

The distant war in Europe was drawing to a close. Rationing was easing. On my way home from school, on a day my mother was absent, I was given a loaf of white bread in Mahon's shop. 'Only a half-dozen came on the train and I kept this one for your mother,' Mrs Mahon said. I hadn't seen a white loaf in years and took it home in high excitement to show it to Katie, and then took it upstairs to my mother. That evening we were all given a slice, and we ate it in wonder. I still gathered and cut sticks about the hedges and went to town with the jennet and cart. My mother no longer went to town on the train. I bought whatever provisions the house needed. When I had difficulty in the shops, I showed them the list she had given me. Always I was made much of, and feasted in Maggie's before leading the jennet out through the railway gates for home. Once outside the town, I sat into the cart.

Whenever my mother was back at school and feeling better, on good evenings she'd spend hours in the flower garden. We vied with one another to help her, and were probably more of a hindrance than a help, but she liked our company and gave us separate tasks when we quarrelled. The little I know of cultivated flowers derives from that garden. The rose bushes were now sturdier, with many blooms; the nasturtiums, lilies, pansies, wallflowers looked happier and more secure in their beds. The fences had been further reinforced, and the garden became even more like a small fortress in the middle of the wilderness. Next

spring, she said, we would plant whitethorn slips all around, and in time we could have an arch of whitethorns above the gate, as they had in her old house in Drumderg.

Around this time, the first note of despair enters my mother's letters: 'I was at school today after a few days in bed. I am improved but still suffering and it seems I must suffer on - maybe if the weather improved the sunshine might help. God is great.'

She suspects that the cancer might have returned, but everybody around her conspires to drive her from this knowledge. Her stomach pain and recurrent bouts of constipation and diarrhoea, she is told, are an unrelated sickness that she can recover from if she will only make the effort. She asks my father to write to Dr Corcoran in Dublin, which he is understandably reluctant to do, since he has already written to him secretly.

He came on his bicycle one last time. He hardly noticed us and was gone in a few hours. All the time was spent in grave conversation with my mother. When he left, she was able to walk him all the way out to the little iron gate at the road. We were not allowed to accompany them. They spent a long time in conversation, and were never to see one another again.

From this time on my father's only contact with my mother was by letter. He began to write to Maggie as well. As Pat couldn't read or write, my father rang the guards in Ballinamore regularly asking them to get Pat to telephone. There would never have been any great urgency for Pat to call my father, but my father would have enjoyed the drama and attention. Maggie and Pat were constantly at the house. One of the white bullocks Pat kept on the hill was thriving, but the other was failing, and I was given a new task of feeding him crushed oats in the morning before I went to school and again in the evening.

In another of my mother's letters there is the same note: 'I am still grunny and stayed in bed to see Dr Dolan. I am not anything worse but just wish if there could be something done before they stay too long. Maggie was out today and said that she had a letter from you. The children are all well. Best love



now. Your loving wife, Sue.' Her complaints are all brief. She enquires about his health and all the hard work he is doing in the barracks and garden and on the bog. She tells him that the oatfield has been rolled and that Pat has moulded all the potatoes. They got ammonia from James McGovern and it had been mixed with compound and put on the potatoes Tuesday evening. She had been in bed at the time and hadn't been able to see it put on but she supposed it had been done all right. The letter to Maggie that she mentioned included a proposal that my mother move to the barracks in order to rest and recuperate. That it was made to Maggie inclines me to believe that it was meant for public consumption rather than anything he wanted or deemed practical, and it was Maggie and not my mother who answered: 'Just to say Sue is very much improved thank God and I asked her if she would wish to go to Cootehall for a rest and she said that when she was getting better at home in Corramahon that she would stay on for the present till she would get built up.'