CLAIRE KEEGAN: ANTARCTICA (1999).

Sisters

It is customary for the Porters to send a postcard to say when they will be arriving. Betty waits. Each time the dog barks she finds herself going to the window at the foot of the stairs, looking out through the maidenhair fern to see if the postman is cycling up the avenue. It is almost June. The chill has slackened off; plums are getting plumper on the trees. The Porters will soon come, demanding strange foods, fresh handkerchiefs, hot-water bottles, ice.

Louisa, Betty's sister, went away to England when she was young and married Stanley Porter, a salesman who fell for her, he said, because of the way her hair fell down her back. Louisa always had beautiful hair. When they were young, Betty brushed it every night, one hundred strokes, and secured the gold braid with a piece of satin ribbon.

Betty's own hair is, and always has been, an unremarkable brown. Her hands were always her best feature, white, lady-like hands that played the organ on Sundays. Now, after years of work, her hands are ruined, the skin on her palms is hard and masculine, the knuckles enlarged; her mother's wedding band cannot be removed.

Betty lives in the homestead, the big house, as it is called. It once belonged to a Protestant landlord who sold up and moved away after a childless marriage ended. The Land Commission, who bought the estate, knocked down the three-storey section of the house and sold the remaining two-storey servants' quarters and the surrounding seventy acres to Betty's father for a small sum when he married. The house looks too small for the garden and too close to the yard, but its ivy-covered walls look handsome nonetheless. The granite archway leads to a yard with stables, a barn and lofty sheds, coach houses, kennels and a spout-house. There's a fine walled orchard at the back in which the landlord grazed an Angus bull to keep the children out, seeing as he had none of his own. The place has a history, a past. People said Parnell had a tooth pulled in the parlour. The big kitchen has a barred window, an Aga and the deal table Betty scrubs on Saturdays. The white, marble fireplace in the parlour suits the mahogany furniture. A staircase curves on to a well-lighted landing with oak doors opening into three large bedrooms overlooking the yard, and a bathroom Betty had plumbed in when her father became ill.

Betty, too, had wanted to go to England, but she stayed back to keep house. Their mother died suddenly when Betty and Louisa were small. She went out to gather wood one afternoon and dropped dead coming back through the meadow. It seemed natural for Betty, being the eldest, to step into her mother's shoes and

mind her father, a humoursome man given to violent fits of temper. She hadn't an easy life. There were cattle to be herded and tested, pigs to fatten, turkeys to be sent off on the train to Dublin before Christmas. They cut the meadow in summer and harvested a field of oats in autumn.

Her father gave instructions and did less and less, paid a man to come in and do the hardest work. He criticised the veterinary bills, insulted the priest who came to anoint him when he was ill, belittled Betty's cooking and claimed that nothing was as it should have been. Nothing was the way it used to be, he meant. He hated change. Towards the end he'd put on his black overcoat and walk the fields, seeing how tall the grass was in the meadow, counting the grains of corn on the stalks, noting the thinness of a cow or the rust on a gate. Then he would come inside just before dark and say, 'Not much time left. Not much time.'

'Don't be morbid,' Betty used to answer, and continued on; but last winter her father took to his bed, and for the three days preceding his death he lay there roaring and kicking his feet, calling for 'Buttermilk! Buttermilk!' When he died on a Tuesday night, by willing himself to die, Betty was more relieved than sorry.

Betty kept track of Louisa's progress through the years; her wedding, which she did not attend, the birth of her children, one boy and one girl, what Louisa had wanted. She sent a fruit cake through the post every Christmas, home-made fudge at Easter, and remembered

the children's birthdays, put pound notes she could not spare in cards.

Betty had been too busy for marriage. She had once walked out with a young Protestant man named Cyril Dawe her father disapproved of. Nothing ever came of it. The time for marriage and children passed for Betty. She became used to attending to her father's needs in the big house, quelling his temper, making his strong tea, ironing his shirts and polishing his good shoes on a Saturday night.

After his death she managed to live by renting out the land and cautiously spending the savings her father had left in the Allied Irish Bank. She was fifty years old. The house was hers, but a clause was put in her father's will that gave Louisa right of residence for the duration of her lifetime. Her father had always favoured Louisa. She had given him the admiration he needed, whereas Betty only fed and clothed and pacified him.

When June passes without word from the Porters, Betty becomes uneasy. She pictures the lettuce and the scallions rotting in the vegetable patch, toys with the notion of renting a guest house by the sea, of going off to Ballymoney or Cahore Point; but in her heart she knows she won't. She never goes anywhere. All she ever does is cook and clean and milk the cow she keeps for the house, attends mass on Sundays. But she likes it this way, likes having the house to herself, knowing things are as she left them.

An overwhelming sense of freedom has accompanied

the days since her father's death. She pulls weeds, keeps the gardens tidy, goes out with the secateurs on Saturdays to cut flowers for the altar. She does the things she never had time to do before: she crochets, blues the lace curtains, replaces the bulb in the Sacred Heart lamp, scrapes the moss off the horse trough and paints the archway gate. She can make jam later on when the fruit ripens. She can pit the potatoes and pickle the tomatoes in the greenhouse. Nothing, really, will go to waste if the Porters do not come. She is getting used to this idea of living through the summer alone, is humming a tune softly and weighing candied peel on the scales, when the postman wheels the bicycle up to the door.

'They're coming on the ninth off the evening ferry, Miss Elizabeth,' he says. 'They're coming as far as Enniscorthy on the bus. You'll have to send a car.' He puts the card on the dresser and slides the kettle over on the hot plate to make himself some tea. 'Not a bad day.'

Betty nods. She has only four days to get the house ready. They could have given her more notice. It seems strange, their not bringing the car, Stanley's big company car that he always takes such pride in.

The next morning she throws out her father's old vests she's used as dusters, carries the empty stout bottles up the wood and dumps them under the bushes. She takes out rugs and beats them with more vigour than is necessary, raises a flurry of dust. She hides old bedspreads at the back of the wardrobe, turns the mattresses and puts the good sheets on the beds. She always

keeps good bed-linen in case she'll get sick and she wouldn't want the doctor or the priest saying her sheets are patched. She takes all the cracked and chipped plates off the dresser and arranges the good willow-pattern dinner set on the shelves. She orders bags of flour and sugar and wheaten meal from the grocer, gets down on her knees and polishes the floor until it shines.

They arrive in the avenue on a hot Friday evening. Betty takes off her apron when the taxi beeps the horn and rushes out into the avenue to greet them.

'Oh Betty!' Louisa says, as if she's surprised to see her there.

She embraces Louisa, who looks as young as ever in her white summer two-piece, her hair hanging in gold waves down her back. Her bare arms are brown with the sun.

Her son, Edward, has grown tall and lanky, a hidden young man who prefers to stay indoors; he extends a cold palm, which Betty shakes. There is little feeling in his handshake. The girl, Ruth, skips down to the old tennis court without so much as a word of hello.

'Come back here and kiss your Aunt Betty!' Louisa screams.

'Where's Stanley?'

'Oh he's busy, had to work, you know,' Louisa says. 'He may follow on later.'

'Well, you're looking great, as usual.'

Louisa's prominent white teeth are too plentiful for her smile. She accepts but does not return the compli-

ment. The taxi-man is taking suitcases off the roof-rack. There is an awful lot of luggage. They've brought a black Labrador and books and pillows and wellingtons, a flute, raincoats, a chessboard and woolly jumpers.

'We brought cheese,' Louisa says, and hands Betty a slab of pungent Cheddar.

'How thoughtful,' Betty says, and sniffs it.

Louisa stands at the front gates and gazes out towards Mount Leinster with its ever-lighted mast, and the lush deciduous forest in the valley.

'Oh, Betty,' she says, 'it's so lovely to be home.'

'Come on in.'

Betty has the table set; two kettles stand boiling on the Aga, their spouts expelling pouty little breaths of steam. A pool of evening sunlight falls through the barred window over the cold roast chickens and potato salad.

'Poor Coventry was put in a cage for the entire journey,' Louisa says, referring to the dog. He has slumped down in front of the dresser and Betty has to slide him across the lino to get the cupboard doors open.

'Any beetroot, Aunt Elizabeth?' Edward asks.

Betty has taken great care washing the lettuce but now finds herself hoping an earwig won't crawl out of the salad bowl. Her eyesight isn't what it used to be. She scalds the teapot and cuts a loaf of brown bread into thin, dainty slices.

'I need the toilet!' Ruth announces.

'Take your elbows off the table,' Louisa instructs, and removes a hair from the butter dish.

There is too much pepper in the salad dressing and the rhubarb tart could have used more sugar, but all that's left is a few potato skins, chicken bones, greasy dishes.

When evening falls, Louisa says she'd like to sleep with Betty.

'It'll be like old times,' she says. 'You can brush my hair.'

She has developed an English accent, which Betty doesn't care for. Betty does not want Louisa in her bed. She likes being sprawled out on her double mattress, waking and sleeping when she feels like it, but she can't say no. She puts Edward in her father's room and Ruth in the other and helps Louisa drag her luggage up the stairs.

Louisa pours two measures of duty-free vodka into glasses and talks about the improvements she has made to the house in England Betty has never seen. She describes the satin floor-length curtains in the living room, which cost £25 a yard, the velvet headboards, the dishwasher that sterilises the dishes and the tumble dryer that means she doesn't have to race out to the line every time a drop of rain falls.

'No wonder Stanley's working,' Betty says, and sips the vodka. She doesn't care for the taste; it reminds her of the holy water she drank as a child, thinking it would cure her stomach aches.

'Don't you miss Daddy?' Louisa says suddenly. 'He always had such a warm welcome for us.'

Betty gives her a straight look, feels the ache in her arms after the four days' work.

'Oh. I don't mean you –'

'I know what you mean,' Betty says. 'No, I don't really miss him. He was so contrary towards the end. Going out to the fields and talking about death. But then, you brought out the sweeter side of him.'

Her father used to hold Louisa in a tight embrace when she arrived home, then stood back to look at her. He used to tell Betty to keep fig rolls in the house because she had a taste for figs. Nothing was ever too good for Louisa.

Now she unpacks her clothes, holding them up for Betty to admire. There's a linen dress with pink butterflies swooping towards the tail, a glittery scarf, a burgundy lace slip, a cashmere jacket, leather peep-toe shoes. She takes the cap off a bottle of American perfume and holds it out for Betty to sniff, but she does not spray a sample on her wrist. Louisa's clothes have the luxurious feel of money. The hems are deep, the linings satin, her shoes have leather insoles. She takes a covetous pride in her belongings, but then Louisa has always been the fashionable one.

Before she went to England Louisa got a job housekeeping for a rich woman in Killiney. Once, Betty took the train to Dublin to spend a day with her. When Louisa saw her at Heuston station with her country suit and her brown handbag, she whipped the handbag from her hands, fast as greased lightning, and said,

'Where do you think you're going with that old thing?' and pushed it down in her shopping bag.

Now she sits at the dressing table, singing an old Latin hymn while Betty brushes her hair. Betty listens to her girlish voice and, catching a glimpse of their reflection in the mirror, realises that nobody would ever suspect they were sisters. Louisa with her gold hair and emerald earrings, looking so much younger than her years: Betty with her brown hair and her man's hands and the age showing so plainly on her face.

'Chalk and cheese' was the phrase their mother used.

Edward wants a poached egg for breakfast. He sits at the head of the table and waits for it to be put in front of him. Betty stands at the Aga stirring porridge while Louisa, still in her nightdress, looks into the cupboards, inspecting their contents, seeing what there is to eat.

'I'm starving!' Ruth says. She's plump for a girl of her age.

None of them do anything simply or quietly; they don't mind taking up space, asking for more of this or that. On those rare occasions when Betty goes into anyone's house, she is thankful for what she gets and washes the dishes afterwards; but the Porters act like they own the place.

Louisa makes cheese on toast for Ruth but eats little herself. She just pushes her eggs around her plate with a fork and sips her tea.

'You're miles away,' Betty says.

'Just thinking.'

Betty does not press her: Louisa has always been secretive. When she was beaten in school, she never said one word at home. Being falsely blamed for laughing or talking out of turn, Louisa would blankly kneel down in front of the picture of Saint Anthony and confess and take undue punishment without ever a mention. Once, after the headmaster hit Betty, her nose would not stop bleeding and he sent her out to the stream to wash her face, but she ran home across the fields and told her mother, who walked her back up to the school, into the classroom, and told the headmaster that if he laid so much as another finger on her girls, he'd get a worse death than Billy the Buttermaker (who had been savagely murdered down south a few days back). Louisa had jeered her about that, but Betty was unashamed. She would rather tell the truth and face the consequences than get down on her knees before a picture of a saint and confess to things she did not do.

On Sunday morning, Louisa balances their father's old shaving mirror on the crucifix in Betty's window and plucks her eyebrows into perfect semi-circles. Betty milks the cow and digs potatoes and gets ready for mass.

A great fuss is made over Louisa in the chapel. Neighbours come up to her in the graveyard and shake her hand, and say she's looking wonderful.

'Aren't you looking great?'

'You haven't aged one bit.'

'Sure weren't you always the apple of everybody's eye?'

'Doesn't she look great, Betty?'

When they go into the grocer's for messages, Joe Costello, the bachelor who owns the quarry and rents out Betty's land, corners Louisa between the tinned goods and the cold meats counter and asks is she still fond of the cinema? He's a great big man with a pinstripe suit and a black, pencil moustache. They used to cycle to the pictures together before Louisa went off to England. Edward is setting mousetraps in the hardware shelves and Ruth's ice-cream cone is dripping down the front of her dress, but Louisa takes no notice.

'Where's the hubby?' Joe Costello is asking Louisa.

'Oh, he had to work.'

'Ah yes, I know the feeling. The work never ends.'

When they get home, Betty ties her apron round her waist and puts the dinner on. She likes Sundays, listening to the curate read the gospel, meeting the neighbours, listening to the spit of the roast while she reads the paper, tending the garden in the afternoon and taking a walk around the wood. She always tries to keep it a day of rest, keep it holy.

'Don't you ever get lonely up here on your own?' Louisa asks.

'No.' It had never occurred to her to be lonely.

Louisa paces the kitchen floor until dinner time, then takes off down the avenue to visit the neighbours' houses. Betty stays at home and works out a menu for

the week. Louisa hasn't given her a penny towards their keep, hasn't bought so much as a loaf. Betty's budget is tight enough without feeding three extra people, but she assumes it's something Louisa will put right when it comes into her mind. Louisa has always been forgetful about the essentials.

Monday is washing day. The Porters don't believe in wearing the same clothes twice, and since Ruth wets the bed, she needs clean sheets every day. Betty wonders at the child – she's almost nine years old – but says nothing to Louisa, sensing it would be a sore point. The clothesline hanging between the lime trees is laden, but a strong wind throws the laundry into a horizontal flapping state that Betty finds pleasurable. Some of the clothes are delicate and Betty must wash them by hand. As she dips her hands down into the sinkful of soapy water, she begins to wonder when Stanley will arrive. He would take them off to the seaside and skim pebbles across the waves and keep the children occupied. Go fishing for pike in the Slaney, shoot rabbits.

Betty rises earlier to have more time to herself. The summer mornings feel healthy and cool. She sits with her head leant against the warmth of the cow's side and watches milk dancing in the bucket. She feeds the geese and pulls carrots and parsnips from the vegetable patch. Mount Leinster looks gratifyingly unchanged in the blue distance; swallows are building under the eaves of the granite stables. This is the life she wants to lead, the good life.

She is pouring warm milk through a piece of muslin when Joe Costello blocks the daylight in the doorway.

'Morning, Betty.' He tips his hat respectfully.

'Good morning, Joe!' She's surprised to see him, he so seldom drops in, except when a bullock goes missing or to pay the rent on the land.

'Sit down, won't you?'

He sits in at the table, all arms and legs. 'Nice spell of weather we're having.'

'Couldn't ask for nicer.'

She makes tea and sits talking to Joe at the table. He's a decent sort of man, Betty thinks, the way he takes his hat off and uses the spoon for the jam instead of pushing his knife down into the pot. Table manners say so much. They talk about cattle and the quarry and then Edward appears, pokes his nose into the implements on the sink.

'Isn't the milk here pasteurised, Aunt Betty?'

Betty laughs with Joe Costello over the good of it, but when Louisa comes down Joe loses all interest in Betty. Louisa isn't wearing her nightdress. Her hair is brushed and she's in her linen butterfly dress, her mouth shiny with Vaseline.

'Ah, Joe!' she says, as if she didn't know he was there.

'Morning, Louisa.' He stands up, as if she's the Queen.

Betty takes it all in, how Louisa flirts: the pout of her lips, the tilt of her hip, the way she lifts and relaxes her bare shoulder. It is a fine art. She leaves them there talking in the kitchen and strides out to the garden for parsley. Ruth is standing under the tree, eating her plums.

'Get away from those plums!'

'Okay, okay,' Ruth says. 'Don't get your knickers in a knot.'

'They're for jam.'

It is an old story. The men flocking round Louisa, sniffing her out, always asking her to dance in the old days.

Louisa and Betty had gone to house-dances together when they were young. Betty remembers a fine summer's night, sitting on a wooden bench in Davis's, just a mile up the road. She was sitting there feeling the grain of the wood under her fingers. The scent of lilacs from the ditch came through the open window. She remembers the happiness of that moment being broken when Louisa leaned over. She can still, to this day, remember her exact words:

'I'll give you a piece of advice. You should try not to smile. You look terrible when you smile.'

Betty didn't smile for years afterwards without remembering this remark. She never had Louisa's white smile. She'd suffered from bronchitis as a child and had to take cough medicine, which ruined her teeth. So many things, all coming back. Betty feels her blood racing when she has such memories. But that is all in the past. She can think for herself now. She has earned that right. Her father is dead. She can see things as they are, not through his eyes, nor Louisa's.

When she comes back into the kitchen with sprigs of parsley, Joe Costello is pouring tea into her best china cup for Louisa.

'Say when.'

'When,' Louisa says. She is sitting with her back to the harsh morning light, the sun intensifying the gold of her hair.

Betty cooks a leg of lamb the following Sunday. When a trickle of blood runs out on the serving plate while she is carving, she doesn't care. Nor does she care that the carrots are rubbery and overcooked, but nobody makes any mention of the meal, not one word. She's in no mood to cater for individual tastes. Earlier she had gone down into the parlour and caught Ruth jumping on the armchair. What's more, there are dog hairs all over the house. Everywhere she looks, dog hairs.

Edward hangs around, silently entering the rooms in which she's working and startles her. He cannot entertain himself.

'There's nothing to do,' he complains. 'We're stranded.'

'You can clean out the hen house if you like,' Betty says. 'The sprong's in the barn.'

But somehow this does not appeal to Edward. He's not a fellow who believes in earning his appetite. Ruth sings and skips around the garden. Betty feels sorry for her sometimes: Louisa pays her little or no attention and she needs some at her age. So when Betty is finished washing the blood-stained dishes, she reads her *Hansel and Gretel*.

'Why would the father desert his own children?' Ruth asks.

Betty cannot think of an answer.

Betty makes jam, takes the step-ladder outside, reaches up into the boughs and plucks every single plum off the tree. They are her plums. She washes and stones them, covers the fruit with sugar in the preserving pan and shows Ruth and Edward how to wash the jam jars. They haven't a clue about domestic work. Edward squirts a cupful of Fairy Liquid into the sink and they have to start again.

'Who does the washing up at home?' Betty asks. 'Oh, that's right: you have a dishwasher, I forgot.'

'A dishwasher? No we don't, Aunt Betty,' Ruth says.

They make the jam and Betty lines up the pots like ammunition in the pantry. She's wondering how long it will last, when Louisa walks into the kitchen after her day out visiting. Her expression is flushed and radiant like someone who's been swimming in deep salt waters.

'Any post?' she says.

'No.'

'Nothing?'

'Just an ESB bill.'

'Oh.'

July has passed without a word from Stanley.

In August the weather turns stormy. Rain keeps the Porters indoors, traps them in the rooms. Wet leaves cling to the window panes, black rainwater runs down between the drills in the vegetable patch. Louisa stays in bed reading romantic novels and eating cake, walks

around in her nightdress till well past noon. She washes her hair with rainwater and makes Rice Krispie buns for the children. Edward plays the flute in the parlour. Betty has never heard anything like it; it's as if somebody has trapped a wild bird or a small reptile in a cage and its despairing little voice is crying out to be freed. Ruth cuts pictures of models and perfume out of magazines with Betty's good dressmaking scissors and pastes them in her scrapbook.

Betty becomes concerned about the garden. Strong winds have shaken the rose bushes, scattered the blooms across the gravel, and Betty, picking them up, feels sorry and strokes the dusky-pink petals, smooth as eyelids in her fingers. There are greenfly on the leaves; they are spotted and drowsy. She has been too busy with domestic chores to tend her garden.

She is standing there, thinking about her poor flowers, when Edward approaches her. Elderberry blossoms are being cast about like confetti in the wind; a light drizzle is falling from a sky of fragmented, greyish cloud.

'Aunt Betty?'

'Yes?'

'Who will own this place when you die?'

She's shocked. The words are like a hard, stinging slap.

'Why? I –' She can't think of anything to say.

Edward is standing there looking at her with his hands in the pockets of his linen trousers that are almost impossible to iron. She feels the sudden threat of tears, backs away from him.

'Go inside and help your mother!' she barks, but he does not move: he just stands there looking into her eyes. His eyes are narrow and blue. She retreats, walks through the ruined garden, down the avenue, and takes refuge in the woods where she cannot be seen. She sits on a damp, mossy stone under the swaying trees for a long time, thinking.

For the first time since her father's death she gives in to a flood of warm, salty tears. Things come back to her: she sees herself at Christmas time wringing turkeys' necks, a mound of feathers at her feet; as a child running in to warm her hands at the fire and running out again, hearing her mother say, 'She's such a hardy little girl.' Her mother going out to the meadow, then laid out so unexpectedly, rosary beads entwined between her fingers. She sees Louisa in a grey suit leaving on the boat to England, coming back with a wealthy husband, pictures of babies in christening robes; her father taking pride in his grandson. She remembers Cyril Dawe sitting under the hawthorn in autumn with his arms around her, holding her tight as if he was afraid she would get away. How he reached down and took a stone from under her, an act of tenderness. All her life she'd worked, she'd done the right things, but was it right? She sees herself stooping to pick up the pieces of a china plate her father broke in temper. Is this what she's become? A woman with broken plates? Is that all?

It seems to her now that there is nothing new under the sun. Edward thinks he'll step into her shoes, just as

she stepped into her mother's. Inheritance is not renewal. More than anything, it keeps everything the same. All that is left, all that's sensible, is to clutch on to what is hers by right. Nothing shall ever stop her.

It is getting dark. How long has she been away? She walks up between the trees. She pacifies herself by concluding that it is only a matter of time before Louisa leaves. The children will have to be back to attend school in a fortnight's time. Come September, Betty will be able to get a good night's sleep, listen to the wireless, get rid of the dog hairs, cook when and what she likes, not have those awful children asking her what will happen when she dies.

When Betty arrives home, Louisa has spread a piece of blue cotton on the parlour floor, is putting an edge on her dressmaker's scissors with the file Betty keeps for sharpening the knives.

'I was thinking we could make some new curtains for the bathroom. Those ones you have are ancient,' she says. She puts the blade to the edge of the fabric and begins to cut.

'Do as you please,' Betty says, and goes upstairs to lie down.

The weather does not take up in mid-August. Huge grey clouds provide a sullen parchment overhead. Frogs crawl in under the door on rainy nights, and Betty finds it almost impossible to get the clothes dry. She hangs them on a clothes-horse round the Aga, lights the par-

lour fire, but a down-draught pushes black smoke into the room. She watches the bees robbing pollen from her crimson flowers outside the door, and counts the days.

She gets a lift into town with the insurance man and checks the balance in her bank account. Her money for August and September is used up. She takes money set aside for October and becomes imaginative with meals.

She is frying pancakes for tea one evening, the fat spattering lightly out on the draining board. The children are outside. The goslings have tried to follow the goose down the steps outside the front door, but their legs aren't long enough. They have fallen on their backs, their legs paddling the air. Ruth and Edward are turning them right-side-up with a long stick while the goose hisses at them and flaps her wings.

Louisa is sitting up next to the Aga with a blanket round her shoulders.

'When will Stanley be coming?' Betty asks. She takes an enamel plate from the gas oven.

'I can't say.'

'You can't say or you don't know?'

'I don't know.'

'The children will have to be back in school in two weeks' time.'

'Yes, I know.'

'Well?'

'Well what?'

'Well do you think he'll come before then?' Betty says,

and accidentally pours too much pancake batter into the pan.

'I don't know.'

She watches the heat dimpling the edges of the batter, wondering how she'll turn it. 'You've left Stanley.'

'Those pancakes smell nice.'

'You've left Stanley and you think you can stay here.'

'Would you like me to set the table?'

'Do you know that's the first time you've asked that since you arrived?' Betty has turned to face her.

'Is it? Edward! Ruth! Come on in for your tea!'

'Louisa!'

'I have a right to be here. It's in Daddy's will.'

Ruth runs in.

'Wash your hands,' Louisa says.

'I thought you said it was ready?' Ruth says, staring at the empty table.

'It will be, love. Soon.'

Louisa gets out of the kitchen that evening. She builds a small fire in the parlour, sits in the big armchair and starts reading *War and Peace*. Betty goes out to milk the cow. She feels a strange soothing mood of crystal clarity descend. It is all beginning to make sense. When she comes back inside, Louisa has taken a bath. She is sitting in front of the fireplace with her back to Betty, rubbing cold cream into her neck. Her hair is wrapped turban-like in a towel. Two glasses on the mantel are filled to the brim with vodka.

'Are the children in bed?'

'Yes,' Louisa says.

She hands a glass of vodka to Betty, as a peace-offering, Betty supposes. They sip in silence while the light drains out of the day.

'Let me do your hair,' says Betty suddenly. She goes upstairs for the comb. When she comes back, Louisa is sitting in front of the overmantel looking into the mirror.

Betty takes the comb from her apron pocket, gently removes the towel from Louisa's head and begins to disentangle the knots in her hair. It is waist-length, smelling strangely of fern and fruit.

'Nice shampoo.'

'Yes.'

Moonlight begins to shine brazenly through the French window. They can hear Edward snoring in the big room above their heads.

Betty pulls the comb's teeth through the damp, gold strands.

'It's like old times,' Louisa says. 'I wish I could go back. Do you ever wish that?'

'No. I'd just do the same things,' Betty says.

'Yes. You're the clever one.'

'Clever?'

'Poor old Betty, slaving away. You got what you wanted.'

'Didn't you? A husband, children, a nice house. Father was no picnic.'

A silence falls. The room seems unbearably quiet.

Betty has been so busy, she has forgotten to wind the grandfather clock. A slice of winterish air slides in under the door.

'There are no satin curtains,' Betty says.

'Whatever do you mean?'

'The dishwasher, the tumble dryer. You made it up. It's all made up.'

'That isn't true.'

Louisa is still admiring herself in the overmantel. She sits there like someone drugged, who cannot take her eyes off her reflection. She won't meet Betty's eyes in the mirror. She doesn't care that Betty did without, sent pound notes to her children, carried buckets through the yard, threw over a chance of marriage, spread dung and washed her father's underpants for decades. She believes she can come and live here, encroach on Betty's ground, have her running around like a slave after her and her young family till the end of her days.

Betty reaches into her apron pocket. If Louisa feels the cold, high up on her neck, she doesn't react. She does not see the gleam of metal, the blades newly sharpened by her own hand. Betty holds the scissors, makes one swift cut. It only takes a second. Betty has great strength in her hands. She is still holding the scissors when Louisa, sensing the difference, sees her hair on the carpet.

Louisa is screaming and saying things, half-truths. Something about greed and a big house all to herself and having not an ounce of sympathy. But Betty isn't listening any more.

Louisa cries. She cries all night, while she packs, and all morning as she leads the children and the dog from the house. Betty says nothing. She just stands in the doorway looking out at the fine blue morning and smiles her terrible smile.

Louisa looks nothing without her hair.