The Green Road
BY THE SAME AUTHOR

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NON-FICTION

Making Babies
The Green Road

Anne Enright
Part One

LEAVING
LATER, AFTER HANNA made some cheese on toast, her mother came into the kitchen and filled a hot water bottle from the big kettle on the range.

‘Go on up to your uncle’s for me, will you?’ she said.
‘Get me some Solpadeine.’
‘You think?’
‘My head’s a fog,’ she said. ‘And ask your uncle for amoxicillin, will I spell that for you? I have a chest coming on.’
‘All right,’ said Hanna.
‘Try anyway,’ she said, coaxingly, taking the hot water bottle to her chest. ‘You will.’

The Madigans lived in a house that had a little river in the garden and its own name on the gate: ARDEEVIN. But it was not far to walk, up over the humpy bridge, past the garage and into town.

Hanna passed the two petrol pumps standing sentry on the forecourt, with the big doors open and Pat Doran in there somewhere, reading the Almanac, or lying in the pit below a car. There was an oil drum by the swinging Castrol sign with the bare fork of a tree sticking out of it, and Pat Doran had dressed it in a pair of old trousers
with two shoes stuck on the ends of the branches, so it looked like a man’s legs waving around in a panic after him falling into the barrel. It was very lifelike. Their mother said it was too near to the bridge, it would cause an accident, but Hanna loved it. And she liked Pat Doran, who they were told to avoid. He took them for rides in fast cars, up over the bridge, bang, down on the other side.

After Doran’s was a terraced row of little houses, and each of the windows had its own decoration and its own version of curtains or blinds: a sailboat made of polished horn, a cream tureen with plastic flowers in it, a pink felted plastic cat. Hanna liked each of them, as she passed, and she liked the way one followed the other in an order that was always the same. At the corner of the Main Street was the doctor’s, and the little hallway had a picture done out of nails and metallic string. The shape twisted over itself and twisted back again and Hanna loved the way it seemed to be moving but stayed still, it looked very scientific. After that were the shops: the draper’s, with a big window lined in yellow cellophane, the butcher’s, his trays of meat fenced around by bloodstained plastic grass, and after the butcher’s, her uncle’s shop – and her grandfather’s shop before him – Considine’s Medical Hall.

KODACHROME COLOUR FILM was written on a plastic strip stuck along the top of the window with Kodak FILM in bold letters in the middle of it and KODACHROME COLOUR FILM repeated on the far side. The window display was cream pegboard, with little shelves holding cardboard boxes faded by the sun. ‘Just right for the constipated child,’ said a sign, in groovy red letters, ‘SENOKOT the natural choice for constipation.’

Hanna pushed the door open, and the bell rang. She
looked up at it: the coil of metal was filthy with dust while, many times an hour, the bell shook itself clean.

‘Come in,’ said her uncle Bart. ‘Come in or go out.’

And Hanna went inside. Bart was on his own out front, while a woman in a white coat moved around the dispensary, where Hanna was never allowed to go. Hanna’s sister, Constance, used to work the counter, but she had a job up in Dublin now, so they were a girl short and there was a testing irritation to the look her uncle gave Hanna.

‘What does she want?’ he said.

‘Em. I can’t remember,’ said Hanna. ‘Her chest. And Solpadeine.’

Bart winked. He had one of those winks that happen free of the surrounding face. Hard to prove it ever happened.

‘Have a cachou.’

‘Don’t mind if I do-hoo,’ said Hanna. She fingered a little tin of Parma Violets from in front of the cash register and sat in the prescriptions chair.

‘Solpadeine,’ he said.

Her uncle Bart was good-looking like her mother, they had the long Considine bones. Bart was a bachelor and a heartbreaker for all the years of Hanna’s girlhood, but now he had a wife who never put her foot in the door of the shop. He was proud of it, Constance said. There he was, paying shop-girls and assistants, and his wife banned from the premises in case she laughed at the parish priest’s impacted stools. Bart had a perfectly useless wife. She had no children and beautiful shoes in a range of colours, and each pair had its own matching bag. The way Bart looked at her, Hanna thought he might hate her, but her sister Constance said she was on the pill, because they had access to the pill. She said they were doing it twice a night.

‘How are they all?’ Bart was opening a pack of Solpadeine and taking the contents out.
‘Good,’ she said.

He tapped around the counter top looking for something and said, ‘Have you the scissors, Mary?’

There was a new stand in the middle of the shop of perfumes, shampoos and conditioners. There were other things on the lower shelves and Hanna realised she had been looking at them when her uncle came out of the back room with the scissors. But he did not pretend to notice: he did not even wink.

He cut the card of tablets in half.

‘Give her this,’ he said, handing over a set of four tablets.

‘Tell her to take a rain check on the chest.’

That was a joke, of some sort.

‘I will so.’

Hanna knew she was supposed to go then, but she was distracted by the new shelves. There were bottles of 4711 and Imperial Leather bath sets in cream and dark red cardboard boxes. There were a couple of bottles of Tweed and a cluster of other perfumes that were new to her.

‘Tramp’, said one bottle, with a bold slash for the crossbar of the T. On the middle shelf were shampoos that weren’t about dandruff, they were about sunshine and tossing your head from side to side – Silvikrin, Sunsilk, Clairol Herbal Essences. On the bottom shelf were puffy plastic packages and Hanna could not think what they were, she thought they must be cotton wool. She picked up Cachet by Prince Matchabelli, in a twisted oblong bottle, and inhaled where the cap met the cold glass.

She could feel her uncle’s eyes resting on her, and in them something like pity. Or joy.

‘Bart,’ she said. ‘Do you think Mammy’s all right?’

‘Oh for God’s sake,’ Bart said. ‘What?’
Hanna’s mother had taken to the bed. She had been there for two weeks, nearly. She had not dressed herself or done her hair since the Sunday before Easter, when Dan told them all that he was going to be a priest.

Dan was in his first year of college up in Galway. They would let him finish his degree, he said, but he would do it from the seminary. So in two years he would be finished in ordinary college and in seven years he would be a priest, and after that he would be off on the missions. It was all decided. He announced all this when he came home for the Easter holidays and their mother went upstairs and did not come down. She said she had a pain in her elbow. Dan said he had little enough to pack and then he would be gone.

‘Go up to the shops,’ said her father, to Hanna. But he didn’t give her any money, and there was nothing she wanted to buy. Besides, she was afraid that something would happen if she left, there would be shouting. Dan would not be there when she got back. His name would never be mentioned again.

But Dan did not leave the house, not even to go for a walk. He hung around the place, sitting in one chair and then moving to another, avoiding the kitchen, accepting the offer of tea or turning it down. Hanna carried the cup to Dan’s room, with something to eat tucked in on the saucer; a ham sandwich or a piece of cake. Sometimes he only took a bite of the food and Hanna finished it as she took it back to the kitchen, and the stale edge to the bread made her even more fond of her brother, in his confinement.

Dan was so unhappy. Hanna was only twelve and it was terrible for her to see her brother so pent up – all that belief, and the struggle to make sense of it. When Dan was still at school, he used to make her listen to poems off his English course, and they talked about them afterwards and
about all kinds of other things, too. This is what her mother also said, later. She said, ‘I told him things that I told to no one else.’ And this statement was very teasing to Hanna, because there was very little of herself that their mother held back. Her children were never what you might call ‘spared’.

Hanna blamed the Pope. He came to Ireland just after Dan left for college and it was like he flew in specially, because Galway was where the big Youth Mass was held, out on the racecourse at Ballybrit. Hanna went to the Limerick Mass, which was just like standing in a field with your parents for six hours, but her brother Emmet was let go to Galway too, even though he was only fourteen and you were supposed to be sixteen for the Youth Mass. He left in a minibus from the local church. The priest brought a banjo and when Emmet came back he had learned how to smoke. He did not see Dan in the crowd. He saw two people having sex in a sleeping bag, he said, but that was the night before, when they all camped in a field somewhere – he could not tell his parents what was the place.

‘And where was the field?’ said their father.

‘I don’t know,’ said Emmet. He did not mention the sex.

‘Was it a school?’ said their mother.

‘I think so,’ said Emmet.

‘Was it beyond Oranmore?’

They slept in tents, or pretended to sleep, because at four in the morning they all had to pack up and troop through the pitch black to the racecourse. Everyone walked in silence, it was like the end of a war, Emmet said, it was hard to explain – just the sound of feet, the sight of a cigarette glowing at someone’s face before it was whipped away. We were walking into history, the priest said, and when the dawn came, there were men with yellow armbands
in their good suits, standing under the trees. That was it, as far as Emmet was concerned. They sang ‘By the Rivers of Babylon’ and he came back with his voice gone and the dirtiest clothes his mother had ever seen; she had to put them through the wash twice.

‘Was it on the road to Athenry?’ their father said. ‘The field?’

The location of the field outside Galway was one abiding mystery in the Madigan family, another was what had happened to Dan, after he went to college. He came back for Christmas and fought with his granny about taking precautions, and his granny was all in favour of taking precautions, that was the joke of it, her sister Constance said, because ‘precautions’ were actually condoms. Later, after the pudding was lit, Dan passed Hanna in the hall and he took her to him, saying, ‘Save me, Hanna. Save me from these ghastly people.’ He folded her in his arms.

On New Year’s Day a priest called to the house and Hanna saw him sitting in the front room with both her parents. The priest’s hair had the mark of the comb in it, as though it was still wet, and his coat, hanging under the stairs, was very black and soft.

After this, Dan went back to Galway and nothing happened until the Easter break, when he said he wanted to be a priest. He made the big announcement at Sunday dinner, which the Madigans always did with a tablecloth and proper napkins, no matter what. On that Sunday, which was Palm Sunday, they had bacon and cabbage with white sauce and carrots – green, white and orange, like the Irish flag. There was a little glass of parsley sitting on the tablecloth, and the shadow of the water trembled in the sunshine. Their father folded his large hands and said grace, after which there was silence. Apart
from the general sound of chewing, that is, and their father clearing his throat, as he tended to do, every minute or so.

‘Hchm-hchmm.’

The parents sat at either end of the table, the children along the sides. Girls facing the window, boys facing the room: Constance-and-Hanna, Emmet-and-Dan.

There was a fire in the grate and the sun also shone, now and then, so they were as warm as winter and warm as summer for five minutes at a time. They were twice as warm.

Dan said, ‘I have been speaking again with Father Fawl.’

It was nearly April. A dappled kind of day. The clean light caught the drops on the windowpane in all their multiplicity while, outside, a thousand baby leaves unfurled against branches black with rain.

Inside, their mother had a tissue trapped in the palm of her hand. She lifted it against her forehead.

‘Oh, no,’ she said, turning away, and her mouth sagged open so you could see the carrots.

‘He says I must ask you to think again. That it is hard for a man who does not have his family behind him. It is a big decision I am making, and he says I must ask you – I must plead with you – not to spoil it, with your own feelings and concerns.’

Dan spoke as though they were in private. Or he spoke as though they were in a great hall. But it was a family meal, which was not the same as either of these things. You could see their mother had an impulse to rise from the table but would not allow herself to flee.

‘He says I am to ask your forgiveness, for the life you had hoped for me, and the grandchildren you will not have.’

Emmet snorted into his dinner. Dan pressed his hands down on to the tabletop before swiping at his little brother,
fast and hard. Their mother blanked for the blow, like a horse jumping a ditch, but Emmet ducked and, after a long second, she landed on the other side. Then she put her head down, as though to gather speed. A moan came out of her, small and unformed. The sound of it seemed to please as well as surprise her so she tried again. This next moan started soft and went long, and there was a kind of speaking to its last rise and fall.

‘Oh God,’ she said.

She threw her head back and blinked at the ceiling, once, twice.

‘Oh dear God.’

The tears started to run, one on top of the last, down to her hairline; one, two-three, four. She stayed like that for a moment, while the children watched and pretended not to be watching and her husband cleared his throat into the silence, ‘Hchm-hchmm.’

Their mother lifted her hands and shook them free of their sleeves. She wiped her wet temples with the heels of her hands and used her delicate, crooked fingers to fix the back of her hair, which she always wore in a chignon. Then she sat up again and looked, very carefully, at nothing. She picked up a fork and stuck it into a piece of bacon and she brought it to her mouth, but the touch of meat to her tongue undid her; the fork swung back down towards her plate and the bacon fell. Her lips made that wailing shape – touching in the middle and open at the sides – what Dan called her ‘wide mouth frog’ look, then she took a sharp inhale and went: ‘Aggh-aahh. Aggh-aahh.’

It seemed to Hanna her mother might stop eating or, if she was that hungry, she might take her plate and go into another room in order to cry, but this did not occur to her mother, clearly, and she sat there, eating and crying at the same time.
Much crying, little eating. There was more work with the tissue, which was now in shreds. It was awful. The pain was awful. Her mother juddering and sputtering, with the carrots falling from her mouth in little lumps and piles.

Constance, who was the eldest, bossed them all quietly about and they carried plates and cups past their mother, as she dripped, one way or the other, into her own food.

‘Oh, Mammy,’ said Constance, leaning in, with her arm around her, to slip the plate neatly away.

Dan was the eldest boy, so it was his job to cut the apple tart, which he stood to do, dark against the window light, with the silver triangle of the cake slice in his hand.

‘You can count me out,’ said their father, who had been playing, in a tiny way, with the handle of his teacup. He got up and left the room and Dan said, ‘Five, so. How am I going to do five?’

There were six Madigans. Five was a whole new angle, as he moved the cake slice through the ghost of a cross and then swung it eighteen degrees to the side. It was a prising open of the relations between them. It was a different story, altogether. As though there might be any number of Madigans and, out in the wide world, any number of apple tarts.

Their mother’s crying turned to funny, staggered inhalations ‘phwhh phwhhh phwhhh’, as she dug into her dessert with a small spoon and the children, too, were comforted by the pastry and by the woody sweetness of the old apples. Still, there was no ice cream on offer that Sunday, and none of them asked for it, though they all knew there was some; it was jammed into the icebox at the top right hand corner of the fridge.

After that, their mother went to bed and Constance had to stay at home instead of getting the bus back to Dublin and she was furious with Dan: she bashed about doing the
dishes while he went up to his room and read his books and their mother lay behind her closed door, and on Monday their father went out to Boolavaun and came back home in the evening, and had no opinions that anyone could discern.

This was not the first time their mother took the horizontal solution, as Dan liked to call it, but it was the longest that Hanna could remember. The bed creaked from time to time. The toilet flushed and the door of her room closed again. They got off school early on Spy Wednesday and she was still ensconced. Hanna and Emmet lurked about the house, that was so large and silent without her. It all looked strange and unconnected: the turn of the bannisters at the top of the stairs, the small study with its light bulb gone, the line of damp on the dining room wallpaper inching up through a grove of bamboo.

Then Constance came up and whacked them, and it became clear – too late – that they had been noisy and wrong-headed when they had meant to be cheerful and full of fun. A cup hit the floor, a lick of cold tea spread towards the library book on the kitchen table, a white, patent leather belt turned out to be plastic when Emmet put a bridle on Hanna and rode her out the front door. After each disaster the children dispersed and acted as though nothing had happened. And nothing did happen. She was asleep up there, she was dead. The silence became more urgent and corpselike, the silence became fully tragic, until the door handle hit the wall and their mother burst out of there. She came flying down the stairs at them, hair undone, the shadows of her breasts moving under the cotton of her nightgown, her mouth open, hand raised.

She might throw another cup, or upset the whole teapot, or fling the broken belt into the flowerbed through the open door.
‘There,’ she said.
‘Happy now?’
‘Two can play at that game,’ she said.
‘What do you think of that?’
She would stare for a moment, as though wondering who these strange children were. After which brief confusion, she would swivel and slam back up to bed. Ten minutes later, or twenty minutes, or half an hour, the door would creak open and her small voice come out of it saying, ‘Constance?’
There was something comical about these displays. Dan pulled a wry face as he went back to his book, Constance might make tea and Emmet would do something very noble and pure – a single flower brought from the garden, a serious kiss. Hanna would not know what to do except maybe go in and be loved.
‘My baby. How’s my little girl?’
Much later, when all this had been forgotten, with the TV on and cheese on toast made for tea, their father came back from the land at Boolavaun. Up the stairs he went, one stair at a time then, after knocking twice, into the room.
‘So?’ he might say, before the door closed on their talk.
After a long time, he came back down to the kitchen to ask for tea. He dozed in silence for an hour or so and woke with a start for the nine o’clock news. Then he switched off the telly and said, ‘Which one of you broke your mother’s belt? Tell me now,’ and Emmet said, ‘It was my fault, Daddy.’
He stood forward with his head down and his hands by his sides. Emmet would drive you mad for being good.
Their father pulled the ruler from under the TV set, and Emmet lifted his hand, and their father held the fingertips until the last millisecond, as he dealt the blow. Then he turned and sighed as he slid the ruler back home.
‘Up to bed,’ he said.

Emmet walked out with his cheeks flaring, and Hanna got her goodnight beardie, which was a scrape of the stubble from her father’s cheek, as he turned, for a joke, from her kiss. Her father smelt of the day’s work: fresh air, diesel, hay, with the memory of cattle in there somewhere, and beyond that again, the memory of milk. He took his dinner out in Boolavaun, where his own mother still lived.

‘Your granny says goodnight,’ he said, which was another kind of joke with him. And he tilted his head.

‘Will you come out with me, tomorrow? You will, so.’

The next day, which was Holy Thursday, he brought Hanna out in the orange Cortina, with the door that gave a great crack when you opened it. A few miles out, he started to hum, and you could feel the sky getting whiter as they travelled towards the sea.

Hanna loved the little house at Boolavaun: four rooms, a porch full of geraniums, a mountain out the back and, out the front, a sky full of weather. If you crossed the long meadow, you came to a boreen which brought you up over a small rise to a view of the Aran Islands out in Galway Bay, and the Cliffs of Moher, which were also famous, far away to the south. This road turned into the green road that went across the Burren, high above the beach at Fanore, and this was the most beautiful road in the world, bar none, her granny said – famed in song and story – the rocks gathering briefly into walls before lapsing back into field, the little stony pastures whose flowers were sweet and rare.

And if you lifted your eyes from the difficulties of the path, it was always different again, the islands sleeping out in the bay, the clouds running their shadows across the water, the Atlantic surging up the distant cliffs in a tranced, silent plume of spray.