

Old Man Trouble.

I grew up with the smell of cunt and the smell of dirt: the human smell and the inhuman smell. As a child I lived beneath my mother's skirts and the skirts of her companions. I was reared amongst women, nurtured in folds of calico, muslin, and silk. I breathed their perfumes every hour of the day and the only voices I heard were women's voices and the only touch I had was the silken touch of a woman's hand or of a woman's breast. The only eyes that ever loved me were women's eyes, my mother's eyes, but all those women who kept my mother's company had loving eyes for the child I was. Back then, I could hardly detect my name in all the laughter that poured out of them, those loving eyes. Back then, that was so long ago. Back then, there must have been happy times, but I was just a boy, and I could hardly have known, back then, what happiness was, or what it wasn't. Back then, before myxoedema.

My mother was Mirabella, or perhaps Cassie, Cassie O'Shea, a lissom Irish cailin, head full of dreams. We were in Hollywood, where I was born. I never knew who my father was but my mother, Mirabella or Cassie, let on to me that it was someone important, someone famous even. My mother had come from Galway in the West of Ireland at the age of seventeen. She had run away from distraught parents who wanted her to become a seamstress. She was in love with the silver screen and the man called Valentino. She took the ship, she took the ship...

Forgive me if I'm vague but I was born sometime in the thirties I don't know exactly when, maybe thirty-two, maybe thirty-three; what matter, I was born. I've learned from the history books that the thirties was a time of depression, of unemployment and soup kitchens, of despair and vice, but in Hollywood things were different. In Hollywood the talking picture had arrived and business was booming. Musicals and comedies and musical comedies were very, very popular because people couldn't stand being miserable. People wanted escapism, glamour, entertainment. People wanted songs, laughter, and dancing girls. My mother's first steps into the limelight were as a dancing girl. She learned her trade at Mirabella's dancing school, which is where she got her name; everything is connected; she went in to that school Cassie O'Shea and came out a star. Hey presto!

My first memory of my mother is of her dancing. She was not a good dancer but she tried hard. I remember her tottering on high heels; for her "number" she had to dance in high heels. I remember a strident voice, the voice of Mirabella's dancing school, accent of New York, saying, "Unless that's a new dance, Honey, and I reckon it ain't, then you've got trouble!" My mother sure did have trouble: she had me. I went everywhere with her. She bounced me up and down on her knee. "Hey, little man!" she repeated over and over. "Hey, little man!" Before returning to her dance lesson. I remember her face as if the sun was always shining full on it. That's how it seemed to me, as if the

sun was always shining on her face and in her eyes. My mother's face was filled with sunlight. I can see it even now, through the veil of failing eyesight, as clear as day.

I was about two years of age when my mother got her first studio contract; she became what was called an "extra". This changed my mother's life, she belonged to the studio now and they could use her as they liked, but she was happy, she was working in Hollywood, in the pictures. We lived in an apartment rented from the studio. It was small, cramped even. I had a woman who used to mind me during the day and when my mother returned in the evenings, all glowing with the sunlight in her eyes, she would tell me, at length, and with great excitement, about all that had happened to her that day. I heard the names of famous film stars of that epoch repeated tirelessly, endlessly, but they meant nothing to me then and nothing to me now. Only certain names stood out. Those names made me laugh for some reason, the very sound of the names made me gurgle with a sort of irresistible joy, as if they had some infectious magic to make me cry with laughter. Those names were Groucho, Chico, and Harpo, but especially Harpo; that name really made me laugh, even now it makes me laugh, but I don't laugh for long. I wouldn't like anyone to think that those names were funny; funny they were not, but still they made me laugh. Perhaps I laughed to please my mother.

It took me a while to figure out what was happening: the

women who looked after me during the day were women like my mother, escapees from distant worlds, unemployed actresses, aspiring chorus girls, starry-eyed hopefuls, the camp followers of dreams living as near to the studios as they could find. Babysitting me was to some of them the first step to stardom; indeed, I was often treated like some auditioning director seated royally on my baby seat while Thelma, Vicky, or Jane, skipped or sang to my delight. "Hey mister! What do you think?" Those voices appeal across time, hands reaching out to beg my approval. What can I say as I watch you time and time again doing your "routine"; and to me more and more, as I watch through disintegrating time, each scene looks like a piece of film caught in the piercing heat of the projector lamp, scorching, melting, disintegrating, fading out of existence: what can I say, except that to me every one of you was a Star!

Those women were desperate to talk to someone who would understand them. For hours on end I was sat on the lap of some gabbling actress, a captive listener to an excited stream of embellished fantasy and exquisite self - justification. They were full of yearning, those women, for life and love and fame, especially fame; for life and love would only truly begin once fame was attained. How often did I hear those words, even from my own mother: "I'm going to build a big house from where I can see all of Hollywood and all of the world outside it, and I'm going to throw parties, immense parties to which everyone will be invited, and people will talk about them for days afterwards,

and you'll be my butler or my chauffeur, little man, or even my dresser, and when times are good or times are bad you'll let me hold you in my arms like this and you'll listen and understand everything I have to say. You'll appreciate even the tiniest murmur of my heart, won't you, little man?" And then they would hug me with great warmth and sometimes ferocity, crushing me with blind and all embracing love to their breasts, and I would listen, yes, I would, because I could hear it, to their hearts' murmur, deep within them.

They say that hearing is the last to go but with me it's smell. The only sounds I can hear these days are sounds that belong to the past; echoes, if you like; sounds that have fallen like ripe apples and pears from the night sky of long ago, into my aged, encrusted lap. I am old, I am even very old. I am so old and my eyesight so bad that I cannot see myself in the mirror or hear myself groaning upstairs or clambering into bed. I can hardly move, I can barely speak, but I can smell. I have a housewoman who comes, Mrs. Keogh, with her brush and her pan, her mop and her bucket, who says: "You should smell yourself! You're dirty!" I know, I know, I can smell myself. I smell myself all the time, my own detritus, my own decay. "Why don't you let the Health Nurse peel those filthy clothes off you and give you a good, clean bath? What are afraid of?" Afraid of falling in love, I think. I am still, in my dotage, susceptible. Or what would happen if her touch recalled my mother's? I would die of grief.

My mother's room was always clean and bright and smelled of flowers. Those smells, if I concentrate hard enough, I can still revive them. Each woman who stayed with me during the day had her own smell, and though I cannot remember their names, I remember their smells: jasmine, lilac, peach, rose, and many, many others, an infinite variety of smells. Those smells encircled me like arms and carried me through the day. They took me everywhere, even into the most private recesses of a life hardly begun. At set intervals I was taken to the toilet; even it smelled like a bed of roses, or a mediterranean orchard, with mingled scent of lemon and lime. Kind hands loosed my belt and rolled my short pants down. Those same hands steadied me on the toilet bowl as I performed my only "routine", practised and rehearsed ad infinitum, and laughed and sang as if I was doing no more than eating a bowl of porridge. Imagine laughing, singing hands, the hands of my mother. Such tender hands, sweet-smelling hands. "Now, it's my turn," they said. And I stood and watched as a skirt was hoisted delicately onto milk-white thighs and a sitting posture assumed. I heard the tuneful trickle of falling water into the bowl sometimes accompanied by a song, a woman's flute-like voice ringing in the tiny shell of my ear. Those moments of intimacy were dear to me. I felt no shame as I would now. My world then was crystal clear and perfectly innocent. I must have been five or six when I was told, for the first time, to go to the toilet on my own. I felt I was being punished, I felt betrayed. I've always missed that tender music

women make, when they piss.

The perfect world of women was sometimes rudely interrupted. I don't remember when the first man came, I just remember that after a certain time men were there, an unwholesome presence in my life. They introduced a different smell, a tobacco and alcohol smell, a dirty smell, a smell of unwashed clothes and unwashed flesh, the smell of dirt; not as bad as I smell nowadays, but to my childish nose a tainted smell none the less. The first of these stinking intruders must have come at the invitation of one of my babysitters, perhaps some were friends, brothers, boyfriends, but I know some were not. In the thirties a woman had to do whatever she had to to survive; if you couldn't pay the rent you went on the street, so to avoid going on the street you did whatever you had to, to pay the rent. I don't blame any one of them. Life is about making ends meet. You do it whether you like it or not. And they did.

As I look back through time I see something in particular which causes me pain. It is a curtain being drawn across my field of vision, locking me in behind a sightless world of gross flowers trapped in dyed fabric. My cot was in one corner of the room and a slender line of rope hanging from wall to wall passed across it. Whenever there was a need for privacy, and remember I was on intimate toilet terms with the majority of these women, a sheet or curtain or some other heavy cloth was thrown over the "line" isolating me. It seems to me that each time it happened I

was shut out from life, from love, from the world, from everything. I don't remember the first time this happened, I only remember that, like the visiting men, it became a regular occurrence. I didn't shout, I didn't scream, I didn't cry. I never protested. I was speechless with hurt and abandonment. I was terrified. From beyond the curtain of tawdry, threadbare blooms I heard the sounds of desperate struggle: creaking, jostling noises, oppressed, heavy breathing, strangled cries of pain or pleasure, followed by deep, seemingly endless silence. It took me a long time to get used to it and a long time to get used to the faint burning smell, like quenched incense that invaded the room with it. A smell like melted, still hot candlewax; a smell I liken to the smell of damp soil clinging to the roots of uprooted flowers before it is shaken out. After a while I came to like that smell and to understand that no harm was being done. The curtain was finally drawn away and a woman's face made anew, refreshed and revived, shone down on me with all its perfect radiance.

Then there was the man in the brown suit, the man who came home with my mother. He had green eyes. He tipped his hat back to look closely at me through the wooden bars of my cot. He mumbled something. Everytime he opened his mouth, vague sounds came out. I never knew what he was saying, it could have been anything. Hands on his hips, a small man, he towered over me. He scratched in his hair. He pointed at me. My mother said: "Ah, that's just my little man!" Soon she laid me on my tummy.

"Sleep, Danny, sleep for mummy!" The curtain was tumbled over the line and drawn across my cot. I heard sounds such as I had never heard. Mouse-like sounds, squeaks and screeches, squeals and tiny, infinitely tiny screams. When my mother drew the curtain back from my cot I was not asleep. I was wide awake. I saw the marks of his fingers on her arms. Deep sooty stains as if she'd been manhandled by the chimney sweep. Beyond her, Brown Suit was stretched on a chair, his shirt undone, whistling.

Brown Suit: I've worn many colours of suit but I've never worn brown, that shit colour. Makes you look as if you're smeared with excrement. Now who would want to..? Last week the P.H.N., the Public Health Nurse, a big untidy Cork girl with a loud hammer of a voice, tried to foist a brown suit on me. "Mr. Lynch," she complained, "we really must do something about your appearance!" I don't know why; I never go out. "You smell!" Famous words. "I find it quite hard to be near you sometimes!" Such a stern, disapproving voice. Makes me feel like crying, as I sometimes did when my mother scolded me. "Big baby!" she called me. All the same I've not had a wash in over two years now and I can scrape the grime out of the lines in my skin with my fingernails. My navel is a graveyard for all sorts of insect, and some spiders. I have cobwebs under my armpits. When I stretch my arms the cobwebs look like wings, or would if I could see them. I'm almost blind. I can't see in the present, only in the past. What would I want to see in the present for? There's nothing for me here! Nothing!

When I was a child women loved to dress and undress me. It's something women like to do with children. It comes I think from playing with dolls. During the day I had many changes of costume; my entire wardrobe was plundered and exploited. My mother loved to buy me clothes: navy jackets and hats, smart striped shirts and white cotton shorts, bright buckled shoes and knee-length stockings; I was sensational! I was put on parade, marched to and from the full-length mirror in the corner of the room - *I still like to look at myself in the mirror though I can see nothing of myself except my ghost* - I was done up like a cowboy or pirate, or swashbuckling sword-fighter, finding my own brief-lived stardom in the purblind screen of the mirror. I was even once blackened with polish to resemble a certain Al Jolsen, and the first song I learned to mimic was: "Mammy, how I love you, how I love you..." I was pronounced: "a darling". It was predicted I would one day be a star, another "Jackie Cooney", whoever he was, and another Valentino. I had all the attributes, my eyes, my ears, my lips, my chin, my dark, romantic, Irish curls, would all conspire to make me someday famous. And you know, I did have my moment on the screen. You may have seen me smiling out at you and not known it was me. But it was me, sure enough. I can't deny it. I was in a picture or two, playing with the starbeams, part of the dreams Hollywood sold to you; part of the illusion, part of your own dreams.

As soon as my mother came home it started: "You know,

Mirabella, that little honey child of yours is going to have his name in lights some day! Mark my words!" Those irrepressible young women were convinced that I, one day, would be a star, even if they would not. "I just know it, Mirabella, I can feel it in my bones!" Brown Suit was canvassed for an opinion; but first, I had to sing and dance for him. On the oval rug in front of my cot, polished up like a new leather shoe, I did my Al Jolson bit for him. He mumbled. My mother reminded me: "No, not like this, like this!" And she stood alongside me and demonstrated the feet movements before falling to her knees and wringing her hands. Brown Suit looked aside and spat onto a distant ashtray placed in the middle of the table. It was a formidable spit and for the first time I began to consciously fear him. He scratched and pulled at the crotch of his trousers. He fingered the curtain with the huge rose flowers discarded over a nearby chair. He nodded to my mother. He mumbled something. My face still blackened with polish I was put on my belly in the cot. The curtain tumbled over the line. There was screeching noises. I stood up in my cot and did the steps my mother had shown me. I sang. The screeching noises continued but I sang: "The sun shines east, the sun shines west, but I know where..." At last the curtain was pulled away. My mother looked happier than I had ever seen her. She picked me up in her arms. "Hey, little man," she lilted in my ear, "you're going to be a star!" Behind her an undone Brown Suit leapt to and fro swinging his feet extravagantly through the air. Clapping his hands feverishly he sang the saddest song I'd ever heard: "Tara - ra -

boom - seeay, tara - ra - boom - seeay," and so on. It was the only discernible sound that ever came from his lips as far as I was concerned and the reason it was sad was that it sounded like he was choking on every syllable. I know all about that now, that sadness. Time passes and all that. Some sort of *tristesse* running in his veins. Same sort of thing as happens to me sometimes.

My mother carried me through the streets, the streets of Hollywood. The streets were crowded: crowded with cossacks and buccaneers, with cowboys and indians, with pin-striped gangsters and gum-chewing molls, with ambling top-hatted, cane-carrying chorus boys and busily bustling, long-legged chorus girls. The streets of Hollywood, with their infinite variety of life, were the first streets I ever saw. Saw them from my mother's arms. Saw nothing wrong with them. Why should anything be wrong with them? To a child of four or five they seemed perfectly normal. Nothing was amiss. The entire world was populated like this. This, I thought, was the real world. And I had entered it.

In a tiny dressing room with walls of painted brick my mother metamorphosed into a dancing girl. She squeezed herself, with some assistance from me, into a fur-trimmed corset, and stumbled onto platform shoes she balanced precariously on. Outside, on the edges of a vast studio floor, thirty or forty women crushed into tight-fitting corsets just like my mother's, sat indolently on upturned cases and crates. They tapped their

feet impatiently; some of them twirled and whirled backwards and forwards, executing showy but difficult dance moves. "Hey, give me a break, sister! I've blisters on my feet from just looking at you!" They all had long, luxuriously long hair they brushed endlessly, like rock-bound mermaids. Even my mother when she let her hair down and tumbled it out with her hands seemed to unloose a bright ocean of hair flowing to her waist. But unlike mermaids, these women, all of them, had legs. Oblivious to the distant studio cranes, the gantries hung with lights and microphones, the hyperactive technicians and cameramen swinging their cameras from side to side, the broad expanse of set, a highly-lit staircase with upright metal standards fixed with flaming torches and bare-chested bronze-painted turbaned men standing at intervals on the steps, I played in and under the forest of legs provided by the dancing girls. The happiest playpen a boy ever had, made of the flesh and laughter of women. Looking up from my jungle their faces composed a sky of bright smiles starred with flashing, brilliant eyes. "Hey, Mirabella, I think I'm going to steal this handsome little man from you if you're not careful!" Stealing hands hoisted me and shook me between shaking arms and thighs before returning me to earth and the smells that hovered below that mesh of legs. After a time the forest pulled itself up by the roots and reassembled in the middle of the studio floor in front of the shooting cameras. There was some jostling for position before a megaphone wielding floor-manager or director imposed order. The girls took their places alongside the bronze painted men on the broad expanse of

staircase. The lights were turned up to an almost unbearable intensity and the music began. Together, in perfect unison, they danced.

Their timing was perfect; the sound of their shoes hitting the ground, with no one out of step, was thrilling. They marched down the steps and dispersed in front of the camera. "That was great, girls! That was just great!" the man with the megaphone shouted. There was a loud sigh of relief and a tiny ripple of applause. The forest came back to me, surrounded me, marooned me, and carried me away with it. I discovered my mother's dressing room was not hers alone; there must have been at least ten women in there discarding sweat-soaked costumes, stripping down to bare flesh, unashamedly naked. I was passed from knee to knee, my hands dabbled in breasts and thighs, stroked shoulders and arms, reached out to the starry brightness of eyes. I see now that all of those women wanted me to be their child. Some of them held me tightly as if they wanted to hold me forever. Reluctantly I was given back to my mother. Enthusiastically the women closed in a circle around us, the smell of greasepaint is still so vivid, and showered me with kisses. By the time I left that dressing room I was drunk with women's warm flesh and women's warm mouths. "Bring him back again soon now! Promise?" My mother carried me proudly. "You're the beautifullest boy in the whole of America!" she whispered to me. To me it was all like a dream, a dream that was rudely interrupted. When we got home Brown Suit was waiting. My mother rushed into his arms. I

was shunted into my cot and the curtain pulled across me view; but I could hear everything. I had become adept at hearing. I recognised the slither of clothes away from skin and the noise bodies made when they rubbed together. I recognised every syllable and variation of sound and how they climbed a rudimentary musical scale to a sort of culmination. I had heard that tune again and again and sung by a variety of voices. My mother's voice was not the one I liked best; her voice had none of the bird-like quality that the other women's voices had. No, my mother when she sang that song, offered something completely different. To put it bluntly she sounded as if she was being sawn in two. *Sawn in two*. Like a piece of wood being sawn through. There now. It comes back to me. I can hear it. That sound. That human sound. It would make you want to weep. I wept. Is there anything in the world, I wonder, as sad as sex? I don't think so. No wonder people, when they fuck, sometimes sound -or haven't you noticed?- as if they're dying.

Enter Harpo. It wasn't so much how he was dressed, - everyone in Hollywood dressed outlandishly, Harpo's battered sartorial style, his punch-drunk top hat and shabby castaway greatcoat, was unobtrusive there - or how he looked - his thick blonde curls, his rolling eyes, his idiot grin, seemed to be plastered on like a mask - but it was the manner in which he walked, swaying from side to side in a sort of bandy-legged swagger, that struck me as unusual. Of course the walk was being practised; he went at it again and again from every corner of

the studio until his legs looked as if they were permanently crooked. It was my first time to see Harpo and I had never seen anyone walk like that before. He spent hours doing it: his walk. He was obsessed with it. I realised after watching him at work for some time that he was a perfectionist; nothing was good enough until he was satisfied with it, and he was never satisfied. Nobody approached him as he worked and instinctively I kept my distance observing him from behind a large, straw - filled crate. In the middle of his walk he broke off, rushed to the crate and pulling a handful of straw out, stuffed it roughly into his mouth. His eyes somersaulted in his head. He grinned like a maniac. He swallowed the straw. Then he dived headlong into the crate his legs kicking in the air. The crate began to empty of straw; I took advantage of his preoccupation to run to my mother and shelter in the copious folds of her skirt. She was laughing. My mother was always laughing and singing and talking as if she was the happiest person alive. She pointed at Harpo's feet kicking wildly in the air above the crate. "Sssh!" someone warned. "You mustn't laugh! Harpo is deadly serious about his work!" My mother stopped laughing but her eyes continued to sparkle with delight.

My days on the set became a game of cat and mouse with Harpo. I spent all my energy avoiding him. I thought if I could keep myself at his back I'd be alright, but Harpo didn't move like other people in straight lines and at a constant pace, he turned and twisted erratically, walking at a headlong pace,

breaking into a run, leaping like a ballet dancer. I became an expert at predicting which way he would turn next, just in time to dash behind some obstacle near to me and hide there; but that wasn't enough, life was more complicated, because Harpo had brothers. Rushing from Harpo I could easily flounder in the path of Chico whose feet tripped me constantly; each time I fell he pointed a forefinger at me and said: "Aha! Gotcha! You little squirrel" That tight blazer and pointed hat he wore made him look ridiculous. I was never afraid of Chico, not really, but Groucho was different. Groucho always sat perfectly immobile. You didn't see him, you didn't even know he was there, until he had you wriggling in his arms. An anxious, constipated-looking man he was instantly cruel if provoked; I felt the back of his hand on more than one occasion. "Hey kid, get back to your mother, before I call the police and have you arrested!" His eyebrows were tacked back on his forehead with metal clips; his moustache drooped vengefully thick with some foul-smelling gluey paste; he carried an unlit cigar everywhere. "Someone get this kid out of here before I dance on him!" was his constant complaint. My mother would come rushing hands outstretched to rescue me while I looked nervously about to see where Harpo had got to. The solid thunk and hoot of his long-handled horn on the back of my head was often the first sign I got that he was in striking distance. I threw myself towards my mother. Harpo scuttled behind me his fingers reaching out to strangle me. I remember how more than once he made me wet myself. I was so afraid of him in the end that the very smell of him made me want

to cry. He smelt like an old, dead, dried up fish. His eyes reminded me of the eyes of a fish staring through the glass of an aquarium. Strange people, the Marx Brothers, very, very strange.

"I never hear you laughing," Mrs. Keogh has the habit of repeating, between pulls on her cigarette. "Mrs. Keogh," I sometimes respond, "I look at you and I don't feel like laughing ever again!" And she looks back at me with vague curiosity because she hasn't understood a word I've said. She shakes her head and I shake mine. Sometimes she is more than usually pert: pert and petulant. "You know what you smell of?" she accuses me. "Shit!" I try to say. Mrs. Keogh is implacable. "You smell of what dirty old men smell of! You smell of bad, bad things, and bad, bad thoughts!" I know now for certain that even my lusts are bad and give off the stench of corruption. "You are the ugliest woman alive!" I counter. "And I am the ugliest man!" But Mrs. Keogh, built on an extravagant model like that Dumont woman, is steady as a tanker leaving Cork Harbour, and does not flinch. In fact, I doubt if she's heard me. "You'd think a man like you would have more shame!" she protests, hitching her eyebrows. "If you sometime see my penis," I tell her, "it is a white and flaccid dying worm! I haven't had an erection since..." I count back in time from where I think I am today. "...since nineteen seventy five!" Mrs. Dumont launches on her favourite theme. "I don't know why you men are the way you are. We women spend all our lives looking after you and look at the

way you turn out! You're like a dirty, filthy thing, some scandalous magazine dragged out of the bottom of a dustbin, all covered in crud and things. If your mother could only see you! I mean, your mother kept you clean and tidy, didn't she? I dare say your mother would turn in her grave!" And I turn with my mother in her grave. "Get out! Get out! Get out!" I scream. "You're not a woman! You're not a woman! You're a monster! I pity your husband!" But she just looks at me with great, uncomprehending surprise, folding her arms with elaborate finesse. "Now don't you get narky with me!" she warns me. "Someday I might just lock the door after me and throw away the key! You'd be like a fish in a barrel then, wouldn't you? How would you get out? How would you get out?" This woman is driving me insane. I'd get rid of her only I'm used to her. And she's not always like this, sometimes she shows her mellower side. When she wants to be nice to me she calls me: "Old man trouble". Then she runs her fingers through my hair and calls me a "poor, decrepit bastard!" Thank you very much, Mrs. Keogh! Thank you very much for inscribing these final words on my tombstone. How well they will look, and how perfectly they will suit, as my impending epitaph.

My personal hygiene is very much my own business; sure, I'm guilty of some of the things Mrs. Keogh accuses me of, but why does Mrs. Keogh think, that in her dealing with me, she can represent the whole world, or even God? Why does she think that she can point an accusing finger at me? I have done no more to

her than the worms that crawl under her feet and are crushed by her Juggernaut passage to Mass. Though I am accused of wickedness I have done nothing to hurt anybody. I have kept to myself all my life through, avoiding confrontation, avoiding conflict, avoiding the unmasking of the soul in aggression. Peace be with you, has always been my motto as I ran from the world the way I ran from Harpo; but like Harpo, I never knew which way the world would turn. Sometimes when I thought, with some comfort, that it was spinning away from me, it turned and came racing back like a boomerang to knock me flat, to crack my skull as if it was some eviscerated eggshell, breaking open the emptiness inside. The world is a trouble-maker and as Mrs. Keogh says with brutal conviction: "the world will always find you out!"

But Mrs. Keogh is only the latest in a long line of people to tell me I'm bad; where did it all begin? It's all so vague; and though I sometimes call myself: *I, the bad*, I cannot remember who was the first person to say to me: "You are bad!" Harpo never did because Harpo never said a word. Even if you pinched Harpo very hard he wouldn't make a sound. He'd screw his face up like a piece of crumpled wastepaper and spin his eyes together as if they were colliding marbles but he would never utter a syllable of pain. Sometimes he'd blow his horn at me with all the force of a shattering expletive, usually prelude to an exhausting chase at the end of which I was severely chastised if caught, or he might scrawl an untidy note for me with the

word "caterpillar" or "cowpat" on it, roll it round a pebble and launch it ferociously at me. But he never wrote the word "bad". I think it must have been Chico; I know it was one of them, but Groucho generally satisfied himself with a swipe of his hand or a sharply delivered kick. Chico, on the other hand, seemed to take pleasure in a sort of moral humiliation. As I said, he liked to trip me. "Hey kid, you like fallin' over my feet or sometin?" he'd yell, his forefinger picking me off as if I was a sitting duck put there for him. Yeah, I reckon it was Chico. I think it must have been him. "Hey kid, can't you stand up straight?" "Hey kid, what's on the ground that's so interesting?" "Hey kid, you canna fool me! I know you're bad!" Yes! And it was Chico who pulled the piano lid down on my fingers that time. He did it on purpose. They were filming. There were other kids. We were all pushed around the piano and told to smile. I wasn't able to smile. Chico slapped me on the face and told me: "Hey kid, you smile, or else!" At the end of a piece of trinket music he pulled the piano lid down on my fingers. I whined like a pup someone had trod on. The tears exploded from my eyes. Chico laughed and pounded the piano keys. The other kids laughed. And the cameras never stopped. You can still see it. I forget which film. I don't look at those films anymore. But if you see me, you'll see me cry. And every one of those tears is genuine.

I was not happy. I who was born in a paradise populated with loving, lovely women, felt more and more on the

circumference of their lives, as if I was in the process of being abandoned. It was not nice. Those lovely maids of the toilet chamber received more and more gentlemen visitors and life at home was often partitioned for hours on end, day after day, by the veiling fabric of vast rose blooms. I was cut off from the laughter, the sad, sad laughter, and the sad, sad sighs, the even sadder sighs, of the women who had loved me. In the evening there was Brown Suit, who now, more than ever, took it on himself to throw the increasingly shabby curtain over the line. Sometimes he looked at me brutally, briefly, with those vicious green eyes of his before he wrapped my world in curtain fabric, and I thought I recognised something familiar in those eyes, something familiar and something terribly, terribly frightening. As if some danger had reemerged from a forgotten nightmare. Brown Suit was the fear that lay buried in all my bad dreams. I was close to recognising the devil for what he was. Someday soon, as he curtained my existence and darkened my world, I would point my little baby fingers at him and tell him: "You!" And then he would know that I knew, who and what he was, and that it was no use pretending. And then, maybe then, ashamed and remorseful, he would leave me alone again, with the woman I loved most in the world, and who loved me most in the world: my mother. My Mirabella!

Harpo really was mad: some of the things he did were even madder than mad. Once the camera started shooting he lost all control. Like a monkey he leapt across the set knocking

everything in his path over. As Groucho looked on with increasing disbelief, Harpo leapt onto the middle of the table where he was eating breakfast, scattering cups and saucers, plates and dishes in all directions. Harpo began to prepare and eat his own breakfast: a table napkin smeared with jam he used to wipe his face, leaving cherry-red streaks around his eyes, and then ate whole. With a knife he buttered his tongue with peanut-butter and then pretended to eat it, chewing vigorously. He made a sandwich of two table-mats and half the tablecloth, sprinkled salt and pepper over it and took an immense bite of it. He rubbed his stomach with glee. His plastic face melted to an expression of dumb, animal happiness. He began to nibble on a glass, tearing tiny shards away with his teeth and swallowing them. He rubbed his tummy with satisfaction. Groucho peeled off one of his socks and handed it to him. "Here try this! It's yesterday's but it's still fresh! Come to think of it, it's yesterday's and the day before's." While Harpo stuffed the sock in his mouth Groucho babbled on stupidly. "Come to think of it, that sock belonged to my father and to his father before him. That sock has a history! Let me tell it to you..." It was incredible the way Groucho just talked and talked and talked until the last tail fragment of sock had disappeared into Harpo's bulging mouth. "That sock was worn by Abraham Lincoln for the Gettysburg Address. It had a hole in it; that's why the speech was never finished; just eighty-four words... It needed darning; the speech, I mean!" Groucho would just go on and on and on. "Now, let me tell you something else about that sock!

George Washington wore that sock, in fact he never took it off; it died with him, that's why it smells so bad!" Harpo had finished; still crouched on the table-top he poured fruit juice into his upended hat and washed his hands in it; he dried his hands on Groucho's bib. "Happy now?" Groucho asked him with obvious contempt. Harpo grinned and nodded. "Well, give me my sock back then you great, big balooba!" And Harpo pushed his hand down his throat and slowly, painfully pulled the ragged sock up from his stomach. I felt sick watching. Around me the women, including my mother, laughed uproariously. Chico sitting at the far side of the table watched and laughed. His laughter was cruel. Sometimes I felt his laughter and his cruelty turning towards me. I retreated to my mother and nestled in the folds of her skirt; her perfumed arms linked around me hung down from my shoulders like a necklace. When she laughed all of her body to her toes shook happily. "That Harpo," I heard her saying to the other women, "that Harpo is a scream!" And Harpo, watched by everyone, swivelled and scratched on his derelict table-top like a monkey in its cage.

Harpo was capable of anything; he was, with one or two exceptions, utterly unpredictable and utterly anarchic. Once I remember him stripping a wall of its bookshelves and shovelling the piled books into a blazing fireplace, for no reason; he never had a reason for anything. Another time he rode a horse around the set, kicking it brutally in the sides to make it rear up and charge at the cameras. The horse shat everywhere; Harpo

disappeared and the entire studio personnel was mobilised with shovels and buckets to clear the studio of horseshit. Things that moved attracted him; he disliked things that were fixed, static and he always destroyed them. He himself was always moving as if dynamised by some super, kinetic force; this force, this energy lashed out from him at everything around, everything inanimate, immobile, forcing it to exert itself, to move, to act, to perform, to break. He pushed the world around him to its breaking point. A stairs to him became a living, moving thing as he rolled up and down it, tumbling like a mountebank, or swung from the banister into mid-air, clutching at some distant chandelier. Feet dangling, his arms tangled in the branches of the chandelier he rocked back and forth, as happy and distracted as a child on a swing, propelled by some inner waltz-like music that played in some dark recess of his mind, and calmed him: the Harpo waltz. Falling to the earth he picked himself up and brushed specks of invisible dirt off the sleeves of his tattered coat. He was for a moment, still, at rest in some cautionary interval of time and space; then, his mad, sad eyes catching some brusque movement he was off again, on the chase, stumbling over the furniture, honking his horn, flying like a bat blindly into the arms of some passing woman.

Sometimes I think I'll dress up like Harpo and wait for Mrs. Keogh to arrive. I'll throw myself on her, sit in her cradling arms, and hang round her neck like a mad, overgrown child. Only, and this is the chastening thought, I know what

she'd do! Once she raised her mop over my head, and another time the handle of her brush was pushed menacingly into the hairy crevices of my nose. "I know your type!" she squealed. "I've seen your sheets!"

Mrs. Keogh, that scavenger, comports herself as Judge, Jury and probable Executioner. She condemns me at every turn and would condemn Harpo equally. "Tell me, Mrs.Keogh, do you like the Marx Brothers at all?" Miracle of miracles, she understands my muttering voice! Mrs. Keogh stands back as if I've struck her. "I've no time to be watching them eejits!" she delivers. "What do you like?" I ask, and she hears me again. "Never you mind!" she warns as if she suspects some overture, before placidly considering. A pensive Mrs. Keogh looks like a piece of failed wax modelling, everything is downcast, everything is strangely awry; her fingers roll invisible rosary beads through her hands. "I like a nice, clean, romantic story!" she announces loudly. "None of your filth!" Does she mean *my* filth? "I don't like dirt! I never have done! Any kind of indecency hurts my sensibilities! I know that's all you men appreciate, but I'm a woman! Women are different!" I study her closely to see this difference. Today she has her hair wrapped in a used handkerchief and there is black, black dirt under her fingernails. "Men only want the one thing from a woman!" she goes on, unusually loquacious. I encourage her with a nod which is met by a suspicious look. "I don't know why us women aren't all lesbians!" she says abruptly and then blushes, yes, *blushes*,

at what she's said. I can't believe it! She used a word she no doubt hates! But she recovers well. "Really, the way you men treat us is a scandal! You've no respect, no respect for us women!" I nod my head. I agree, I agree. "Why do you think I've never become involved," I want to say, "why do you think I've let my penis wither like a white worm in a cold, dry, dark place all these years, in spite of the demands of heart and soul?" Mrs. Keogh nods knowingly. "If I had my way," she says sombrely, "I'd take all you men out somewhere, on a nice cold winter's day, and I'd cut your things off!" I retreat into my shell; I think I've heard enough. Mrs. Keogh slops her bucket on the ground in front of me and struggles down on her knees. She's getting old too and it's not so easy anymore. She begins to scrub with an old worn brush, sending streams of dark, sudsy water under my shoes. Then she looks up at me with one eye closed and says: "Them Marks Brothers?" as if she's asking a question. "Yes," I answer, wondering what's coming next. "Well," she says, "I have a son who likes them." And I think to myself: "Good God, there is mad laughter in her house after all!" Just as I'd expected. Mad laughter and mad tears. My squalling five-year old face! What can I say? Film, with its deep reservoir of nostalgia, its vivid reminder of past dreams and past torments, is surely, must be, has to be, the cruellest medium; images that move and yet stay the same! Trapped forever! Was, is, and always will be, over and over and over, again... Till I cry: "Stop!"

Here are the two exceptions to the rule, when Harpo became,

for a change, predictable. First of all, if someone unsuspecting entered the room you knew just what was going to happen: Harpo would cut their clothes to ribbons. He did this every time. Tucked inside his coat he had a big scissors, a sharp one, always ready. We all watched with bated breath as the unsuspecting victim arrived. Usually Groucho or Chico would offer a distraction. "Did I ever tell you about my adventures in Africa?" Groucho would say. "No? Well how could I? I've never been there!" Harpo worked away with his scissors cutting loose fragments of clothing away: the tail of a jacket, a trailing shirt-tail, the insides of pockets, collars and lapels, loose ties, and then began work on the main body of the garment. He reduced everyone to the status of a tattered beggar and each snip of the scissors produced only laughter, never alarm, around the world. In the studio the laughter was unstoppable as Harpo's victim was left in flitters and Harpo scampered away from threatening, raised fists and voices. Mirabella clapped her hands: "Oh, he's a scream! He's a scream!" And no one ever stood up to complain: "But this won't do! It won't do! You can't make ribbons of people like this!" Except sometimes one of his enraged victims shaking impotent fists above his head which only made him appear more and more ridiculous and made people laugh even harder. It was side-splitting; it really was; especially if Harpo's victim was a woman. The sight of a cheap muslin dress being cut open at the back to reveal a pair of shapely legs seemed the acme of hilarity. And Harpo himself took a particular glee in his scissor-work if it was a woman who was his victim.

And that too is where he was predictable. If a woman entered the room Harpo was galvanised into action, jerking like a frog probed with an electric terminal, and immediately assaulted her. He didn't mess around. Oh no, not our Harpo! If he didn't cut her clothes open to reveal what was underneath he'd simply tear them off, ripping away layer after layer, until she was almost stripped naked. A sort of rape was enacted every time. The poor woman would run from him, trying to cover herself with her hands, and at the same time protect herself from his cruel attentions. Harpo barrelled after her, his clawing hands tearing her clothes away, honking his horn, skipping over the furniture to prevent her escape, threatening capture every time, but delaying his pounce, his delighted eyes spinning like those glasses in which the painted black and white lenses rotated dizzily. Harpo could not resist a woman. Any woman who came near to him was prey to him. So it was with my mother. It was one of her walk-on roles, when she emerged from the chorus line to move one step closer to stardom, and they asked her to enter a room through one door, cross the room slowly, with a sultry roll of her hips and shoulders, and leave the room by a second door opposite the first one. They dressed her in a slinky satin dress that clung to every square inch of her body; she wasn't naked, but everyone looked at her as if she was; as if each movement she made represented precisely the trembling, tentative movement of naked flesh in sunlight; as if there was nothing between her and the transparent air, nothing but a film of sweat colouring her skin like the dawn. Her flesh had become that slight

covering of satin, had merged completely with it, was it, unmistakably. No one saw the dress, everyone saw my mother. When Mirabella walked into the room, the temperature rose palpably. She strode lazily towards the middle of the set. I noticed some of the technicians manning the cameras, lights, and microphones, pulling energetically at the crotch of their trousers. I realised then for the first time that to men, to sly, cruel, stinking men, my mother was some sort of symbol written on the world to be looked at and admired and excited by: a symbol of beauty, or more exactly, of the female. When my mother reached the middle of the set Harpo appeared. The satin dress was pulled away roughly to reveal a minuscule camisole underneath. My mother screamed and ran; Harpo followed. With his scissors he cut the straps of her camisole. The door my mother ran to wouldn't open. Everyone laughed. My mother cowered in the middle of the room; like a trapped mouse she squealed her distress. Harpo mounted the divan and swung through the air towards her. She ducked under his flailing feet and seeing her opportunity ran for the door she had entered by. She just made it. She shot through the door. Harpo raced through after her. It was almost an hour before I saw her again and when I did she had a look of utter exhaustion. In spite of her tiredness, she picked me up in her arms and carried me out of the studio to our home.

Brown Suit was waiting when we got home. He had his own key; he could let himself in. Sometimes he came during the day

when my mother was working, and each time, whether he was with my mother or some other woman he hung that same curtain up and cut me out of my life. This time he was sitting, his legs outstretched, on the edge of my mother's bed, winding a scarf around his hands, seemingly absorbed in what he was doing. "Run away from me, would you?" I thought I heard him saying, growling it as if to himself. My mother put me standing in front of her, I turned and buried my face in her skirt. "I'm tired," I heard her saying. "I'm not able for all this! It's too much!" Her voice sounded as if she could hardly speak. There was a long, hard silence, in which, with my face pressed deep into my mother's skirt, I thought I could hear the soft noise the scarf made as it wound around his fingers, and the quiet, hissing, snake-like menace of his breathing. "The child!" he said at last. I felt myself being lifted up; my face fell forward across my mother's shoulder; my cheek touched her cheek; her cheek was wet. "Don't you love me any more?" she asked. "I love you, Mammy! I love you, Mammy!" I said, clutching her around the neck with my little arms. Years later, I understand the question was not being asked of me. Behind me snide laughter tinkled like a music-box being opened and shut abruptly. "I thought so!" my mother said, carrying me to my cot. "But I love you! I love you like crazy! I'm going to die if I can't love you!" She sat me in the cot and without looking at me raised the tattered curtain up and threw it across the line. Darkness fell on my world. I stood and listened for the hard click of buttons undone and the murmurous swish of skirt sliding down stockinged legs. I stood

and listened for the tender muffled agony of clothes thrown to the floor and trampled on. I stood and listened for the rustle and sigh of bodies in the wind. I stood and listened for the first creaking protest of the bed under the gravity of falling bodies spiralling ever downwards. I stood and listened. I stood and listened for the first cry of pain stabbing through my mother's heart. I stood and listened to her sobs and her suffocation. I stood and listened. To all that sadness. My mother was dying. Mirabella was dying, I was sure of it; Mirabella was being smothered just feet away from where I was standing, listening, and I could do nothing about it! But I could do something! For the first time in my life I reached out of my cot and touched the tawdry curtain that divided me from the rest of the room and the rest of the world. I held it in my hand. I gripped it. I pulled it tightly into my fist. And with one steady, hesitant, fearful movement I dragged it down off the line, till it fell under its own weight, like a slow rain of flowers on my cot. I saw them! Lying on the bed. I wanted to cry out and announce my presence, to say: "Mirabella, I'm here!" But my voice stuck like a bone in my throat. I was condemned to watch, unable to turn away, fascinated by the act of evisceration I had never seen before, unheard and unseen, like some invisible spirit which had penetrated the room to observe its secret rituals. I saw, in one blazing moment that flared up out of my darkness and burned hotly, what all the noises and smells that had seeped through my curtained world denoted, and what act they were messengers of. Brown Suit was still in his

brown suit lying on top of my mother, moving up and down on her as if he was sawing his way through her flesh. Mirabella, under him, was completely naked, moaning, sighing, sobbing, all of her clothes scattered on the floor of the room, her arms reaching behind her, twisting through the brass rails at the head of the bed. She was trussed up like a Christmas turkey; her arms and ankles were tied with scarves, and the trailing ends of the scarves were knotted through the bed rails. Her face was turned away; I saw only the trace of her tears as they fell glistening in the lamplight and formed long, lovely arabesques on her slanted, silken cheeks. Brown Suit shed no tears. Brown Suit screwed himself into her, harder and harder. He banged against her, banged into her, with all the unforgiving cruelty of a door slamming shut on frail fingers. He squealed like a pig wallowing in its own muck. He bounced up and down on her, his clothes flapping around him like birds on the back of a wind-tossed scarecrow. And all the while Mirabella cried, inaudible tears, until with one last surge of effort he spun and twisted over her, then fell exhausted on her, and her sobs resounded like distant, dying thunder weeping on the wind somewhere. I climbed out of my cot and making no noise tiptoed over her strewn clothes to the edge of the bed. I stood at the edge of the bed silently watching. When he opened his eyes I was just inches from his face. I had never been so close to him. I knew him and he knew that I knew him. He grinned and made his eyes somersault in their sockets. It was Harpo. No mistake. He winked at me, his green eye going on and off like a street lamp. I turned and, on

my knees, crawled back to my cot. I climbed in, pulling the fallen curtain after me. I lay down in my cot with the curtain over me. I could hear my mother crying. I could hear the anguished movement of the bed as Harpo bestrode her again. I could hear her saying: "No! No!" I heard Harpo laughing. His laughter echoed under the curtain, echoed all around me. That man was vile. As he fucked my mother he squealed like a stuck pig. He screeched louder and louder until in the end he sounded like a sick dog baying at the moon. That noise was intolerable. Even today, in the night sometimes, I can hear it. I have to cover my ears with my hands. I have to squeal and screech in turn until I have drowned him out. Under my curtain of fallen rose-blooms I squealed and screeched until my mother came to me. She picked me out of my cot and hugged me and soothed me. I heard Harpo slamming the door behind him and heard him shouting on the stairs as he left. I don't know what he was saying and I don't care. My mother, after her torture, was back in my arms. "It's all right, honey!" she was saying. "It's all right! There's nothing to be afraid of. He's gone. He's gone! That bad man is gone!" She rocked me on her shoulder. I began to feel better. I clung to her as if I was afraid of losing her forever. Strangely, my mother began to laugh. "Why are you laughing, Mammy?" I asked her. "What's funny?" She laughed louder and louder. She doubled up with laughter and had to put me down. I stood in front of her and watched in astonishment as with her hands on her sides she bent over until her forehead was almost touching the ground. She bellowed and the neighbours began to

bang loudly on the walls. It was crazy. She knelt and held my shoulders and shook with contained laughter. "It's so funny," she said. "It's so funny!" And maybe because she had no one else to share the joke with she decided to tell it to me. I didn't understand when she said: "That dummy may not be able to speak, but he sure can howl!" Even now, sixty years later I find it impossible to laugh at that. How could she? Mirabella looked like a chemise that had been fed through a mangle. Her eyes were blackened. Her face was streaked with mingled sweat and tears. The tears still flowed in thin streams to the edge of her lips. "I don't know why I'm laughing," she admitted at last, "but it's better than crying, isn't it?" But she was crying. Somehow that seemed to escape her. When she stood up and went to the mirror and saw herself she said: "My, my, I am a mess, amn't I?" She twisted stray strands of hair behind her ears as if that little adjustment would make all the difference. She looked at herself for a long time, staring long and hard at herself in the mirror. It was as if she'd forgotten me. I stood behind her my eyes fixed on the untidy mess of my mother's bed. It had been ransacked and looked like a gutted thing with its intestines trailing. I felt afraid of that bed with its smell of dead or rotting fish. That's what it looked like: like a gutted, white-bellied fish, with its rotted entrails on display. It made me want to vomit. I got on my knees and retched. Still tied to the brass rails, softly-knotted strands of scarf fluttered lightly in the draught from an open window.

My mother loved that man so much it killed her. After that last, fatal, slamming of the door, she was never the same. She couldn't dance, she couldn't sing, and her looks disintegrated until she resembled a withered flower. Soon, very soon, she was no longer in demand at the studio; but she still had her contract and still had her apartment. "They can't take those away from me!" she said. "Not yet anyway!" She stayed at home with me all day. All of the other women in my life, the dancers and singers, the dreamers and no-hopers, who had nurtured me tenderly during the five years of my existence, had melted away one by one. There was only Mirabella left: tired, listless, empty, broken-hearted Mirabella. And she too began to melt away. Each day there was less and less of her until she looked like a woman made from sticks tied together, but she still smelled nice. Each morning, after getting out of bed, she dabbed perfume on her neck and wrists, then went back to bed. I lay beside her on the bed, wreathed in the scent of apple blossom and peach blossom, kicking my legs and dreaming anxiously of Brown Suit and green eyes and a man who ate glass for nutriment; the same man who had cannibalised my mother. We never saw him again. He never came. Sometimes my mother sat and wrote long letters she tore to pieces when she had finished. She scattered the torn fragments like confetti over us, laughing; and then on her knees she picked them up, one by one, and tried to piece them together again. I helped, but some of the bits of paper I swallowed so the letter would remain incomplete. My mother would cry for hours on end over the lost pieces of the jigsaw; then, bowing to

the inevitable she would brush the reconstructed letter aside and taking a brand new sheet of paper begin all over again. Sometimes she just cried, and cried and cried and cried, and called his name. She lay on the bed and tossed and turned as if his spirit had returned to possess her. She turned and twisted until she had exhausted herself, then lay like a dead thing with her still-flowing tears trickling into her open mouth. Once, once only, taking four lightly coloured scarfs from a drawer she tied her feet and her left hand to the brass rails of the bedstead. She pleaded with me to tie her right hand to the bed. "Do it for Mammy, darling! It's easy! It's not hard!" I was afraid, I hesitated. At last, moved by her expression of utter desolation and sadness, I clambered on the bed beside her and wound the last scarf around her wrist and through the cold brass rail and tied them tightly together. I curled up in a ball and tried to sleep but I could not. All night my mother's body shook with tears. When at last she was quiet I got on my knees and loosened the four knotted scarves. I carried them to the window, opened the window, and let them out on the wind. They were carried over the street and over the buildings and over the studio and far, far away, to wherever the wind goes to. They were like pretty, dancing spirits in the air as they flew away, but I hoped I would never see them again, and that they were gone with the wind, forever. I climbed back on the bed beside my sleeping mother. Her muslin dress and the sheets under her were soaked with her tears. For the first time I realised that her tears came from some inexhaustible reservoir deep inside her and

that it didn't matter how much I begged her to, my mother's tears were never going to stop. They would never stop until she was dead. And death, as even I could see, was not far away.

My mother was not abandoned by other women; they often called, but she always said: "I'm so sorry, honey, I'm just on my way out! Call back again sometime, won't you?" So sweetly, that they left without a murmur of protest. Sometimes they insisted on staying but my mother continued to be sweet and said: "You mind the boy then! I just have to go out for a moment!" A moment was sometimes an hour or two; where she went I have no idea, but she often returned enlivened from her excursions, singing and dancing around the room. During the interval I played hide and seek games with my babysitter, just like old times; sometimes I dragged my old clothes out of the wardrobe and dressed myself like a pirate or a commanchee. "You are such a sweet little thing! You'll break lots of ladies' hearts, Valentino, when you get older, won't you!" Those women were kind to me and always left me sweets and sometimes sang little lullabies to me before they left. Nothing seemed terribly wrong to them. They noticed my mother was a little thin: "Now, child, you look after yourself! Remember you were born to be a star! Nobody likes to hire a skinny actress!" And then they left, just before my mother collapsed from the effort of entertaining them. No men came, except maybe once or twice: men who tried to console my mother, who persisted a while, who were resisted and who left disgruntled, my mother shutting the door

firmly behind them. "There's only one man for me now!" she said, lifting me on her knee. Life had certainly changed. Under my cot the rolled, disused curtain had collected dust and its blooms were invisible. One day while my mother slept, I dropped it out of the window and watched it floating away. It was not pretty. It showered dust over Hollywood. It looked like a banner of despair unfurling in the sky.

I helped my mother as much as I could. I did all the housework. My mother directed me from her bed. She had no energy. It seemed harder and harder for her to get up. She never ate; if she ate she got sick. I think she probably starved to death, but I don't know. One day she complained of a "terrible tiredness", that's all. She said she wanted to sleep forever. She told me to be "a good boy". She closed her eyes. After about twenty minutes her tears stopped falling from under her closed eyelids. I washed her face with a damp handkerchief. I dabbed the scent of apple blossom on her ears and scrawny neck. I kissed Mirabella for the last time and threw myself from the window of the room. I floated down as lightly as a discarded scarf let loose on the air.

All I remember after that is staring up from the hard ground at six or seven ferocious looking Indians gathered around me. Their faces were painted with savage colour and they held bloodied tomahawks in their raised hands. I thought they were going to scalp me. I began to cry. I never ever saw Mirabella

again, either living or dead. The only Mirabella I saw was the one who haunts my memory still, and who sometimes dances in my imagination on tottering high heels. To tell the truth I know nothing of her, nothing at all, other than what I have been told: that she was Cassie O'Shea, a young girl from Galway, who ran away to America, because she loved the man called Valentino.

My aunt told me about the time in hospital. I was all bandaged up from head to toe. There was a photograph but she'd lost it. I looked "a scream". I was like that for nearly six months. And then, and then, she told me, I spent some time in a special school somewhere in Los Angeles, with other orphaned and disabled children, learning to walk. The war was about to begin but no one knew about that in America. I was put on a ship to Ireland. I did not like that. Ireland is a place you take a ship from when you leave, as my mother did, but you are *put on* a ship when you go there, as I was. I did not like being put on the ship. I remember the sea and the fading lights of the American coast. I imagined I could see the lights of Hollywood and all its dreams of stardom fading. I remember a word spoken often on ship: *starboard*. Everything was *to starboard*. The language of the world, I find, is full of sad resonance. For six weeks I stared out at the rolling sea waiting for the lights of Hollywood to switch back on to welcome me home. For six weeks I was alone on a world in ceaseless flux, going I knew not where, except it was not home. They sent me to the country and people my mother had run away from: what imagination! What a thing to

do to the child of a dreaming, starry-eyed actress! What a thing to do to me, who had played Valentino to a thousand adoring hearts, and was promised stardom on the silver screen! What a thing to do, to a fellow-American! I knew when I first saw it that Ireland could not be America. It looked completely different. Where were the cowboys, the pirates, the swashbucklers, the apaches in the street? Where were the dancing girls with their music and song, their dreaming eyes and loving hearts? Where were the dreams? Not here, not in Cobh, a place of mists and muck, where all the dreams that could be found in Ireland were gathered together in a smouldering heap and readied for departure. As I came down the plank I saw them crowded together, with their bundled rags at their feet, waiting impatiently to board ship. I knew instinctively, no one had to tell me, no one had to explain, where they were going. Their eyes looked so hungry and so cold and were stamped with the dream of America; that faraway, distant dream, that insatiable dream. If only I could have gone back there with one of them. If only...

Nora O' Shea, Cassie's older sister, married a man from the County Cork. They lived, conveniently, on the outskirts of Cobh. They met me at the ship. Nora clamped her arms around me and crushed me. She smelled like a man. "Is there anything you want? Anything you want?" she asked and repeated in an accent that made me want to weep. I thought I heard my mother's voice. "I want to go home," I cried. "I want to go home!" And the man's

voice behind her said sternly: "This is your home now!" A hand reached out to me and a man with, I thought, green eyes, said: "I'll be your father from now on!" I was only seven or eight or nine at the time -it's all vague, all so vague- but I was young enough for them to put me on a ship and send me away forever, and I felt as if I had lost everything, and my life was over, my only real life was over.

Back then, everything was black and white, or so you would think. One day Mrs. Keogh called, accompanied by her son Joseph, a fine, big, strapping fellow, carrying an enormous cardboard box. Mrs. Keogh smiled through her crocodile teeth and said sweetly: "You're going to like this, old man trouble! A little surprise!" It must have been something I said, and it will teach me to keep my mouth shut in future. At first, I didn't know what they had in store for me. Joseph produced a slim black machine trailing cable from the cardboard box. He sprawled on the floor beneath the telly, twisting and stretching and kicking like a swimmer floundering at the bottom of a dry pool, running the wires back and forth through his hands. He switched the telly on and the screen buzzed and danced crazily with broken black and grey stripes. It was just like back then. He twiddled some knobs and the lines curved and zigzagged and broke and regrouped and then curved and zigzagged and broke again. It took him almost an hour to tune into that bygone world. "The set's not the best," he apologised. "Nothing in this house works properly!" Mrs. Keogh complained, her sweetness eroded by the hour wait. She

grabbed my arm and shook me brutally. "Are you going to live like this until you die?" she spat fiercely. "Rotting with your diseases?" I shook my head in what I thought was a conciliatory fashion and tried with my feeble fingers to prise her strong ones off my arm. "There's nothing wrong with you, you know!" she said with authority, Mrs. Doctor Keogh, in her spare time. "There's nothing wrong with you at all, except you're too fond of your own dirt!" She let go of my arm to shake her fist at me. "That's what's debilitated you, my man! Dirt and filth and obscenity! God have mercy on your crippled soul! Because I won't!" Joseph turned to his mother. "Sssh, Ma, I nearly have it!" Faintly, I heard voices. Oh no, I thought to myself, what is this? There was loud, lively music; what's called "jolly" music, the music clowns tumble into the circus ring to. "I'm tired!" I said, "I don't know if I want to..." But Mrs. Keogh silenced me with a peremptory wave of her hand. Joseph, still in the swimming position on the floor, twiddled the knobs some more, and the picture began to compose itself, to emerge through a haze of falling black and white snow. Then it was clear as day: on the screen a banner headline, "The Marx Brothers", with those laughing, idiot faces glaring at me, after all these years, as if time had never elapsed at all. Joseph sat back on his bottom, two feet in front of the telly, and began to roll and rock with laughter. "Them clowns! Them clowns!" Mrs. Keogh roared, pointing accusingly at the telly. "Eejits the lot of them!" I never heard such rough and frightening laughter as my soul was savaged in front of them. It was all there, everything

I've recounted: Harpo swinging from the chandelier; the breakfast debacle; the horse charging through the set; Chico playing the piano; my crushed fingers, my squalling face; and then, moment of supreme tenderness, a crowded drawing room and my mother's entrance. They laughed and laughed and laughed. "Look at the walk of that one!" Mrs. Keogh said viciously. "Now look at what he's doing to her! Serves her right!" Joseph rocked backwards and forwards wildly, until his head seemed in danger of flying through the television screen. It was not fair to do that to me. I wished that time had no memory. I wished that film had never been invented. And as they laughed and laughed, I cried and cried, and wished for the end to come soon. Harpo chased my mother out of the room and I knew she would not return. The Keoghs were twisted in knots of laughter. Mrs. Keogh, who claimed she did not like the Marx Brothers, looked as if she was going to come apart and fall to pieces at my feet. Then, instantly transformed, her laughter stopped abruptly, she stood up, she leapt, literally leapt, like a frog leaping into a pond, across the floor to the telly, and with a flick of her hand killed the screen. "Ah, Ma!" Joseph protested. Mrs. Keogh turned and folded her arms across her chest. Her face was a model of stern retribution; her hooded eyes addressed me without looking at me. "If you don't appreciate what we've done for you, then there's no need to go on, is there?" She waited for some reply. Joseph looked round at me, his face in obvious confusion. "He's crying, Ma," he whispered. "Crying? Crying?" Mrs. Keogh raised her voice to a peak of indignation. "That's him all over!

That's my old man trouble! Crying when he should be laughing! What can you do with the likes of him?" Mrs. Keogh tapped her feet bitterly on the floor. "I've a good mind to take the handle of the mop to him and split his skull open for him! Now! That's what I'd do!" Joseph shuffled towards me on hands and knees. With not unkind hands he searched through the pockets of my jacket and pulled a crumpled white handkerchief out. He wiped my tears away. He moistened the edge of the handkerchief at the tap and washed my face. Mrs. Keogh, awkwardly, bundled the slim black machine back into its cardboard box; she tugged at the connecting cables until they broke free. "C'mon, Joseph," she commanded. "If you knew him like I knew him!" She turned and spat, yes, this time I mean *spat*, at me. "I curse the day I met him: the miserable old fool!" She was in a rage. I had never seen her so violently provoked. She stood over me shaking her fists. "I hope someday soon someone breaks into this dirty hovel of yours and splatters your brains all over them walls!" She pointed at the walls. She danced up and down with anger. "You're a dirty whore! That's what you are! A dirty whore!" Joseph had to restrain her. "C'mon Ma, let's go home now! We'll watch the rest of the film at home!" Mrs. Keogh, calmed somewhat, huffed and puffed over me. "The Marx Brothers is too good for some people, I suppose!" She poked me with her finger. "Eh? Eh?" What was the question? Joseph held the box in his arms, carrying her away, my mother, in that cardboard coffin, that pauper's grave of memory in which she had turned to celluloid. "C'mon, Ma, this thing is heavy!" Mrs. Keogh stamped her feet one last time. "But

I'll be back!" she said. "I'm warning you, I'll be back! I'll come back some night and murder you in your bed so I will! Just you wait!" What could I say? "I'm sorry, Mrs. Keogh," I attempted meekly. "Don't you threaten me, you cur, you!" she snarled back at me. Joseph caught the sleeve of her coat and dragged her towards the door. She had just left and the door had shut behind her when it opened again and she rushed back in. She stood over me again her head nodding from side to side as if it had worked its way loose and was about to fall off. I thought she'd lost her voice. I heard nothing. The silence went on and on. It was unbearable. And then came her parting shot. "It's a terrible thing," she said at last, "a terrible thing!" I waited. "It's a terrible thing," she began again and repeated that it was "a terrible thing". Eventually she got it out with stunning clarity. "It's a terrible thing," she concluded, "a terrible thing, not to have a sense of humour!" I bowed to her as she left slamming the door behind her. Thank God, she was gone. I hoped I'd never see her again, but she returned the next day and did her work around the house as usual, as if nothing had happened. She seemed even subdued, perhaps contrite is the word. Before she left she sat on the edge of my chair and slipped her arm around my shoulder. "Surely there's something you'd like to see on the video?" she said. "Joseph says he can get you anything you ask for!" She waited patiently. I said nothing. I had seen enough. "Ah c'mon, now," she coaxed me, "try a little! Make an effort! There must be someone! You men always had a flame in the pictures! Someone you fancied! C'mon! Don't be shy!

Who was it?" She grinned inanely and shook my shoulders companionably; this reformed Mrs. Keogh was outrageous. I thought of telling her to "fuck off!" "C'mon!" she encouraged me. "Who were you in love with? Which actress did you love the most? Joan Crawford, Rita Hayworth, Dorothy Lamour, Mae West, which one did you love?" She chucked me under the chin as if I was an idiot child and to kill or cure her I gave her an answer. "Mirabella!" I said, as loudly and clearly as I could. "Who?" "Mirabella!" I repeated, and this time she heard me. "Mirabella?" she said, puzzling over the name. I nodded a shower of affirmatives. "Mirabella?" she repeated, shaking her head. "That name means nothing to me!" She shook her head again and repeated the name as if by repeating it endlessly all would be made clear. It was strange to hear my mother's name intoned by that viper voice. "Mirabella? Mirabella? Mirabella?" clanged around me like the tonguing of a cracked bell. "I don't think I remember her at all!" Mrs. Keogh shook her head round and round and round. "No, I can't seem to remember her! Don't remember her at all! Just can't seem to remember! Don't remember! Can't remember! Don't remember!" And why should I have been surprised, because that's the way it's always been? That's it, you see; that's the way it's always been. Nobody remembers Mirabella, nobody at all. Only me! I'm the only one... I'm the only one who remembers.

