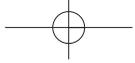


The Forgotten Waltz



BY THE SAME AUTHOR

FICTION

The Portable Virgin
The Wig My Father Wore
What Are You Like?
The Pleasure of Eliza Lynch
The Gathering
Yesterday's Weather

NON-FICTION

Making Babies

ANTHOLOGY



The Granta Book of the Irish Short Story (editor)



The Forgotten Waltz



Anne Enright



JONATHAN CAPE
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This novel is a work of fiction despite the use in some cases of real names which feature strictly as a dramatic device. All characters are the products of the author's imagination and any resemblance to actual persons is entirely coincidental

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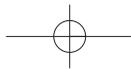
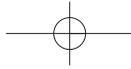
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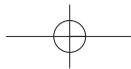
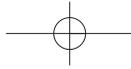
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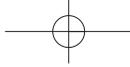


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Preface

IF IT HADN'T been for the child then none of this might have happened, but the fact that a child was involved made everything that much harder to forgive. Not that there is anything to forgive, of course, but the fact that a child was mixed up in it all made us feel that there was no going back; that it mattered. The fact that a child was affected meant we had to face ourselves properly, we had to follow through.

She was nine when it started, but that hardly matters. I mean her age hardly matters because she was always special – isn't that the word? Of course all children are special, all children are beautiful. I always thought Evie was a bit peculiar, I have to say: but also that she was special in the old-fashioned sense of the word. There was a funny, off-centre beauty to her. She went to an ordinary school, but there was, even at that stage, an amount of ambivalence about Evie, the sense of things unsaid. Even the doctors – especially the doctors – kept it vague, with their, 'Wait and see.'

So there was a lot of anxiety around Evie – too much, I thought, because she was also a lovely child. When I got

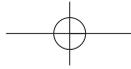


to know her better, I saw that she could be cranky, or lonely; I questioned her happiness. But when she was nine I thought of her as a beautiful, clear little person, a kind of gift, too.

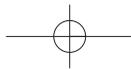
And when she saw me kissing her father – when she saw her father kissing me, in his own house – she laughed and flapped her hands. A shrill, unforgettable hoot. It was a laugh, I thought later, mostly of recognition, but also of spite, or something like it – glee, perhaps. And her mother, who was just downstairs, said, ‘Evie! What are you doing up there?’ making the child glance back over her shoulder. ‘Come on, down now.’

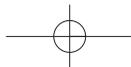
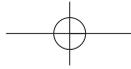


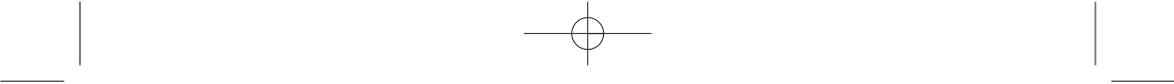
And some miracle of her mother’s voice, so casual and controlled, made Evie think that everything was all right, despite the fact that I had been kissing her father. Not for the first time, either – though I now think of it as the first real time, the first official occasion of our love, on New Year’s Day 2007, when Evie was still pretty much a child.



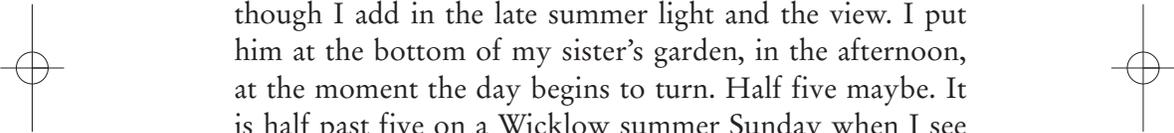
I







There Will Be Peace in the Valley



I MET HIM in my sister's garden in Enniskerry. That is where I saw him first. There was nothing fated about it, though I add in the late summer light and the view. I put him at the bottom of my sister's garden, in the afternoon, at the moment the day begins to turn. Half five maybe. It is half past five on a Wicklow summer Sunday when I see Seán for the first time. There he is, where the end of my sister's garden becomes uncertain. He is about to turn around – but he doesn't know this yet. He is looking at the view and I am looking at him. The sun is low and lovely. He is standing where the hillside begins its slow run down to the coast, and the light is at his back, and it is just that time of day when all the colours come into their own.

It is some years ago now. The house is new and this is my sister's housewarming party, or first party, a few months after they moved in. The first thing they did was take down the wooden fence, to get their glimpse of the sea, so the back of the house sits like a missing tooth in the row of new homes, exposed to the easterly winds and to curious cows; a little stage set, for this afternoon, of happiness.



They have new neighbours in, and old pals, and me, with a few cases of wine and the barbecue they put on their wedding list but ended up buying themselves. It sits on the patio, a green thing with a swivelling bucket of a lid, and my brother-in-law Shay – I think he even wore the apron – waves wooden tongs over lamb steaks and chicken drumsticks, while cracking cans of beer, high in the air, with his free hand.

Fiona keeps expecting me to help because I am her sister. She passes with an armful of plates and shoots me a dark look. Then she remembers that I am a guest and offers me some Chardonnay.

‘Yes,’ I say. ‘Yes, I’d love some, thanks,’ and we chat like grown-ups. The glass she fills me is the size of a swimming pool.



It makes me want to cry to think of it. It must have been 2002. There I was, just back from three weeks in Australia and mad – just *mad* – into Chardonnay. My niece Megan must have been four, my nephew nearly two: fantastic, messy little items, who look at me like they are waiting for the joke. They have friends in, too. It’s hard to tell how many kids there are, running around the place – I think they are being cloned in the downstairs bathroom. A woman goes in there with one toddler and she always comes out fussing over two.

I sit beside the glass wall between the kitchen and garden – it really is a lovely house – and I watch my sister’s life. The mothers hover round the table where the kids’ food is set, while, out in the open air, the men sip their drinks and glance skywards, as though for rain. I end up talking to a woman who is sitting beside a plate of chocolate Rice Krispie cakes and working her way through them in a forgetful sort of way. They have mini-marshmallows on top. She goes to pop one in her mouth, then she pulls back in surprise.



‘Ooh, pink!’ she says.

I don’t know what I was waiting for. My boyfriend, Conor, must have been dropping someone off or picking them up – I can’t remember why he wasn’t back. He would have been driving. He usually drove, so I could have a few drinks. Which was one of the good things about Conor, I have to say. These days, it’s me who drives. Though that is an improvement, too.

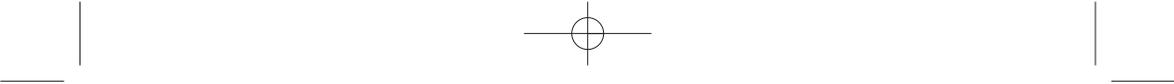
And I don’t know why I remember the chocolate Rice Krispies, except that ‘Ooh, pink!’ seemed like the funniest thing I had ever heard, and we ended up weak with laughter, myself and this nameless neighbour of my sister’s – she, in particular, so crippled by mirth you couldn’t tell if it was appendicitis or hilarity had her bent over. In the middle of which, she seemed to keel off her chair a little. She rolled to the side, while I just kept looking at her and laughing. Then she hit the ground running and began a low charge, out through the glass door and towards my brother-in-law.

The jet lag hit.

I remember the strangeness of it. This woman lumbering straight at Shay, while he cooked on; the hissing meat, the flames; me thinking, ‘Is this night-time? What time is it, anyway?’ while the chocolate Rice Krispie cake died on my lips. The woman stooped, as if to tackle Shay by the shins, but when she rose, it was with a small, suddenly buoyant child in her arms, and she was saying, ‘Out of there, all right? Out of there!’

The child looked around him, indifferent, more or less, to this abrupt change of scene. Three, maybe four years old: she set him down on the grass and went to hit him. At least, I thought so. She raised a hand to him and then suddenly back at herself, as though to clear a wasp from in front of her face.

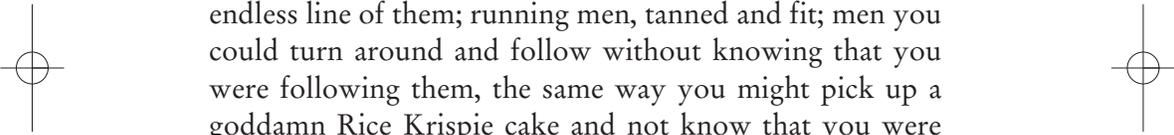
‘How many times do I have to tell you?’



Shay lifted an arm to crack a beer, and the child ran off, and the woman just stood there, running her wayward hand through her hair.

That was one thing. There were others. There was Fiona, her cheeks a hectic pink, her eyes suddenly wet from the sheer la-la-lah of pouring wine and laughing gaily and being a beautiful mother forward slash hostess in her beautiful new house.

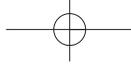
And there was Conor. My love. Who was late.



It is 2002, and already, none of these people smoke. I sit on my own at the kitchen table and look for someone to talk to. The men in the garden seem no more interesting than they did when I arrived – in their short-sleeved shirts and something about their casual trousers that still screams ‘slacks’. I am just back from Australia. I remember the guys you see along Sydney Harbour-front at lunchtime, an endless line of them; running men, tanned and fit; men you could turn around and follow without knowing that you were following them, the same way you might pick up a goddamn Rice Krispie cake and not know that you were eating it, until you spotted the marshmallow on the top.

‘Ooh, pink!’

I really want a cigarette now. Fiona’s children have never seen one, she told me – Megan burst into tears when an electrician lit up in the house. I pull my bag from the back of the chair and idle my way across the threshold, past Shay, who waves a piece of meat at me, through rain-bleached tricycles and cheerful suburbanites, down to where Fiona’s little rowan tree stands tethered to its square stake and the garden turns to mountainside. There is a little log house here for the kids, made out of brown plastic: a bit disgusting actually – the logs look so fake, they might as well be moulded out of chocolate, or some kind of rubberised shit. I lurk behind this yoke – and I am so busy



making this seem a respectable thing to do; leaning into the fence, smoothing my skirt, furtively rooting in my bag for smokes, that I do not see him until I light up, so my first sight of Seán (in this, the story I tell myself about Seán) takes place at the beginning of my first exhalation: his body; the figure he makes against the view, made hazy by the smoke of a long-delayed Marlboro Light.

Seán.

He is, for a moment, completely himself. He is about to turn around, but he does not know this yet. He will look around and see me as I see him and, after this, nothing will happen for many years. There is no reason why it should.

It really feels like night-time. The light is wonderful and wrong – it's like I have to pull the whole planet around in my head to get to this garden, and this part of the afternoon and to this man, who is the stranger I sleep beside now.

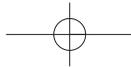
A woman comes up and speaks to him in a low voice. He listens to her over his shoulder, then he twists further to look at a small girl who hangs back from them both.

'Oh for God's sake, Evie,' he says. And he sighs – because it is not the child herself who is annoying him but something else; something larger and more sad.

The woman goes back to scrub at the gunk on Evie's face with a paper napkin that shreds itself on her sticky skin. Seán watches this for a few seconds. And then he looks over to me.

These things happen all the time. You catch a stranger's eye, for a moment too long, and then you look away.

I was just back from holidays – a week with Conor's sister in Sydney, then north to this amazing place where we learned how to scuba dive. Where we also learned, as I recall, how to have sex while sober; a simple trick, but a good one, it was like taking off an extra skin. Maybe this





was why I could meet Seán's eye. I had just been to the other side of the world. I was looking, by my own standards, pretty good. I was in love – properly in love – with a man I would soon decide to marry, so when he looked at me, I did not feel afraid.

Perhaps I should have done.

And I can't, for the life of me, recall what Evie looked like that day. She would have been four, but I can't think how that would play on the girl I know now. All I saw that afternoon was a child with a dirty face. So Evie is just a kind of smudge in the picture, which is otherwise so clear.



Because the amazing thing is how much I got in that first glance: how much, in retrospect, I should have known. It is all there: the twitch of interest I had in Seán, the whole business with Evie; I remember this very clearly, as I remember the neat and indomitable politeness of his wife. I got her straight off, and nothing she subsequently did surprised me or proved me wrong. Aileen, who never changed her hair, who was then and will always remain a size 10. I could wave to Aileen now, across the bridge of years, and she would give me the same look she gave me then, pretty much. Because she knew me too. On sight. And even though she was so smiling and correct, I did not fail to see her intensity.

Aileen, I think it would be fair to say, has not moved on.

I am not sure I have, myself. Somewhere up by the house, Marshmallow Woman is laughing too hard, Conor is elsewhere, Aileen's paper napkin, in a tasteful shade of lime-green, will soon leave shreds of itself on Evie's sticky skin, and Seán will glance my way. But not yet. For the moment, I am just breathing out.