. The girl looks up at her mother, and for a moment I imagine I can see the older woman flinching. She pushes the hair brusquely off Matilda's forehead and picks up her hands, examining the fingers.

'Look at you, you're a mess,' she mutters. And then speaking more clearly to the child she says, 'This is Barbara.'

Matilda looks up and regards me coldly. She sneezes and her mother takes a tissue from the box on her bedside locker, and wipes the child's nose. Matilda wriggles away from her mother's grip and stares at me. She looks completely unlike her mother, fair with bluey grey eyes. Immediately there is something familiar about her.

'Hello,' I say, stepping forward awkwardly to peer over the bed at the sketchbook. 'What are you drawing?' I try to sound friendly and upbeat.

The child ignores me, looks crossly at her mother.

'Mummy, I don't want an au pair. Why do I have to have an au pair?'

'Because Daddy says so.' Olivia pats her daughter's sheets and stands up.

'I don't like her, Mummy. Her coat is red, and she has red hair. Why can't you look after me?' Matilda's voice rises.

My cheeks are burning, I am mortified, but Olivia doesn't seem the slightest bit embarrassed.

'Because I need the help, ma petite!' she exclaims, hands on her hips.

'I don't want her,' Matilda whines.

'Don't be so selfish,' Olivia says, talking to her six-year-old daughter as if she is an adult. 'I can't cope on my own.'

I take a step back. This is a mistake, I should leave now, but my

feet root me to the spot. I have never encountered such a rude child, or such a strange mother.

During my first week with the Finches I believed Olivia didn't possess a maternal bone in her body. In hindsight it all makes perfect sense.

'Mama,' Matilda says, her voice suddenly quiet, almost a whisper.

'Yes, my darling,' Olivia replies wearily.

'I feel sick.'

'All right, just a minute, there's a good girl.'

Olivia goes back to the bed and takes a china basin out from underneath it. She is just in time. Matilda vomits violently into the bowl.

'That's it, good girl.' Olivia's voice is softer, more gentle than before. 'I don't think that new medicine suits you. We shall have to tell Daddy, shan't we?'

I stand awkwardly in the doorway, not knowing whether I should leave or stay. Matilda's hair falls across her forehead in limp, dark blonde strands. I can see the blue veins through the pale skin of her face, and yet she isn't thin, or delicate looking; her cheeks are plump, if as white as snow. She looks at me, and her eyes are almost black, the pupils so large. I shiver . . . again that unsettling familiarity. It is as if I have seen her before but I can't think where. The child sits back against the pillow and closes her eyes. Her mother wipes her face with a tissue and motions for me to come over. She hands me the basin of sick.

'Please, can you get rid of this?' she asks me. 'Quickly.'

I dash out of the room, but I don't know where the bathroom is. The first door I try is a bedroom, surely the Finches', for it is huge, with an enormous bed covered with a purple counterpane and piled with lots of cushions, all blue and gold. The walls are white, but littered with art, mostly modern and abstract. I quickly

close the door, afraid I might spill some sick on the pristine carpet, the smell of which is beginning to turn my already fragile stomach.

On my third try (after coming across a small study) I find the bathroom. It is all polished taps and slippery marble. I slide across the floor and pour the contents of the basin down the toilet. I flush and then wash my hands. I bend my head under the cold tap and drink some of the water. My throat is so dry. I rinse out the basin in the bath and then pause to look in the mirror over the sink.

My hair has almost fallen out of its ponytail. I pull it out and try to comb it with my fingers, twisting it back up into a bunch on the top of my head.

She has red hair. That's what Matilda said. Why doesn't she like red hair? I prefer to describe it as auburn, or chestnut. I smooth my eyebrows down with my fingers. I have never noticed before how thick they are. My eyes stare back at me, the colour of bog water Daddy once joked; or seaweed, Fiona said. One of my eyes is darker green than the other. I am uneven. I find it hard to look at myself for I seem so foolish, and so young, like Olivia Finch said. I feel like an alien, so out of place in this big, grand house. I don't belong here, and the little girl is a monster.

Yet I don't want to go home, not any more. I need to get away from our house in Culleenamore, from all the memories in the field next door, the ruins of a happier life, slowly buried in the weeds and brambles, but nevertheless constantly staring me in the face. There are the words my mother conjures up – every day for the past nine years – from Mattie, for she cannot leave go of him, not even for a day.

And the secret: it is my fault. Mammy is right, there are no such things as accidents. I have tried to hide this from her ever since it happened, and I thought there might be a time when she could forgive me, but as I grow older, begin to understand the depths of her

grief, I know she never would. And so I keep silent, and my non-confession is like a gaping wound in my side, getting larger and larger, until the whole of me feels empty.

'Barbara.'

I start, nearly dropping the basin onto the tiled floor.

I open the door and Olivia Finch is standing on the landing.

'What took you so long?' she asks crossly. Without waiting for a reply she takes the basin out of my hand and places it on the floor outside Matilda's room.

'She's sleeping now so I'll show you to your room.'

I pick up my suitcase, abandoned earlier on the landing. To my surprise, instead of going up the staircase to the second floor, she opens the door next to Matilda's room, one I had not tried yet.

'I thought it best you were next door to her. She often needs help in the night,' Olivia explains.

I like the room. It is sunny and bright, and beautifully decorated. It is how I imagine a hotel room might be: snowy white sheets, smart wallpaper with tiny rosebuds on it, and pink lacy curtains.

'John decorated this room for Matilda, but she didn't like it. She doesn't like pink, or red. Not favourite colours of mine either. Pink is too sickly, and red' – Olivia pauses looking at my jacket, her lips curving into an unkind smile – 'well, red lacks subtlety. So I made her room yellow, the colour of summer. She prefers it.'

I go over to the bed and put my suitcase on it.

'If you want to come downstairs in a couple of minutes I'll go through your duties, and tell you about Matilda. Did the agency explain about her condition?'

She speaks quickly as if it is a subject she wishes not to dwell on.

'They said she had seizures, but not exactly what it is . . .'

Olivia laughs shortly. 'Yes that is the million dollar question. My daughter is not well, has never been well since she was very little. If we were in the nineteenth century you would say she suffers

from "hysteria". Some days she is better than others. Today is not such a good day . . .'

She starts to walk out of the room.

'Come down in about ten minutes.'

The door snaps shut.

I walk over to the window. My room overlooks the garden and the large chestnut tree I saw earlier. The sky is cloudless now. Late-afternoon sunshine spills onto the lawn. The garden is as immaculate as the house. There is a small greenhouse at the back, along with a large shed. A pond takes up the centre of the garden, and there are luscious water lilies floating on its surface. The beds are bursting with different flowers, many I have never seen before. It looks like the garden in *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*. I half expect to see a little brown rabbit with a blue jacket, hopping across the lawn. The air is thick with flies and bees buzzing drowsily as the day begins to wind down. I see a man come out of the shed. He is carrying a trowel and a pot. I wonder if he is Mr Finch. He has dark brown hair, is quite stocky, and looks a little younger than Mrs Finch. As if he senses me looking down at him, he pauses and looks up at the house. I quickly step back feeling silly.

I take off my jacket, move forward again, open the window and step back, careful not to look out again. A slight breeze enters the room, but the air is hot, warmer than back home. I decide to change out of my t-shirt. I unzip my suitcase and rummage with desperation through my sparse wardrobe. Unhappily I notice that a lot of my clothes are red, and pink. I pull out a baby blue t-shirt, a favourite I have had since I was fourteen but cannot bear to throw out. I pull it on. It is a little tight, since it has shrunk and I have grown over the years. But its tightness is quite fetching I decide, looking into the mirror. I take my hair out of its ponytail and leave it down. I give it a good brush but it refuses to stay straight, especially after getting so wet in the rain, and pings immediately into a

series of waves and kinks. I wish I had perfectly smooth hair, like Fiona's. She looks the way boys like.

I have never had a proper boyfriend. Of course I've shifted a few boys, but I've never actually gone out with someone. Fiona and Murtagh have been going out for two years. Fiona slept with Murtagh when her parents were away last summer. I didn't ask her the details but she said it didn't hurt, not like they said it would, and that it was nice and made her feel special. Murtagh gave her a claddagh ring, and Fiona says it is a secret engagement ring, their secret and mine because I am the only one who knows. I like Murtagh. He always includes me in the things they do, and invites me with them everywhere, but sometimes I think Fiona minds so I say I can't go, and go walking by the sea with Solomon, and since he died, on my own.

I still get angry when I think about Solomon. They should never have put him down. But Mammy said we couldn't afford to take him to the animal hospital in Dublin, even though I offered to pay for it, all of my savings – communion and confirmation money – but she said even that wasn't enough for the operation.

I said, 'You wouldn't put me down if I needed an operation, you'd find the money somehow.' But to my mother Solomon wasn't as important as a human. To me, he was more important. I try not to think about my dog as the tears come boiling to the surface. I wipe my hand across my eyes. I miss him so much. More than I miss my mother, and my father. More than Mattie.

Immediately I feel sick with guilt. I sit down on the bed and catch my breath. This is a new beginning, I say to myself. An adventure, I whisper weakly, but somehow it doesn't feel like one. I wish I were Fiona, because to me it appears she knows exactly who she is, what she is going to do with her life and who she loves. I know nothing. I am at sea.

*