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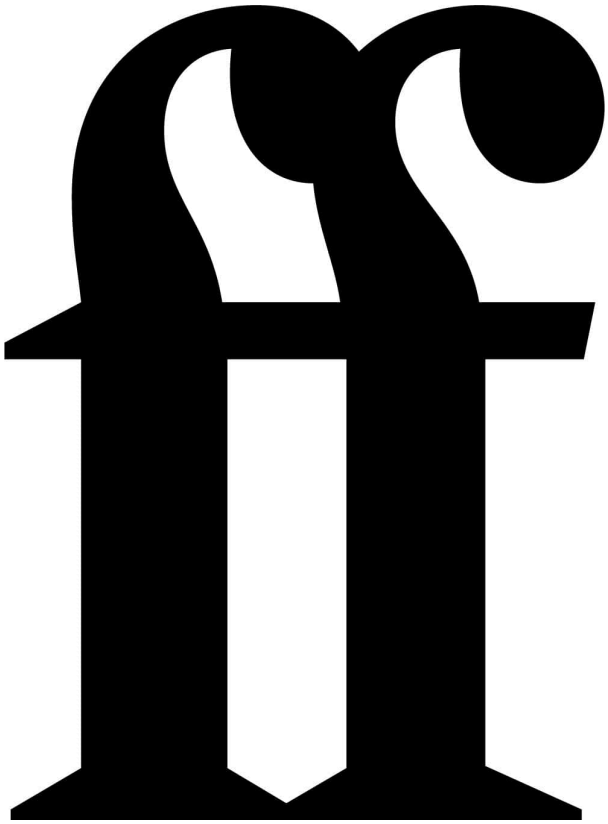

Small Things Like These

CLAIRE KEEGAN

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This story is dedicated to the women and children who suffered time in Ireland's mother and baby homes and Magdalen laundries.

And for Mary McCay, teacher.

‘The Irish Republic is entitled to, and hereby claims, the allegiance of every Irishman and Irishwoman. The Republic guarantees religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens, and declares its resolve to pursue the happiness and prosperity of the whole nation and of all its parts, cherishing all of the children of the nation equally.’

Excerpt from ‘The Proclamation of the Irish Republic’, 1916

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In October there were yellow trees. Then the clocks went back the hour and the long November winds came in and blew, and stripped the trees bare. In the town of New Ross, chimneys threw out smoke which fell away and drifted off in hairy, drawn-out strings before dispersing along the quays, and soon the River Barrow, dark as stout, swelled up with rain.

The people, for the most part, unhappily endured the weather: shop-keepers and tradesmen, men and women in the post office and the dole queue, the mart, the coffee shop and supermarket, the bingo hall, the pubs and the chipper all commented, in their own ways, on the cold and what rain had fallen, asking what was in it – and could there be something in it – for who could believe that there, again, was another raw-cold day? Children pulled their hoods up before facing out to school, while their mothers, so used now to ducking their heads and running to the clothesline, or hardly daring to hang anything out at all, had little faith in getting so much as a shirt dry before evening. And then the nights came on and the frosts took hold again, and blades of cold slid under doors and cut the knees off those who still knelt to say the rosary.

Down in the yard, Bill Furlong, the coal and timber merchant, rubbed his hands, saying if things carried on as they were, they would soon need a new set of tyres for the lorry.

'She's on the road every hour of the day,' he told his men. 'We could soon be on the rims.'

And it was true: hardly had one customer left the yard before another arrived in, fresh on their heels, or the phone rang – with almost everyone

saying they wanted delivery now or soon, that next week wouldn't do.

Furlong sold coal, turf, anthracite, slack and logs. These were ordered by the hundredweight, the half hundredweight or the full tonne or lorry load. He also sold bales of briquettes, kindling and bottled gas. The coal was the dirtiest work and had, in winter, to be collected monthly, off the quays. Two full days it took for the men to collect, carry, sort and weigh it all out, back at the yard. Meanwhile, the Polish and Russian boatmen were a novelty going about town in their fur caps and long, buttoned coats, with hardly a word of English.

During busy times like these, Furlong made most of the deliveries himself, leaving the yardmen to bag up the next orders and cut and split the loads of felled trees the farmers brought in. Through the mornings, the saws and shovels could be heard going hard at it, but when the Angelus bell rang, at noon, the men laid down their tools, washed the black off their hands, and went round to Kehoe's, where they were fed hot dinners with soup, and fish & chips on Fridays.

'The empty sack cannot stand,' Mrs Kehoe liked to say, standing behind her new buffet counter, slicing up the meat and dishing out the veg and mash with her long, metal spoons.

Gladly, the men sat down to thaw out and eat their fill before having a smoke and facing back out into the cold again.

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Furlong had come from nothing. Less than nothing, some might say. His mother, at the age of sixteen, had fallen pregnant while working as a domestic for Mrs Wilson, the Protestant widow who lived in the big house a few miles outside of town. When his mother's trouble became known, and her people made it clear that they'd have no more to do with her, Mrs Wilson, instead of giving his mother her walking papers, told her she should stay on, and keep her work. On the morning Furlong was born, it was Mrs Wilson who had his mother taken into hospital, and had them brought home. It was the first of April, 1946, and some said the boy would turn out to be a fool.

The main of Furlong's infancy was spent in a Moses basket in Mrs Wilson's kitchen and he was then harnessed into the big pram beside the dresser, just out of reach of the long, blue jugs. His earliest memories were of serving plates, a black range – hot! hot! – and a shining floor of square tiles made of two colours, on which he crawled and later walked and later still learned resembled a draughts board whose pieces either jumped over others or were taken.

As he grew, Mrs Wilson, who had no children of her own, took him under her wing, gave him little jobs and helped him along with his reading. She had a small library and didn't seem to care much for what judgements others passed but carried temperately along with her own life, living off the pension she received on account of her husband having been killed in the War, and what income that came from her small herd of well-minded Herefords, and Cheviot ewes. Ned, the farmhand, lived in too, and

seldom was there much friction around the place or with neighbours as the land was well fenced and managed, and no money was owing. Neither was there much tension over religious beliefs which, on both sides, were lukewarm; on Sundays, Mrs Wilson simply changed her dress and shoes, pinned her good hat onto her head and was driven as far as the church by Ned in the Ford, which was then driven a little farther on, with mother and child, to the chapel – and when they returned home, both prayer books and the bible were left lying on the hallstand until the following Sunday or holy day.

As a schoolboy, Furlong had been jeered and called some ugly names; once, he'd come home with the back of his coat covered in spit, but his connection with the big house had given him some leeway, and protection. He had gone on then, to the technical school for a couple of years before winding up at the coal yard, doing much the same work as his own men now did, under him, and had worked his way up. He'd a head for business, was known for getting along, and could be relied upon, as he had developed good, Protestant habits; was given to rising early and had no taste for drink.

Now, he lived in the town with his wife, Eileen, and their five daughters. He'd met Eileen while she was working in the office of Graves & Co. and had courted her in the usual ways, taking her to the cinema and for long walks along the towpath in the evenings. He was attracted to her shiny black hair and slate eyes, her practical, agile mind. When they engaged to marry, Mrs Wilson gave Furlong a few thousand pounds, to start up. Some said she had given him money because it was one of her own that had fathered him – sure hadn't he been christened William, after the kings.

But Furlong never had found out who his father was. His mother had died suddenly, keeled over on the cobblestones one day, wheeling a barrow of crab-apples up to the house, to make jelly. A bleeding to the brain, was what the doctors had called it afterwards. Furlong was twelve at the time. Years later, when he'd gone into the registry office for a copy of

his birth certificate, *Unknown* was all that was written in the space where his father's name might have been. The clerk's mouth had bent into an ugly smile handing it out to him, over the counter.

Now, Furlong was disinclined to dwell on the past; his attention was fixed on providing for his girls, who were black-haired like Eileen and fairly complexioned. Already, they were showing promise in the schools. Kathleen, his eldest, came in with him to the little pre-fabricated office on Saturdays and for pocket money helped out with the books, was able to file what had come in during the week and keep an account of most things. Joan, too, had a good head on her shoulders and had recently joined the choir. Both were now attending secondary, at St Margaret's.

The middle child, Sheila, and the second youngest, Grace, who'd been born eleven months apart, could recite the multiplication tables off by heart, do long division and name the counties and rivers of Ireland, which they sometimes traced out and coloured in with markers at the kitchen table. They, too, were musically inclined and were taking accordion lessons up at the convent on Tuesdays, after school.

Loretta, their youngest, although shy of people, was getting gold and silver stars on her copy-books, reading her way through Enid Blyton, and had won a Texaco prize for her drawing of a fat, blue hen skating across a frozen pond.

Sometimes Furlong, seeing the girls going through the small things which needed to be done – genuflecting in the chapel or thanking a shop-keeper for the change – felt a deep, private joy that these children were his own.

'Aren't we the lucky ones?' he remarked to Eileen in bed one night. 'There's many out there badly off.'

'We are, surely.'

'Not that we've much,' he said. 'But, still.'

Eileen's hand slowly pushed a crease out of the bedspread. 'Did something happen?'

It took him a moment to answer. ‘Mick Sinnott’s little chap was out on the road again today, foraging for sticks.’

‘I suppose you stopped?’

‘Wasn’t it spilling rain. I pulled over and offered him a lift and gave him what bit of change was loose in my pocket.’

‘I dare say.’

‘You’d think it was a hundred pound I’d given him.’

‘You know some of these bring the hardship on themselves?’

‘Tis not the child’s doing, surely.’

‘Sinnott was stotious at the phone box on Tuesday.’

‘The poor man,’ Furlong said, ‘whatever ails him.’

‘Drink is what ails him. If he’d any regard for his children, he’d not be going around like that. He’d pull himself out of it.’

‘Maybe the man isn’t able.’

‘I suppose.’ She reached over and sighed, turned out the light. ‘Always there’s one that has to pull the short straw.’

Some nights, Furlong lay there with Eileen, going over small things like these. Other times, after a day of heavy lifting or being delayed by a puncture and getting soaked out on the road, he’d come home and eat his fill and fall into bed early, then wake in the night sensing Eileen, heavy in sleep, at his side – and there he’d lie with his mind going round in circles, agitating, before finally he’d have to go down and put the kettle on, for tea. He’d stand at the window then with the cup in his hand, looking down at the streets and what he could see of the river, at the little bits and pieces of goings on: stray dogs out foraging for scraps in the bins; chipper bags and empty cans being rolled and blown roughly about by the driving wind and rain; stragglers from the pubs, stumbling home. Sometimes these stumbling men sang a little. Other times, Furlong would hear a sharp, hot whistle and laughter, which made him tense. He imagined his girls getting big and growing up, going out into that world of men. Already he’d seen men’s eyes following his girls. But some part of his mind was often tense; he could not say why.

It would be the easiest thing in the world to lose everything, Furlong knew. Although he did not venture far, he got around – and many an unfortunate he'd seen around town and out the country roads. The dole queues were getting longer and there were men out there who couldn't pay their ESB bills, living in houses no warmer than bunkers, sleeping in their overcoats. Women, on the first Friday of every month, lined up at the post-office wall with shopping bags, waiting to collect their children's allowances. And farther out the country, he'd known cows to be left bawling to be milked because the man who had their care had upped, suddenly, and taken the boat to England. Once, a man from St Mullins got a lift into town to pay his bill, saying that they'd had to sell the Jeep as they couldn't get a wink of sleep knowing what was owing, that the bank was coming down on them. And early one morning, Furlong had seen a young schoolboy drinking the milk out of the cat's bowl behind the priest's house.

While making the rounds, Furlong wasn't inclined to listen to the radio, but he sometimes tuned in and caught the news. It was 1985, and the young people were emigrating, leaving for London and Boston, New York. A new airport had just opened in Knock – Haughey himself had gone down to snip the ribbon. The Taoiseach had signed an agreement with Thatcher over The North, and the Unionists in Belfast were out marching with drums, protesting over Dublin having any say in their affairs. The crowds down in Cork and Kerry were thinning out but some still gathered at the shrines, in the hope that one of the statues might move again.

In New Ross, the shipyard company had closed and Albatros, the big fertiliser factory on the far side of the river, had made several redundancies. Bennett's had let eleven employees go, and Graves & Co., where Eileen had worked, which had been there for as long as anyone could remember, had closed their doors. The auctioneer said business was stone cold, that he might as well be trying to sell ice to the Eskimos. And Miss Kenny, the florist, whose shop was near the coal yard, had boarded up her window; had asked one of Furlong's men to hold the plywood steady for her one evening while she drove the nails.

The times were raw but Furlong felt all the more determined to carry on, to keep his head down and stay on the right side of people, and to keep providing for his girls and see them getting on and completing their education at St Margaret's, the only good school for girls in the town.

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Christmas was coming. Already, a handsome Norway spruce was put standing in the Square beside the manger whose nativity figures that year had been freshly painted. If some complained over Joseph looking overly colourful in his red and purple robes, the Virgin Mary was met with general approval, kneeling passively in her usual blue and white. The brown donkey, too, looked much the same, standing guard over two sleeping ewes and the crib where, on Christmas Eve, the figure of the infant Jesus would be placed.

The custom was for people to gather there on the first Sunday of December, outside the Town Hall, after dark, to see the lights coming on. The afternoon stayed dry but the cold was bitter, and Eileen made the girls zip up their anoraks and wear gloves. When they reached the centre of town, the pipe band and carol singers had already assembled, and Mrs Kehoe was out with a stall, selling slabs of gingerbread and hot chocolate. Joan, who had gone on ahead, was handing out carol sheets with other members of the choir, while the nuns walked around, supervising and talking to some of the more well-off parents.

It was cold standing around so they walked about the side streets for a while before sheltering in the recessed doorway of Hanrahan's, where Eileen paused to admire a pair of navy, patent shoes and a matching handbag, and to chat with neighbours and others she seldom saw who had come from farther out, taking the opportunity to draw and share what news they carried.

Before long, an announcement was made over the speaker inviting everyone to assemble. The Councillor, wearing his brasses over a Crombie coat, got out of a Mercedes and made a short speech before a switch was flipped, and the lights came on. Magically, then, the streets seemed to change and come alive under the long strands of multi-coloured bulbs which swayed, pleasantly, in the wind above their heads. The crowd made soft little splashes of applause and soon the band piped up – but at the sight of the big, fat Santa coming down the street, Loretta stood back, anxious, and began to cry.

'There's no harm,' Furlong assured. 'Tis just a man like myself, only in costume.'

While other children queued up to visit Santa in the grotto and collect their presents, Loretta stood in tight and held on to Furlong's hand.

'There's no need to go if you don't want, a leanbh,' Furlong told her. 'Stay here with me.'

But it cut him, all the same, to see one of his own so upset by the sight of what other children craved and he could not help but wonder if she'd be brave enough or able for what the world had in store.

That evening, when they got home, Eileen said it was well past time they made the Christmas cake. Good-humouredly, she took down her Odlum's recipe and got Furlong to cream a pound of butter and sugar in the brown delft bowl with the hand mixer while the girls grated lemon rind, weighed and chopped candied peel and cherries, soaked whole almonds in boiled water and slipped them from their skins. For an hour or so they raked through the dried fruit, picking stalks out of sultanas, currants and raisins while Eileen sifted the flour and spice, beat up bantam eggs, and greased and lined the tin, wrapping the outside with two layers of brown paper and tying it, tight, with twine.

Furlong took charge of the Rayburn, putting on tidy little shovelfuls of anthracite and regulating the draught to keep the oven low and steady for the night.

When the mixture was ready, Eileen pushed it into the big square tin with the wooden spoon, smoothing it out on top before giving the base a few hard bangs to get it all into the corners, laughing a little – but no sooner was it in the oven with the door closed than she took stock of the room and told the girls to clear down so she could get on, and start the ironing.

'Why don't ye write your letters to Santa now?'

Always it was the same, Furlong thought; always they carried mechanically on without pause, to the next job at hand. What would life be like, he wondered, if they were given time to think and reflect over things? Might their lives be different or much the same – or would they just lose the run of themselves? Even while he'd been creaming the butter and sugar, his mind was not so much upon the here and now and on this Sunday nearing Christmas with his wife and daughters so much as on tomorrow and who owed what, and how and when he'd deliver what was ordered and what man he'd leave to which task, and how and where he'd collect what was owed – and before tomorrow was coming to an end, he knew his mind would already be working in much the same way, yet again, over the day that was to follow.

Now, he looked at Eileen, unwinding the cord and plugging the iron into the socket, and at his daughters sitting in at the table with their copy-books and pencil-cases to write out their letters – and reluctantly he found himself remembering back to when he was a boy, how he had written away, as best he could, asking for his daddy or else a jigsaw puzzle of a farm in five hundred pieces. On Christmas morning, when he'd gone down to the drawing room Mrs Wilson occasionally let them share, the fire was already lighted and he'd found three parcels under the tree wrapped in the same green paper: a nailbrush and bar of soap were wrapped together in one. The second was a hot water bottle, from Ned. And from Mrs Wilson he'd been given *A Christmas Carol*, an old book with a hard, red cover and no pictures, which smelled of must.

He'd gone outside then, to the cow-house, to hide his disappointment, and cry. Neither Santa nor his father had come. And there was no jigsaw. He thought about the things children said about him in school, the name he was called, and understood this to be the reason. When he'd looked up, the cow, chained to her stall, was pulling hay from the rack, contented. Before going back into the house, he'd washed his face at the horse-trough, breaking the ice on the surface, pushing his hands down deep in the cold and keeping them there, to divert his pain, until he could no longer feel it.

Where was his father now? Sometimes, he caught himself looking at older men, trying to find a physical resemblance, or listening out for some clue in the things people said. Surely some local knew who his father was – everyone had a father – and it didn't seem likely that someone hadn't ever said a word about it in his company for people were bound, he knew, to reveal not only themselves but what they knew, in conversation.

Not long after he'd married, Furlong decided to ask Mrs Wilson if she knew his father but hadn't, on any evening he'd gone out to visit, been able to summon the courage; to her it might have seemed ill-mannered after all she'd done for them. Not more than a year afterwards, Mrs Wilson took a stroke and was taken into hospital. When he had gone in to see her, on the Sunday, she'd lost the use of her left side and was past speech but she recognised him, and lifted her good hand. Like a child she was, sitting up in the bed, gazing out the window, a flowery nightgown buttoned to her chin. It was a blustery afternoon in April; beyond the wide, clear panes, a blizzard of white blossom was being torn and blown off the roused-up cherry trees, and Furlong had opened the pane a little as she had never liked being in a closed room.

'Did Santy ever come to you, Daddy?' Sheila now asked, eerily.

They could be like young witches sometimes, his daughters, with their black hair and sharp eyes. It was easy to understand why women feared men with their physical strength and lust and social powers, but women, with their canny intuitions, were so much deeper: they could predict what was to come long before it came, dream it overnight, and read your mind.