

# 1983

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**Una**  
**Donegal, Ireland**  
**September**  
**Wednesday**

**Y**ou stupid, stupid girl!”

I back my way to the door. Mam’s finger is pointing right into my heart. I turn and run.

I have no idea where to run though. Our woods? Cullen’s house is down the road, but that’s the first place she’d come looking for me, probably to call me more names the nuns would put us in detention for at school. Mam’s never called me that before, never shouted at me like that before.

I need to hide for a while until she calms down. I split out the back door and breathe in the view for a minute while I sort myself out: the lofty fir trees along the road,

blowing their arms around like priests with holy water; the vast garden of bulbous winter vegetables Frank Jones has growing next door; and the fields embraced by haphazard stone walls and hedges slowly rising all the way to the mountains.

I spy a place to hide, even if it's really lame and she'd find me in a second—the car. Why did I tell Mam at all? Why, why, why? I open the back door and curl up on the soft seat.

MY TIMEX SAYS IT'S SIX. The three brothers' heads sparkle past the car window in response to Mam's call to dinner, oblivious to my scrunched-up body in the back. Ellie's probably helping Mam get dinner on the table and getting little Ruthie into the highchair.

My stomach is in rag order now. I can smell the shepherd's pie I helped Mam make earlier, before I told her I was pregnant, before she called me things Father Barry tells us will condemn us to hell forever.

Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, if you're up there, help me now. I haven't a clue what to do.

Forty minutes later and I'm starting to feel like I want to puke and I can't open the car door fast enough, but Mam put a child lock on the back door and I can't get out and I puke all over the green back seat of her Honda Civic. Can life get any worse?

Holding my breath isn't working. I reckon dinner's over and Ellie's skedaddled to the bathroom with little Ruthie. I flump into the front seat to get out and sneak along the hedge of prickly holly leaves to the bathroom window, its dull light weaving through the gloaming onto

my feet. My tights aren't much use against the sweep of wind that's blowing in through every thread of them. I hope to God Ellie's in there, and sure enough, the joint blur of one big and one tiny body moves behind the pocked glass, along with the low murmur of Ellie's voice. She always talks to Ruthie when they're in there. She always talks to everyone, but Ruthie's her best listener . . . when she's got her trapped like that. I bang my knuckles against the icy glass and wait with a fist under each armpit to ward off the wind.

Ellie's coffee-colored hair appears first followed by her Brigitte Bardot face—according to every boy in town. “What the hell are you doing out there? Are you trying to get in the window?”

“Not right now; I just need a wet towel.” I dangle an arm through the open space.

Ellie sticks a towel into the bathwater and rinses it out a bit. Ruthie starts to cry and stands with her half-naked body on the bathmat with her arms reaching up to the window. She always wants to be with the sister she can't have.

“Thanks.” Ellie stares at me for a second before I hunker back down and head for the car.

Wiping the wet towel over the seat is only making this worse. It's spreading my puke, not mopping it up, and despite the awful stink of it all, I really want some dinner. Maybe Ellie can get me some later, or maybe I can get back into the house when they've all gone to bed. Or I could go to Tanya's house and help myself to her fridge. Best friends and all that.

I do my best with what's left of the rank, lumpy mess on the seat and wave my hand in the air, much good it'll do my nose.

Ellie's left the window open a smidgen and she helps me wriggle my hips through and plant my feet onto the toilet seat lid. Lucky for me, Ruthie's out of the bath now, but she's got her fat little leg trying to reach up and over the edge of the bath, back into the bubbles. I throw the towel into the water that's on its way down the drain and shake it around.

Ellie's acting as if nothing weird is going on at all. That's how the Gallahers do things. We pretend everything is normal, no matter what kind of shite is happening, until someone says it isn't.

"God, what have you done to your hair, Una?" She reaches up and pats a bit against my ear. "You never could get it straight. Someone should invent something for that."

I suppose puking your guts up all over your mam's car would set the hair dancing.

Ruthie plays with the mess of it while Ellie puts her nappy on. "Here we go, Ruthie," she says. "First, I fold in each side of the nappy, like this, and then I put the liner in it, like this." She grabs Ruthie's feet in one hand and dips her fingers into the Sudocrem I just opened for her. "And now I'm going to put it on your bum bum, like this, until your bum looks like an ice cream." She smiles, but I don't know if I have it in me. She sticks the big nappy pins in *very* carefully, clicks down the pink cap on them, and then stands Ruthie to her feet. We're like her other mothers.

Ellie looks up at me, into my eyes, and I wonder if she knows, if Mam told her; but Mam's probably mortified,

wondering what everyone's going to say. It'll be all over town in hours if she says anything. Father Barry'll probably use me as an example of Mary Magdalene in his next sermon. Oh God, I'll be kicked out of St. Joseph's! What am I going to say? I haven't told Cullen I have his baby in this deep part of my body, and I don't plan on telling him either. I'm scared stupid and I have no idea how he'll react. But if Mam tells?

But I had to tell her. She's my mam, for God's sake. I'd kept it in for so long and I knew she'd notice it soon. She's always gone on at us about telling the truth. I felt evil for not telling her. Do I feel better now? No. Not at all.

"Upsadaisy, Ruthie," says Ellie. "Give me your foot so we can get your jammies on." I hold Ruthie's little body so she won't fall over. Ellie's the nice one. I'd trust her, but I don't want her to have to keep secrets. It wouldn't be fair on her. But here's what I didn't tell Mam. If I had a choice to do it all over again, I would, only with a Durex this time, and no drink.

There. I've said it. I liked it, and Father Barry and all the nuns at St. Josephs can stay in their miserable, sadistic, single lives because they don't know what they're missing. No wonder Mam keeps having babies. It's the only time she's allowed to do it.