

## *A Masterpiece*

'It's a masterpiece,' bespectacled, bald-headed, nearly breathless with enthusiasm, Joey O'Mara was the first to say it. 'A masterpiece, there's no avoiding the word. It's a masterpiece!'

'I have to say I'm in perfect agreement with you,' agreed an overweight, matronly and nearly out of breath Mary Flumpey.

They were talking on Mary's phone-in talk show, *Talk to Mary*, on Irish morning radio. The subject of their conversation: Hugh Happenstance's latest novel, *An Irish Childhood*. Joe was the first to cross the Rubicon, launching the word which had trembled feverishly on everyone's lips for weeks, ever since the book had been published. There would be no stopping it now. The word was on its way. A masterpiece had been born, live on Irish radio. Now people were queuing up to get in on the act. Mary Flumpey first in line.

'It's such a lovely book, isn't it?' said Mary, 'I mean when I read it, sure, I laughed, but I cried a lot too, and then his language is beautiful too, isn't it? You know, lyrical, and tender... and sweet. I really must have him on the show!'

'The first time I saw Hugo Happenstance,' O'Mara declared, with total sincerity, 'I said, that fellow will produce a masterpiece one day! And now here it is...'

The sound of *An Irish Childhood* being thumped like some primitive Tom-Tom on Mary Flumpey's desk was clearly audible. The Tom-Tom thumping no doubt proved both the book's existence and its status as a great work, as well as sending the message of its greatness to the wider world. The thumping became softer. I imagined him hitting the book against Flumpey's massive breasts as if pleading with her to breastfeed it. After all, this masterpiece was still in its infancy.

O'Mara spoke with some authority. An author of several esteemed works, he was considered by many to be a literary master himself. However, much to his chagrin, his sister, Sally, was much better known. She was an internationally famous rock singer who had recently become a nun. No kidding. After all, this was Ireland — a world beyond satire.

Mary's callers were 'on the line', as she put it.

'I've not read Hughie Happenspans,,' grinded one querulous voice, 'but it would need to be a very good book indeed to match the Teefshock's lovely daughter's lovely little book, you know the one I mean, it's in all the best... bestseller lists.'

He was referring to the latest sensation to hit the world of Irish literature. Connie Gond, eldest daughter of the nation's leader, had just published a novel which was right at that very moment, as Mary Flumpey's listener had rightly said, sitting pretty on top of the bestseller lists. Her father, the affable Buttie Gond, told the nation through parliament that 'she was writing in her copybooks since she was eight', a fitting apprenticeship for an inheritor of Joyce. Connie's smiling blue eyes and straight, dyed blonde hair, like some Aryan image of new Irish beauty, stared from the cover of every magazine in town. She was the new standardised model of Irish womanhood, fulsome, soft, blonde, all benign smiles with abundant hints of coyness, an effusion of apparent innocence with no trace of opinion or controversy, just limitless triviality and mediocrity admiring itself and buying and selling itself, over and over, tirelessly, tediously, the new, the real Ireland. The island of the Gonds.

Mary Flumpey's querulous listener was an obvious fan of the Gonds and of the book Connie had produced from all those years of writing in her copybook. He pressed her claim.

'Now that's a lovely little book. What I'd like to know is what does Jocky O'Mara think of the Teefshock's lovely little daughter's lovely little book? Does he think it's a masterpiece?'

'Would you like to answer that one?' breathless Flumpey encouraged O'Mara.

Newly-christened Jocky cleared his throat. He hesitated.

'Yes, the Teefshock's daughter's lovely book...'

The caller broke in impatiently.

'She was paid a million pounds in advance for writing it, you know... a million pounds! Before she'd even written a chapter, a single line! Now that's what I call writing! A million pounds! And not a single line of it down on paper... All in her head! It was that good!'

O'Mara was clearly at a loss for words. Flumpey came breathlessly to his rescue.

'Agreed, listener, it's a darling little book, I laughed and I cried, I mean, you know... I mean for an eighteen-year old to write so knowingly about love and loss... I mean and her language is beautiful, isn't it? Lyrical and tender... and so sweet... Simple in lots of ways, but really a beautiful book. A lovely book, listener... you're so right! I'm in total agreement with you.'

Thus encouraged, her listener was unstoppable.

'A million pounds in advance! And not a line written... All in her head! I tell you that girl deserves every credit! I don't like them ones who says it's only because she's the Teefshock's daughter. Ireland has had too many begrudgers right throughout its history. That's been Ireland's downfall all along. Begrudgers and begrudgement. Sure doesn't it stand to reason?...'

Standing to reason, O'Mara finally came up with something to say.

'I don't know if I'd call it a masterpiece all the same, listener. More airport lounge than library, wouldn't you agree?'

'A million pounds and not a line written,' the listener persisted. 'Does that not tell you something?'

'It tells me I'm in the wrong line of writing,' O'Mara, losing heart, quipped.

I knew exactly how he felt.

At that very moment the phone rang, interrupting my morning radio listening. It was, it had to be, no other than Homer Patt, my frustrated, hysterical, angry publisher. Homer phoned me every day. Homer did not speak. He exclaimed. Especially when he was talking to me.

'Have you been listening to Mary Flumpey?'

'Working, I'm afraid.' As always, I lied to him.

'Hugh Happenstance's novel is now officially a masterpiece, courtesy of Joey O'Mara!'

'Good for Happenstance. You know, the first time I saw him, I said to myself, that fellow has a masterpiece in him.'

'Masterpiece or no masterpiece, Happenstance is making money from writing. People buy him. And Happenstance is respected by the critics. Happenstance wins awards. What about you, Mr. Clever Novelist? Mr. Great Writer?'

'I'm working on my masterpiece,' I informed him, nonchalantly.

‘Masterpiece, me arse!’ he spat. ‘Three worthless novels to your name... where’s the masterpiece going to come from? Tell me that!’

He was referring to my novels, each one a greater failure, in both commercial and critical terms, than the previous one. Of my first novel, *A Sad Country*, the critics wrote with unanimity but some generosity: ‘a sad day for Ireland’. Of my second novel, *A Fishy Tale*, they wrote, with perfect unanimity, but little generosity: ‘this fish rises from the murk to drown breathlessly in front of our eyes.’ I liked that. Of my third novel, *Cat in Winter*, they wrote in astounding unanimity but no generosity at all: ‘screeches like a cat castrated, till you feel the need to cover your ears’. Homer had warned me. He was going to show me no more indulgence. Next time, I had to come up with what he called ‘the goods’. To be honest, I knew nothing at all about them: ‘the goods’. But I couldn’t tell Homer that. It would break his heart. I felt sorry for Homer. As he said himself, he had ‘paid good money’ for me. And all he had ended up with was ‘damaged goods’. I realized that these were not at all in the same league as ‘the goods’.

It had all been such an accident. A bad accident, I often thought. I had enrolled, with nothing better to do, in one of those creative writing courses run by the National University. A gun to my head, the course leader, a retired Professor of Anglo-Irish Literature — a nephew once or twice-removed, someone said, of the great Irish short-story writer and gun-toting rebel in the 1920s’ war for Irish independence, Frankie O’Connelly — persuaded in his heart of hearts that anyone could write, and vowing to bring out my creative side, had absolutely compelled me to write a short story. ‘The Irish have an innate gift for the short story’, he told me, gun to my head, and ‘you’re not going to let the side down, or I’ll effing shoot you’ Under duress, I produced a short story of sorts about my granny, one day when she had a fit. I called it, *Granny on the Edge*, a story of senile disintegration. The Professor liked it. It made him laugh. ‘I bet I can do something with this,’ he promised, relishing the challenge. He immediately reconstituted himself as my ‘editor’, a practice current, he said, in the publishing world. One of his own literary successes, he told me in confidence, had been completely rewritten by his publisher’s Polish secretary who, to cap it all, did not speak a word of English. He laughed when he told me this. Then he set to work on my little opus, knocking off the rough edges, touching it up here and there, polishing it, renamed it *Death of an Irish Grandmother*, and then for the fun of it, he slipped it in the post. The first story I had ever written, more or less. Two weeks later it was in the Sunday newspaper, *The Sunday Obituary*, you know, the one with the prestigious new writers’ page. At the end of the year I was nominated for the *Obituary*’s annual short story award. I won it. And all Ireland was suddenly breathless with enthusiasm on my behalf. Overnight I had become a literary commodity, a commercial package, a brand name. I was given a substantial sum of money (the Professor of Anglo-Irish Literature still rings me looking for his ‘cut’, as he calls it — I cannot name him here or I’ll be sued) and a publishing deal. That’s where Homer Patt comes in. Homer was the business end of the ‘deal’. Homer exclaimed that he was going to ‘sell’ me. So far, it hadn’t really gone to plan. After all, who would buy ‘damaged goods’? Homer had gone very nearly bald tearing his hair out because of me. ‘I’m going to cut you loose,’ he warned me. ‘I’m just warning you, I want no more “laments for literature” (he was being ironic) from you! I’ll kill you if you don’t come up with a decent story! And it will have to be at least as good as Hughie Happenstance’s masterpiece!’

He put the phone down, with a loud crash. I knew he was serious this time. Though I had some difficulty understanding him. After all, every word I had ever written, ever since my humble beginnings under the tutelage of the Anglo-Irish Literature Professor, had been rewritten by editors until it was unrecognisable. If there was a problem, the solution was to change editor, to find one who could really write. Or, failing that, give my work to someone's non-English-speaking Polish secretary. I, for my part, was innocent of all charges. I was just trying to live my life. It wasn't easy.

Mary Flumpey was still on the radio. Joey O'Mara had left. Flumpey's breathless voice soothed her listener. Unbelievably, it was the same one. The Teefshock's lovely daughter's lovely little book one.

'You're right, of course, listener. I know what you mean... Sure it's a lovely little book and a lovely, lovely story. Love and loss, and bereavement... I mean, where does she get her inspiration from? And all that insight? And sure she's a lovely little girl too... And sure I know her daddy. The Teefshock. And he's lovely too. In spite of all the criticism he gets... Sure he's only trying to do his best for the country, as he says himself. I often meet him out and about here and there. You know, I've never known him to say a bad word about anyone. No, I've never met her... But I've seen her on the telly and on the magazine covers. I'm sure she's lovely. Sure she looks lovely in the photos. I really must have her on the show sometime.'

'A million pounds... Sterling! And not a single word written... All in her head! Brilliant! How many so-called writers could do it? Tell me that!'

'And sure her sister is a lovely girl too... Isn't she married to one of them showband fellows? *Westzone*... I really must have her on the show sometime too.'

It was just an ordinary day at home. The radio was on. Ireland was talking to itself like some idiot in the corner of a lunatic asylum somewhere. Edge of Europe, edge of the world. Waiting to fall off. I felt as if I was going mad. I needed a story. A decent story. But where was I going to get one? The inspiration? The insights? I decided to make tea. I looked in the fridge. There was no story there. No milk either. I needed to go to the shop. I looked in my wallet. No story there. And no money to buy milk with either. I phoned Homer. He listened suspiciously. He always listened suspiciously, when he wasn't exclaiming.

'Homer, you know, if I'm going to write this story I'll need some money to buy milk with. It's known as the economic imperative. So, how about an advance?'

I could hear his teeth grinding noisily together at the other end of the phone. In spite of himself, however, perhaps to stop himself going mad, or perhaps simply yielding to economic realities, he asked with a surprising, if suspicious, softness in his voice.

'How much?'

I could not believe my luck.

'A million pounds...' I informed him, nonchalantly.

After all, masterpieces don't come cheap.

### *Unruly Visitors*

Joey O'Mara had started something. I'm not sure what it was, but from the moment he said the magic word *masterpiece* on Mary Flumpey's phone-in talk show on Irish morning radio, my world was strangely different. I could not say exactly what but I had

that feeling you might have when re-entering a room after a short absence, with the sudden, uncanny impression that the furniture has been moving about the room in your absence and has only just restored itself to equanimity a moment prior to your return. It was as if a magic spell, or some cruel curse, had been placed over my world. Things began to happen, one after the other, as my life began to career towards some fatal rendezvous. The first thing that happened was Tiny. That same day, while Mary Flumpey was still conversing with her listener, Tiny came knocking on my door.

Tiny was a scream. She was so short she hovered permanently around the navel of the world. What she lacked in stature, however, she made up for in ambition. Tiny was bent on taking the world by storm — her own world, that is, not to be confused with any other. Tiny was one of Ireland's very own midnight's children, that extraordinary generation born at the very moment, nay, the very second, when *Telly Ireland* sprang to life back in the 1960s. There were several hundred thousands of them, it appeared, the 'extraordinary ones', who had at an extremely tender age displayed a near magical affinity with their brand new family television sets, and who before they ever uttered a word had found their niche in life in front of the silver and black screen, their brave new Ireland.

Many commentators on social change were fascinated by these mere infants' absorption in the jelly-like, glaucous world of television. Some opined that the children communed telepathically with each other through the electronically-fuelled power of the light-filled boxes. What they communed about no one could say. Possibly views on their favourite programmes, possibly responses to advertisements featuring baby foods or new styles of nappy; quite possibly, disparaging views on the ultimately disappointing nature of reality, or even their parents, if such a thing were imaginable.

Other commentators were of the opinion that some new and revolutionary form of religious adoration was coming to light, and that the children or 'blessed ones', as they became known, had opened a channel through the airwaves to some super-deity lodged in the inner recesses of an immense cathode-ray tube in the sky somewhere. Watching the silver and black light bowl for endless hours was really, in this scenario, a form of transcendent worship where the silently prayerful, or often happily gurgling, but always fabulously fascinated, infants achieved unprecedented levels of meditative immersion in their new spiritual medium. This theory was a very attractive one simply because it was beyond all proof and so was driven by blind faith and blind faith alone, which made it particularly appropriate for a theory of a religious disposition.

A third theory was that the children were extra-terrestrials who by processes of material and psychological manipulation beyond our understanding had simply sent the televisual technology to planet Ireland ahead of their own arrival here for the purposes of being entertained when they got here. Without anyone being any the wiser, according to this theory, the mothers of the 'blessed ones' had been secretly kidnapped and impregnated aboard UFOs during a duly-recorded by meteorologists shower of meteorites which had set the atmosphere above Ireland, quite literally, ablaze on the night of November 14 196-, nine months exactly before the launch of *Telly Ireland*. This theory had the immense appeal of making sex in Ireland during the 1960s appear enormously interesting.

Unfortunately, despite its attractiveness, the theory achieved no popular credence, simply because, no one believed that sex in Ireland could ever have been that interesting.

I could not tell if Tiny had any alien ancestry, nor if she possessed telepathic gifts of any calibre, but the notion that she might be a worshipper of some telly deity had a grim

aspect of truth about it. She had a deeply mental and emotional, if not spiritual, attraction to the television screen. But that was just typical of Tiny, as well as television she loved glossy magazines, fashion and fashion designers, celebrities of all descriptions, pop music and pop stars, chick lit, the cinema, actors and actresses, in short, everything trite and trivial. Her main ambition in life was to 'make it big', as she put it. She would do anything, she stated with grim determination, to 'make it big'. She just knew that someday she was going to 'make it big'. The reasons for this were not just that she 'worked hard' and 'believed in' herself, but that she had 'real talent', though no one could be sure what this last quality consisted in. She sometimes admitted, usually when she had some drink taken and was in a slurry-mouthed mood, that she felt she was 'destined for greater things'. After all, she knew she had 'as much to offer' as almost all of the famous people she admired. Her deepest desire was to be an actress. Actresses she admired above all other category of human. Realising her ambitions would not be easy, however. One problem she faced was knowing that 'hard work' and 'self-belief' allied to 'real talent' was often not enough to guarantee success in the world she lived in and for; it was absolutely necessary to be 'discovered'. All the world's great talents, the real stars, according to Tiny, had been 'discovered'. 'Stars get discovered,' she told me over drink. 'It's a scientific fact!' Adding, 'I'll be discovered some day, I know it, I just have to work hard and believe in myself. I've got real talent!' I wondered how useful a talent for self-delusion could be in achieving the sort of success Tiny dreamed of, but I considered it must help in some way.

When Tiny arrived at my door that fateful day, she was feeling somewhat disillusioned with the way her 'career plan', as she called it, was going. She had auditioned recently for a new *Telly Ireland* programme aimed at 'discovering' new singing talent. The idea was to build a career in music on the success of the programme. All of it was the brainchild of Ireland's pop baron, Loopy Goodwillie, a wily cheque-book infatuated and motivated promoter of singing adolescent boy bands to pop music besotted pre-adolescent girls who knew no better. In this, he admitted himself, he had only been following the international market, but because he had been ahead of it on planet Ireland, following the market had led him like some randy, money-craving leprechaun of sorts, to his pot of gold at the end of his personal rainbow, deep inside the knickers of Ireland's pre-pubescent females. The gold, however, came directly from the pockets of the parents of these infants, who like all parents, aid and abet the most daring crimes committed against their children, when they do not perpetrate them themselves. Goodwillie had become an Irish celebrity himself, mainly because he was rich, having had the clairvoyance to follow the international market, and having dared to go where no Irish entrepreneur before him had dared to go. His had been the most perfect violation of innocence ever. On his *Pop Ireland* telly programme he looked like the cat who had got the richest cream ever, and it was fair to say that he had.

Tiny was no stranger to television. As a child, she had appeared in several televised advertisements aimed at children — you know the ones, for yoghurts or fruit juices, or ice creams, or sausages. Her parents had briefly promoted a career in the modelling of children's clothes, but clothes never looked well on Tiny, and she looked sadly outlandish in everything she wore. At an early age she began auditioning for parts in popular television series, and had once or twice appeared as an extra in *The Corrigans of Carlow*, an early Irish rural soap set in the farming community. A little older, but none

the wiser, she had briefly been the presenter of a children's programme in the early afternoon, where she played straight woman to a lunatic, red-haired puppet called Boxy, who lived in a box. The puppet was a roaring success with the nation's children, but Tiny was soon dropped, as watching her made young infants feel sea-sick. Her singing in particular was a source of much nausea. She had also appeared on breakfast television doing the 'soap watch' as it was called, untangling the past, present and future storylines of successful soaps for hapless viewers who could not figure them out for themselves. Tiny was an expert on all things 'soap' and confessed to loving them. Indeed, she once said that she lived for them. She knew all the fictional characters' fictional lives inside-out, and all the actors and actresses' real lives, or that part of their lives retailed by the glossy magazines, inside-out. Tiny could tell you everything about everything, except anything that mattered. On another show she had recently reviewed the Teefshock's daughter's chick lit epic *Post Scriptum Love*, describing it as a 'new voice in Irish literature', which it was. Irish literature had made the difficult journey from Joyce to the Teefshock's daughter in less than one hundred years. It took some doing. Deep down Tiny believed the only real value was celebrity. It didn't matter how it was acquired. Why should it matter? She had made many friends among the new generation of Irish celebrities. Shirley Temple-Barr was one, the long-haired, large-toothed, crooked-smiling transvestite who hosted a popular bingo game on *Telly Ireland*. They were often seen together, Tiny and Shirley, in the photo pages of Ireland's celebrity mags, smiling, large-toothed, crooked, both of them. This was a world in love with itself and eager to display its love. Shirley was also one of the 'blessed ones'. Like Tiny and the Teefshock's daughter, Shirley represented the cutting edge of Ireland in the twenty-first century. The past, it seemed, was annihilated. The future belonged to anybody and everybody. Except me, of course. I was useless, and hopeless, as Homer Patt often reminded me. Confident that her experience of television would help her and encouraged by her friends 'in the business', as she put it, Tiny prepared to take Loopy Goodwillie's *Pop Ireland* televised quest for a music star by storm. She spent weeks rehearsing. She locked herself into her bedroom. She watched endless videos of her favourite pop performers, in particular the ones plucked from obscurity to later revel in obscene wealth while shining like stars above us all in our own personal night. These were the best models, because obscurity to fame and adulation was a narrative with universal and infinite appeal — especially if obscurity was where you were to begin with. And it was certainly where Tiny was. But she was working hard to find the light — the starlight. Locked in solitary confinement in her bedroom, in front of a full-length mirror — this was typical Tiny territory — she perfected every move. She rehearsed the whole song and dance of pop performance and celebrity, ad infinitum, ad nauseum. She never got tired of it, or herself. One day, feeling she was ready, she called to my house and performed live for me in my sitting room. It was quite simply appalling. I told her she nonetheless that she was 'great' as, being a writer of sorts, I am a natural liar. Loopy Goodwillie showed her no such indulgence when she appeared on *Pop Ireland* watched by an audience of millions. 'Why do you imagine you have any chance of succeeding?' he asked her in his best smug, rich bastard air. Tiny trotted out the usual nonsense the 'blessed ones' were full of. 'I work hard, I believe in myself, and I have real talent,' Tiny answered. 'You're shite,' Loopy told her, in front of the audience of millions. It was the formula of the show, exploitation and humiliation. In front of an audience of millions,

Tiny cried copious tears, and vowed to prove him wrong. The audience applauded. Tiny felt somewhere obscurely that she was 'making it big', and was openly delighted to have shared the same televised platform as the great Loopy Goodwillie, but this ultimately did little to console her. Telly, her deity since childbirth, had rejected her. She was determined to show strength in adversity. In her head she was constantly writing and rewriting her own magazine stories, complete with glossy photos. She had an immense portfolio: fictitious mothers or infants dying from cancer, a whole exciting range of childhood traumas, some secret loss or tragedy, her hard work, her belief in herself, her quest for fame, her strength in adversity. Asked whom she most admired, she answered, 'the Teefshock's daughter'. Asked why, she answered, 'because she works hard, believes in herself, and has real talent.' She was also short of stature and with strength in adversity hair, straight, streaming blonde, dyed blonde, just like Tiny. Tiny was determined that one day she would count the Teefshock's daughter among her closest friends. They would be like sisters, she told me. Dyed blondes together. The product and emblem of a dying, dyed blonde new Irish world. It was enough to make you cry.

When Tiny called, that fateful day, she carried a book under her arm. It was *An Irish Childhood* by Hugh Happenstance. She beat it like a primitive Tom-Tom on my living room table, drowning out the conversation between Mary Flumpey and her listener. 'You just have to be seen with this book,' she told me. 'It's a masterpiece!'

'What's it about?'

'An Irish childhood,' she said with some impatience at my stupidity.

'Yes, I know, but what is it about?'

She hesitated, before informing me nonchalantly, 'Strength in adversity.'

She shot wistful glances at me.

'Do you know Hugh Happenstance?' she asked.

'Yes. The first time I saw him, I said...'

She grew excited and interrupted me.

'Can you introduce me? I'd love to tell him how much I love his book...'

'I'll see what I can do,' I promised. The last time I had seen Happenstance he had criticised my writing and told me his non-English-speaking Polish secretary could do better. The only thing I had written of any merit, he said, was *Death of an Irish Grandmother*. He had been one of the prize judges. If only he knew.

Tiny wanted tea. I went to the kitchen. Immediately I left the room I heard her reading the news. This was also one of her ambitions. Dyed blonde and believing in herself, she knew she had 'what it takes' to 'make it big' as a news reader, the new, modern, Irish dyed-blond variety. She gave herself a series of commands. 'Sit straight, eyes set, nothing moves only the lips, and the bottom.' It was the new news style, she explained. The news had to be sexy, dyed blondes squirming on their bottoms intoning the litany of disasters demanded by the viewers, like some vapid, ceaseless prayer. Tiny had it pat. '30 children die in school blaze in Pitapata... Train derailed in Pandarponder... estimates 12 dead, but observers say this figure is sure to rise... Tribal warfare in Southern Oregon... Famine, looting, rape... Hostage beheaded in Basil... Stay tuned for more pictures... Look at all these corpses in the streets of Gotnospher... Breaking news just in... An explosion rocked the centre of... killing... lots and lots and lots... After the break for advertisements, don't go away, watch the ads, they're so good, more entertaining stories of mayhem and slaughter... Don't dare switch channels... Stay away from porn on the

Internet... Remember, I'm here waiting... Sexy dyed blonde, squirming on my bottom, just for you! Bringing you your staple, daily diet of horror. Without which you could not even begin to think of living.' She dropped the smartly-dressed female undertaker done by a child actress, or convent girl from Connymara, demeanour for the 'lighter' news.

With a smile and some graceless squirming on her tiny bottom, as if someone was tickling it, or had slipped intrusive fingers into some pleurably violated private place, she instantly forgot the burned children, the tribal warfare, the hostage beheaded, the corpses in the streets of Gotnospher, to tell us about the 'successful separation of Siamese twins after three days of surgery in Japan... or the birth of a Panda cub in a Mexican zoo... Or the last survivor of the Gulag Archipelago, with the lights going out on his Siberian winter ghost town... Vowing not to leave... His world built on the bones of the dead.' Like all our worlds, I thought. Tiny finished with a round-up of the financial news, briefly flirting with the markets, before offering a smattering of sports news. Tiny held the heart and soul of the news in her tiny hands, from its twin poles of sadism and mutilation, on the one hand, to dyed blonde sex appeal on the other. No doubt about it, she had mastered the formula, and dreamt one day of embodying it.

By the time I returned to the room with the tea, Tiny was doing the weather. Another one of her ambitions was to be a weathergirl. For this, she was standing against the wall on the far side of the room which was decorated with a map of Ireland. Standing slightly sideways, she gestured carefully towards distant corners of the island. 'Rain will sweep across the country from the West. There will be some periods of sunshine, however, it will be mostly wet. Overnight there will a clearance spreading from the West, but this will turn quickly to more rain. There will be rain tomorrow and the day after. There is a possibility of some sunshine in some places, but this is unlikely in most areas. Rain will spread from the West over the weekend, and Eastern Southern and Northern parts will also see rain. All parts will see rain next week spreading from the West. If you are going on holidays and want to see what the weather will be like in your favourite holiday destination, where hopefully it will not be raining, join me on *Telly Ireland 2* for the Euroweather View later this evening.' After a stunning sequence of sunny smiles accompanying persistent rain spreading from the West, Tiny finished with a flourish. 'Always leave the customers happy,' she quipped. She often lamented that she did not speak Irish as the new Irish-language station was awash with ample-breasted, dyed-blond weathergirls squirming to the rhythmic, dancelike beat of the pitiless Irish weather God – sadly outlandish in their own way, lost in their own gobbledygook.

Tiny performed the ritual of the news and the weather on a constant basis throughout the day and night. Sometimes the news needed to be delivered six or seven times in a single shift, or every half-hour on the radio, she explained. 'How do you manage to inject feeling into it?' I asked, genuinely interested. 'How do you keep it fresh?' 'Remember it's a performance,' she explained. 'The reader is simply a viaduct for information. No feelings come into it... It's like a play. You have to treat it like Shakespeare.'

Yet even Shakespeare, I reasoned, allowed his characters to cry, and his actors. He even encouraged it.

You have to be a hard bitch to read the news, I reasoned.

Tiny announced that she had 'come to rescue me'.

'You have to get out,' she said. 'You're at home too often. You're getting morbid, bitter and disenchanted. People think you're dead, you know... They see so little of you. They think you've died. They think you're a dead writer.'

She swung again into child actress undertaker mode and read my short obituary for the main evening news, irresistibly swinging, after a brace of curt and grimly delivered sentences about my death, into the next story about firemen rescuing a cat from a tree, before sailing imperturbably on to tell the story of Loopy Goodwillie's latest 'discovery': Tiny, a convent girl from Connymara, who was now 'making it big'! Then she began to interview herself, the hard work, the self-belief, the strength in adversity, the initial failure and then success, the tragedies she'd faced in life, a mother almost dead from cancer (Tiny's real mother was very much alive and well!), how she'd almost lost her baby (Tiny had never ever been pregnant!), how she grew up in an orphan's home (pure fiction!), her fans, her stalkers, the pressures, her friend the Teefshock's lovely daughter, how she found love with Hugh Happenstance, her unleashed imagination growing increasingly wild.

'The best writers are dead ones,' I offered, trying to steer the monologue back in my direction.

'Hugh Happenstance is not dead!' she answered, winning the argument.

'No, not yet,' I conceded.

'And neither are you,' said Tiny, much to my relief. 'I'm going to take you out. We're going to a David Byrne concert... Have you heard of him? Talking Heads? *Once in a Lifetime?* *Road to Nowhere?*'

I shook my head. I had no idea who or what she was talking about.

'Anyway, he's on at the Olympia, and we're going,' she said emphatically. 'I'll call for you later...'

She looked out the window, mumbling about the weather. 'Sunny spells with scattered showers... That's the most important one!' She repeated it like an Irish mantra, over and over.

She left, all blue-eyed, dyed-blond charm and innocence, tumbling, all hard work and self-belief, into the sunshine and scattered showers of a typical Irish day. In spite of everything, I liked Tiny. We had met years before at the Edinburgh arts festival. Somebody had dramatised *Death of an Irish Grandmother*. It was a huge success. Tiny was there for the first night. Chatting to me afterwards over champagne, she mistakenly thought I must be *someone*. I didn't tell her I was a literary accident. We slept together. It was all rather pitiable. In spite of her disappointment she hung on to me. I think she felt attached to me, my 'outlandish sadness', the pathetic and the non-pathetic varieties of it. She wanted, she said repeatedly, 'to rescue me'. In the meantime she was content to be a satellite of the famous, in love with anything remotely resembling a *star*, no matter how dim. Her latest fatuous fascination was with iconoclastic journalist, Sean Pispenn. He was a hard bastard and would be the death of her. Everyone said it. I watched Tiny's tiny frame disappearing down the street, the sea all swept with sudden sunlight, brittle gold, beyond her. She always looked as if she was about to disappear forever.

I did not believe she would come back for me that evening, to take me to the David Byrne concert, but she did. In the meantime I had other visitors to contend with. Homer Patt was the first one. He came with a pile of books under his arm. On top of the pile, in a cover of murky, brittle gold, I could make out the resplendent title, *An Irish Childhood*,

by Hugh Happenstance. Below the title, the word *Masterpiece*, with an exclamation mark, shouldered by the authority of Joey O'Mara, was clearly, vibrantly visible.

*Homer Patt on the Edge*