A Choice of Butchers by William Trevor

The upper landing of our house had brown linoleum on it and outside each of the bedroom doors there was a small black mat. From this square landing with its three mats and its window overlooking the backyard there rose a flight of uncarpeted steps that led to the attic room where Bridget, who was our maid, slept. The stairs that descended to the lower landing, where the bathroom and lavatory were and where my mother and father slept, were carpeted with a pattern of red flowers which continued down wards to a hall that also had brown linoleum on its floor. There was a hall-stand in the hall and beside it a high green plant in a brass pot, and a figure of the Holy Mother on a table, all by itself. The walls of the landings, and of the hall and the staircase, were papered gloomily in an oatmeal shade that had no pattern, only a pebbly roughness that was fashionable in my childhood in our West Cork town. On this hung two brown pictures, one of oxen dragging a plough over rough ground at sunrise, the other of a farmer leading a working horse towards a farmyard at the end of the day. It was against a background of the oatmeal shade and the oxen in the dawn that I, through the rails of the banisters on the upper landing, saw my father kissing Bridget at the end of one summer holiday.

I had come from my room on that warm September evening to watch for Henry Dukelow, who came up every night to say good-night to me. I had knelt down by the banisters, with my face against them, pressing hard so that I might be marked, so that Mr Dukelow would laugh when he saw me. ‘God, you’re tip-top,’ my father said in a whisper that travelled easily up to me, and then he put his arms round her shoulders and roughly hugged her, with his lips pressed on to her lips.

I was seven years of age, the afterthought of the family, as my father called me. My brothers and sisters were all grown up, but I didn’t feel then, not yet, that my parents had given so much to them that there wasn’t a lot left to give me. Once upon a time they had all been a family like any other family: the children in turn had left home, and then, when my mother should have been resting and my father finding life less demanding, I had arrived. I did not ever doubt my parents’ concern for me, but for the six months that he was in our house I felt that *Mr* Dukelow loved me as much as they did. ‘Say good-night to him for me,’ I often heard my mother calling out to him as he mounted the stairs to tell me my night-time story, and I grew up thinking of my mother as a tired person because that was what she was. Her hair was going grey and her face bore a fatigued look: Mr Dukelow said she probably didn’t sleep well. There were a lot of people who didn’t sleep well, he told me, sitting on my bed one night when I was seven, and I remember he went on talking about that until I must have fallen asleep myself.

Mr Dukelow, who occupied the room next to mine, taught me to play marbles on the rough surface of our backyard. He made me an aeroplane out of heavy pieces of wood he found lying about, and he explained to me that although a star could fall through the sky it would never land on the earth. He told me stories about Columbus and Vasco da Gama, and about the great emperors of Europe and the Battle of the Yellow Ford. He had a good memory for what had interested him at school, but he had forgotten as easily the rest: he had been a poor scholar, he said. He told me the plots of films he’d seen and of a play called *Paddy the Next Best Thing.* He spoke very quietly and he always answered my questions: a small man, as thin as a willow, bony

and pale-faced and supposed to be delicate, different from my father. He was fifty-seven; my father was fifty-nine.

In the middle of the night that my father kissed Bridget Mr Dukelow came to my room again. He switched the light on and stood there in grey-striped pyjamas that were badly torn.

‘I could hear you crying,’ he said. ‘What’s the trouble with you?’

He wore spectacles with fine wire rims, and all his face seemed to have gone into his nose, which was thin and tapering. His greased hair was black, his hands were like a skeleton’s. The first night Mr Dukelow arrived in our house my father brought him into the kitchen, where my mother was reading the *Irish Press* at the table and Bridget was darning one of her black stockings. ‘I’ve employed this man,’ my father said, and as he stepped to one side of the doorway the bent figure of Mr Dukelow appeared suddenly and silently, and my father gestured in the manner of a ringmaster introducing a circus act. Mr Dukelow was carrying a cardboard suitcase that had too many clothes in it. I remember seeing the flannel material of a shirt protruding, for the case was not fastened as it was meant to be.

‘What are you crying for?’ he asked me on that later occasion. ‘What’s up with you?’

‘Go away, Mr Dukelow.’

A frown appeared on his white forehead. He went away, leaving the light on, and he returned within a minute carrying a packet of cigarettes and a cigarette-lighter. He always smoked Craven A, claiming that they were manufactured from a superior kind of tobacco. He lit one and sat on my bed. He talked, as often he did, about the moment of his arrival at our house and how he had paused for a moment outside it.

Looking at our house from the street, you saw the brown hall door, its paintwork grained to make it seem like mahogany. There was a brass knocker and a letter-box that every morning except Sunday were cleaned with Brasso by Bridget. To the right of the hall door, and dwarfing it, were the windows of my father’s butcher shop, with its sides of mutton hanging from hooks, tripe on a white enamel dish, and beef and sausages and mince and suet.

Afterwards, when he became my friend, Mr Dukelow said that he had stood on the street outside the shop, having just got off the Bantry bus. With his suitcase weighing him down, he had gazed at the windows, wondering about the shop and the house, and about my father. He had not come all the way from Bantry but from a house in the hills somewhere, where he had been employed as some kind of manservant. He had walked to a crossroads and had stood there waiting for the bus: there had been dust on his shoes that night when first he came into our kitchen. ‘I looked at the meat in the window,’ he told me afterwards, ‘and I thought I’d rather go away again.’ But my father, expecting him, had come out of the shop and had told him to come on in. My father was a big man; beside Mr Dukelow he looked like a giant.

Mr Dukelow sat on my bed, smoking his Craven A. He began to talk about the advertisement my father had placed in the *Cork Examiner* for an assistant. He repeated the words my father had

employed in the advertisement and he said he'd been nervous even to look at them. 'I had no qualifications,' Mr Dukelow said. 'I was afraid.'

That night, six months before, there'd been that kind of fear in his face. 'Sit down, Mr Dukelow,' my mother had said. 'Have you had your tea?' He shook hands with my mother and myself and with Bridget, making a great thing of it, covering up his shyness. He said he'd had tea, although he confessed to me afterwards that he hadn't. 'You'll take a cup, anyway,' my mother offered, 'and a piece of fruit-cake I made?' Bridget took a kettle from the range and poured boiling water into a teapot to warm it. 'Errah, maybe he wants something stronger,' my father said, giving a great gusty laugh. 'Will we go down to Neenan's, Henry?' But my mother insisted that, first of all, before strong drink was taken, before even Mr Dukelow was led to his room, he should have a cup of tea and a slice of fruit-cake. 'He's hardly inside the door,' she said chidingly to my father, 'before you're lifting him out again.' My father, who laughed easily, laughed again. 'Doesn't he have to get to know the people of the town?' he demanded. 'It's a great little town,' he informed Mr Dukelow. 'There's tip-top business here.' My father had only six fingers and one thumb: being a clumsy man, he had lost the others at different moments, when engaged in his trade. When he had no fingers left he would retire, he used to say, and he would laugh in his roaring way, and add that the sight of a butcher with no fingers would be more than customers could tolerate.

'I often think back,' said Mr Dukelow, 'to the kindness of your mother that first time.'

'He kissed Bridget in the hall,' I said. 'He said she was looking great.'

'Ah, no.'

'I saw him through the banisters.'

'Is it a nightmare you had? Will I get your mammy up?'

I said it wasn't a nightmare I had had: I said I didn't want my mother. My mother was sleeping beside him in their bed and she didn't know that he'd been kissing the maid.

'She'd go away,' I said. 'My mother would go away.'

'Ah no, no.'

'He was kissing Bridget.'

Once, saying good-night to me, Mr Dukelow had unexpectedly given me a kiss, but it was a kiss that wasn't at all like the kiss I had observed in the hall. Mr Dukelow had kissed me because my mother was too tired to climb the stairs; he had kissed me in case I felt neglected. Another time, just as unexpectedly, he had taken a florin from his waistcoat pocket and had put it under my pillow, telling me to buy sweets with it. 'Where d'you get that from?' my father had demanded the next day, and when I told him he hit the side of his leg with his fist, becoming angry in a way that puzzled me. Afterwards I heard him shouting at my mother that Henry Dukelow had given

me a two-bob bit and had she anything to say to that? My father was sometimes so peculiar in his behaviour that I couldn't make him out. My mother's quietness was always more noticeable when he was present; I loved her for her quietness.

'He had a few jars in tonight.'

'Was he drunk, Mr Dukelow?'

'I think he was.'

'My mother –'

'Will I tell you a story?'

'No, no.'

I imagined Bridget, as I had been imagining her while I lay awake, thinking to herself that she'd give my mother her marching orders. I imagined, suddenly, my mother doing Bridget's work in the kitchen and Bridget standing at the door watching her. She was a plump girl, red-cheeked, with black curly hair. She had fat arms and legs, and she wasn't as tall as my mother. She must have been about twenty-five at the time; Mr Dukelow had told me that my mother was fifty-one. Bridget used to bring me the green glass balls that fishermen use for floating their nets, because she lived by the sea and often found them washed up on the strand. She didn't tell me stories like Mr Dukelow did, but sometimes she'd read to me out of one of the romances she borrowed from a library that the nuns ran. All the books had brown paper covers on them to keep them from getting dirty, with the titles written in ink on the front. I couldn't remember a time that Bridget hadn't been in the house, with those brown-covered volumes, cycling back from her Sunday afternoon off with fish and vegetables in a basket. I had always liked her, but she was different from my mother: I was fonder of my mother.

'If my mother died,' I said, 'he would be married to Bridget. She didn't mind it when he kissed her.'

Mr Dukelow shook his head. She might have been taken unawares, he pointed out: she might have minded it and not been able to protest owing to surprise. Maybe she'd protested, he suggested, after I'd run back to bed.

'She's going out with the porter in the Munster and Leinster Bank,' he said. 'She's keen on that fellow.'

'My father's got more money.'

'Don't worry about your father now. A little thing like that can happen and that's the end of it. Your father's a decent man.'

It was typical of Mr Dukelow to say that my father was a decent man, even though he knew my father didn't like him. In the shop Mr Dukelow outclassed him: after he'd recovered from his initial nervousness, he'd become neater with the meat than my father was, and it was impossible to imagine Mr Dukelow banging through his thin fingers with the cleaver, or letting a knife slip into his flesh. My father said Mr Dukelow had a lot to learn, but it was my father really who had a lot to learn, since he hadn't been able to learn properly in the first place. Once, a woman called Mrs Tighe had returned a piece of meat to the shop, complaining that it had a smell. 'Will you watch that, Henry?' my father expostulated after Mrs Tighe had left the shop, but Mrs Tighe hadn't said it was Mr Dukelow who had sold her the meat. I was there myself at the time and I knew from the expression on Mr Dukelow's face that it was my father who had sold the bad meat to Mrs Tighe. 'Any stuff like that,' my father said to him, 'mince up in the machine.' I could see Mr Dukelow deciding that he intended to do no such thing: it would go against his sensitivity to mince up odorous meat, not because of the dishonesty of the action but because he had become a more prideful butcher than my father, even though he was only an assistant. Mr Dukelow would throw such a piece of meat away, hiding it beneath offal so that my father couldn't accuse him of wasting anything.

In my bedroom, which had a yellow distemper on the walls and a chest of drawers painted white, with a cupboard and wash-stand to match, Mr Dukelow told me not to worry. There was a little crucifix on the wall above my bed, placed there by my mother, and there was a sacred picture opposite the bed so that I could see the face of Our Lady from where I lay. 'Say a prayer,' urged Mr Dukelow, indicating with a thin hand the two reminders of my Faith. 'I would address St Agnes on a question like that.'

Slowly he selected and lit another cigarette. 'Your father's a decent man,' he repeated, and then he must have gone away because when I woke up the light had been switched off. It was half past seven and the first thing I thought was that the day was the last day of the summer holidays. Then I remembered my father kissing Bridget and Mr Dukelow talking to me in the night.

We all had our breakfast together in the kitchen, my mother at one end of the table, my father at the other, Bridget next to me, and Mr Dukelow opposite us. We always sat like that, for all meals, but what I hadn't paid any attention to before was that Bridget was next to my father.

'Two dozen chops,' he said, sitting there with blood on his hands. 'Did I tell you that, Henry? To go over to Mrs Ashe in the hotel.'

'I'll cut them so,' promised Mr Dukelow in his quiet way.

My father laughed. 'Errah, man, haven't I cut them myself?' He laughed again. He watched while Bridget knelt down to open the iron door of the oven. 'There's nothing like cutting chops,' he said, 'to give you an appetite for your breakfast, Bridget.'

My eyes were on a piece of fried bread on my plate. I didn't lift them, but I could feel Mr Dukelow looking at me. He knew I felt jealous because my father had addressed Bridget instead of my mother. I was jealous on my mother's behalf, because she couldn't be jealous herself, because she didn't know. Mr Dukelow sensed everything, as though there was an extra

dimension to him. The chops for Mrs Ashe would have been more elegantly cut if he had cut them himself; they'd have been more cleverly cut, with less waste and in half the time.

'Ah, that's great,' said my father as Bridget placed a plate of rashers and sausages in front of him. She sat down quietly beside me. Neither she nor my mother had said anything since I'd entered the kitchen.

'Is there no potato-cakes?' my father demanded, and my mother said she'd be making fresh ones today.

'The last ones were lumpy.'

'A little,' agreed my mother. 'There were a few little lumps.'

He held his knife and fork awkwardly because of the injuries to his hands. Often he put too much on his fork and pieces of bacon would fall off. Mr Dukelow, when he was eating, had a certain style.

'Well, mister-me-buck,' said my father, addressing me, 'it's the final day of your holidays,'

'Yes.'

'When I was the age you are I had to do work in my holidays. I was delivering meat at six and a half years.'

'Yes.'

'Don't the times change, Bridget?'

Bridget said that times did change. My father asked Mr Dukelow if he had worked during the holidays as a child and Mr Dukelow replied that he had worked in the fields in the summertime, weeding, harvesting potatoes and making hay.

'They have an easy time of it these days,' my father pronounced. He had addressed all of us except my mother. He pushed his cup towards Bridget and she passed it to my mother for more tea.

'An easy time of it,' repeated my father.

I could see him eyeing Mr Dukelow's hands as if he was thinking to himself that they didn't look as if they would be much use for harvesting potatoes. And I thought to myself that my father was wrong in this estimation: Mr Dukelow would collect the potatoes speedily, having dug them himself in a methodical way; he would toss them into sacks with a flick of the wrist, a craftsman even in that.

The postman, called Mr Dicey, who was small and inquisitive and had squinting eyes, came into the kitchen from the yard. When he had a letter for the household he delivered it in this manner, while we sat at breakfast. He would stand while the letter was opened, drinking a cup of tea.

‘That’s a fine morning,’ said Mr Dicey. ‘We’ll have a fine day of it.’

‘Unless it rains.’ My father laughed until he was red in the face, and then abruptly ceased because no one was laughing with him. ‘How’re you, Dicey?’ he more calmly inquired.

‘I have an ache in my back,’ replied Mr Dicey, handing my mother a letter.

Mr Dukelow nodded at him, greeting him in that way. Sometimes Mr Dukelow was so quiet in the kitchen that my father asked him if there was something awry with him.

‘I was saying to the bucko here,’ said my father, ‘that when I was his age I used to deliver meat from the shop. Haven’t times changed, Dicey?’

‘They have not remained the same,’ agreed Mr Dicey. ‘You could not expect it.’

Bridget handed him a cup of tea. He stirred sugar into it, remarking to Bridget that he’d seen her out last night. It was said that Mr Dicey’s curiosity was so great that he often steamed open a letter and delivered it a day late. He was interested in everyone in the town and was keen to know of fresh developments in people’s lives.

‘You didn’t see me at all,’ he said to Bridget. He paused, drinking his tea. ‘You were engaged at the same time,’ he said, ‘with another person.’

‘Oh, Bridie has her admirers all right,’ said my father.

‘From the Munster and Leinster Bank.’ Mr Dicey laughed. ‘There’s a letter from your daughter,’ he said to my mother. ‘I know her little round-shaped writing.’

My mother, concerned with the letter, nodded.

‘Bridie could claim the best,’ said my father.

I looked at him and saw that he was glancing down the length of the table at my mother.

‘Bridie could claim the best,’ he repeated in a notably loud voice. ‘Wouldn’t you say that, Dicey? Isn’t she a great-looking girl?’

‘She is, of course,’ said Mr Dicey. ‘Why wouldn’t she be?’

‘It’s a wonder she never claimed Henry Dukelow.’ My father coughed and laughed. ‘Amn’t I right she could claim the best, Henry? Couldn’t Bridie have any husband she put her eye on?’

‘I’ll carry over the chops to Mrs Ashe,’ said Mr Dukelow, getting up from the table.

My father laughed. ‘Henry Dukelow wouldn’t be interested,’ he said. ‘D’you understand me, Dicey?’

‘Oh, now, why wouldn’t Henry be interested?’ inquired Mr Dicey, interested himself.

Mr Dukelow washed his hands at the sink. He dried them on a towel that hung on the back of the kitchen door, a special towel that only he and my father used.

‘He’s not a marrying man,’ said my father. ‘Amn’t I right, Henry?’

Mr Dukelow smiled at my father and left the kitchen without speaking. Mr Dicey began to say something, but my father interrupted him.

‘He’s not a marrying man,’ he repeated. He pressed a piece of bread into the grease on his plate. He cleaned the plate with it, and then ate it and drank some tea. Mr Dicey put his cup and saucer on to the table, telling Bridget she was a marvel at making tea. There wasn’t better tea in the town, Mr Dicey said, than the tea he drank in this kitchen. He wanted to remain, to hang around in case something happened: he was aware of a heavy atmosphere that morning and he was as puzzled as I was.

My mother was still reading the letter, my father was still staring at her head. Was he trying to hurt her? I wondered: was he attempting to upset her by saying that Bridget could have anyone she wanted as a husband?

She handed the letter to me, indicating that I should pass it on to him. I saw that it was from my sister Sheila, who had married, two Christmases before, a salesman of stationery. I gave it to my father and I watched him reading.

‘Bedad,’ he said. ‘She’s due for a baby.’

When I heard my father saying that I thought for only a moment about what the words signified. Bridget exclaimed appropriately, and then there was a silence while my father looked at my mother. She smiled at him in a half-hearted way, obliged by duty to do that, reluctant to share any greater emotion with him.

‘Is it Sheila herself?’ cried Mr Dicey in simulated excitement. ‘God, you wouldn’t believe it!’ From the way he spoke it was evident that he had known the details of the letter. He went on to say that it seemed only yesterday that my sister was an infant herself. He continued to talk, his squinting eyes moving rapidly over all of us, and I could sense his interest in the calm way my mother had taken the news, not saying a word. There was a damper on the natural excitement, which no one could have failed to be aware of.

My father tried to make up for the lack of commotion by shouting out that for the first time in his life he would be a grandfather. My mother smiled again at him and then, like Mr Dukelow, she rose and left the kitchen. Reluctantly, Mr Dicey took his leave of us also.

Bridget collected the dishes from the table and conveyed them to the sink. My father lit a cigarette. He poured himself a cup of tea, humming a melody that often, tunelessly, he did hum. 'You're as quiet as Henry Dukelow this morning,' he said to me, and I wanted to reply that we were all quiet except himself, but I didn't say anything. Sometimes when he looked at me I remembered the time he'd said to me that he wondered when I was grown up if I'd take over his shop and be a butcher like he was. 'Your brothers didn't care for that,' he'd said, speaking without rancour but with a certain sorrow in his voice. 'They didn't fancy the trade.' He had smiled at me coaxingly, saying that he was a happy man and that he had built up the business and wouldn't want to see it die away. At the time I felt revulsion at the thought of cutting up dead animals all day long, knifing off slices of red steak and poking for kidneys. I had often watched him at work since he encouraged me to do that, even offering me the experience as a treat. 'Well, mister-me-buck,' he would shout at me, bustling about in his white apron, 'is there a nice piece of liver there for Mrs Bourke?' He would talk to his customers about me as he weighed their orders, remarking that I was growing well and was a good boy when I remembered to be. 'Will you be a butcher like your daddy?' a woman often asked me and I could feel the tension in him without at the time understanding it. It wasn't until I saw Mr Dukelow going about the business in his stylish way that I began to say to the women that I might be a butcher one day. Mr Dukelow didn't make me feel that he was cutting up dead animals at all: Mr Dukelow made it all seem civilized.

I didn't leave the kitchen that morning until my father had finished his cup of tea and was ready to go also, in case he'd kiss Bridget when they were alone together. He told me to hurry up and go and help my mother, but I delayed deliberately and in the end I shamed him into going before me. Bridget went on cleaning the dishes in the sink, standing there silently, as if she didn't know what was happening.

I went to my parents' bedroom, where my mother was making their bed. She asked me to take the end of a sheet and to pull it up so that she wouldn't have to walk around the bed and do it herself. She had taught me how to help her. I seized the end of the sheet and then the end of a blanket. I said:

'If you go away I will go with you.'

She looked at me. She asked me what I'd said and I said it again. She didn't reply. We went on making the bed together and when it was finished she said:

'It isn't me who's going away, love.'

'Is it Bridget?'

'There's no need for Bridget –'

'I saw him –'

'He didn't mean any harm.'

'Did you see him too?'

'It doesn't matter at all. Sheila's going to have a little baby. Isn't that grand?'

I couldn't understand why she was suddenly talking about my sister having a baby since it had nothing to do with my father kissing Bridget.

'It's not he who's going away?' I asked, knowing that for my father to go away would be the most unlikely development of all.

'Bridget was telling me yesterday,' my mother said, 'she's going to marry the porter at the Munster and Leinster Bank. It's a secret Bridget has: don't tell your father or Mr Dicey or anyone like that.'

'Mr Dukelow –'

'It is Mr Dukelow who will be going away.'

She covered the big bed with a candlewick bedspread. She pointed a finger at the side of the bedspread that was near me, indicating that I should aid her with it.

'Mr Dukelow?' I said. 'Why would –'

'He moves around from one place to another. He does different kinds of work.'

'Does he get the sack?'

My mother shrugged her shoulders. I went on asking questions, but she told me to be quiet. I followed her to the kitchen and watched her making potato-cakes, while Bridget went in and out. Occasionally they spoke, but they weren't unfriendly: it wasn't between them that there was anything wrong. I remembered Bridget saying to me one time that my mother was always very good to her, better than her own mother had ever been. She had a great fondness for my mother, she said, and I sensed it between them that morning because somehow it seemed greater than it had been in the past, even though the night before my father had been kissing Bridget in the hall. I kept looking at my mother, wanting her to explain whatever there was to explain to me, to tell me why Mr Dukelow, who'd said he never wanted to leave my father's shop, was going to leave now, after only six months. I couldn't imagine the house without Mr Dukelow. I couldn't imagine lying in my bed without anyone to come and tell me about Vasco da Gama. I couldn't imagine not seeing him lighting a Craven A cigarette with his little lighter.

'Well, isn't that terrible?' said my father when we were all sitting down again at the kitchen table for our dinner. 'Henry Dukelow's shifting on.'

Mr Dukelow looked nervous. He glanced from me to my mother, not knowing that my mother had guessed he would be going, not knowing she'd suggested it to me.

'We thought he might be,' my mother said. 'He's learnt the business.'

My father pressed potatoes into his mouth and remarked on the stew we were eating. His mood was wholly different now: he wagged his head at my mother, saying she'd cooked the meat well. There wasn't a woman in the country, he tediously continued, who could cook stew like my mother. He asked me if I agreed with that, and I said I did. 'You'll be back at school tomorrow,' he said, and I agreed with that also. 'Tell them they'll have an uncle in the class,' he advised, 'and give the teacher a few smiles.'

Releasing an obstreperous laugh, he pushed his plate away from him with the stumps of two fingers. 'Will we go down to Neenan's,' he suggested to Mr Dukelow, 'and have a talk about what you will do?'

'You can talk here,' said my mother with severity. I could see her saying to herself that it was the half-day and if my father entered Neenan's he'd remain there for the afternoon.

'Hurry up, Henry,' said my father, scraping his chair as he pushed it back on the flagged floor. 'A tip-top stew,' he repeated. He made a noise in his mouth, sucking through his teeth, a noise that was familiar to all of us. He told Mr Dukelow he'd be waiting for him in Neenan's.

'Keep an eye on him,' my mother murmured when he'd gone, and Mr Dukelow nodded.

'I would have told you that tonight,' he said to me. 'I didn't want to say a thing until I'd mentioned it to your father first.'

'Mr Dukelow'll be here a month yet.' My mother smiled at me. 'He can tell you a good few stories in that time.'

But Mr Dukelow in fact did not remain in our house for another month. When he returned with my father later that day, my father, in a better mood than ever, said:

'We've come to a good agreement. Henry's going to pack his traps. He'll catch the half-seven bus.'

But Mr Dukelow didn't say anything. He walked from the kitchen without swaying like my father was swaying.

My father had his hat on. and he didn't take it off. He took his turnip watch from his waistcoat pocket and examined it. 'I can't see without my glasses,' he said to me. 'Will you take a gander at it, boy?'

He never wore glasses, but he often made the joke when he'd been down to Neenan's for a while. I told him it was twenty past six. He put the stumps of two fingers on my head and said I

was a great boy. Did I know, he asked me, that in six months' time I'd be an uncle? He had a way of touching me with his stumps instead of with the fingers that remained with him, just as he had a way of pushing from him a plate from which he'd eaten a meal. 'Don't forget to tell the teacher,' he said. 'It's not every day he has an uncle to instruct.'

My mother took a barm brack from a tin and began to butter it for Mr Dukelow before he went. Bridget moved a kettle on to the hot area of the stove. It boiled at once. 'Will I fry him something?' she asked my mother.

'There's rashers there,' said my mother, 'and a bit of black pudding. Do him eggs, Bridget, and a few potato-cakes.'

'He's going,' repeated my father. His face, redder than usually it was, had sweat on the sides of it. 'He's going,' he said again.

I was sitting at the end of the table with a comic spread out in front of me. While I gazed at my father half my vision retained the confused mass of cartoon characters.

'Well, that's that,' said my father.

He stood there swaying, his feet rooted to the kitchen floor, like a statue about to topple in a wind. He was wearing the blue-striped suit that he always wore on the half-day; his hands were hanging by his sides.

'You should be bloody ashamed of yourself,' he said suddenly, and I thought he was talking to me. He wasn't looking at any of us; his eyes were turned upwards, regarding a corner of the ceiling. 'A chancer like that,' he said, 'that gives a young fellow two-bob pieces.' Instinctively I knew then that he was speaking to my mother, even though she did not acknowledge his remarks.

'Sent up from Satan,' he said. 'Sent up to make wickedness. I'm sorry about that thing, Bridget.'

Bridget shook her head, implying that it didn't matter, and I knew they were referring to what had happened in the hall last night.

'Tell Henry Dukelow I'll see him at the bus.' He moved to the back door, adding that he was returning to Neenan's until it was time to say goodbye to Mr Dukelow. 'He'll never make a butcher,' he said, 'Or any other bloody thing either.'

I closed the comic and watched my mother and Bridget preparing Mr Dukelow's last meal in our house. They didn't speak and I was afraid to, now. I still couldn't understand why this series of events was taking place. I tried to connect one occurrence with another, but I failed. I felt forgotten in the house: I might have been dead at the table for all they considered me: they were assuming I had no mind.

Mr Dukelow came into the silence, carrying the suitcase he had first carried into the kitchen six months ago, bound up with what looked like the same piece of string. He ate in silence, and Bridget and my mother sat at the table, not saying anything either. I pretended to read the comic, but all the time I was thinking that I'd rather have Mr Dukelow for my father. I couldn't help thinking it and I began to imagine my father sitting on the Bantry bus and Mr Dukelow staying where he was, running the shop better than my father had ever run it, cutting the meat better. I thought of Mr Dukelow in the big bed with my mother, lying asleep beside her. I saw his hands on the white sheets, the thin clever hands instead of hands that made you turn your head away. I saw Mr Dukelow and my mother and myself going out for a walk together on a Sunday afternoon, and Mr Dukelow telling us about Vasco da Gama and Columbus. Mr Dukelow could spend the afternoon in Neenan's and not sway and lurch when he came back. There was no need for Mr Dukelow to go kissing the maid.

'I'm sorry I upset him,' said Mr Dukelow suddenly. 'He's a decent man.'

'It has nothing to do with anything,' said my mother. 'He's in a bad way with drink.'

'Yes,' said Mr Dukelow.

As out of a fog the truth came in pieces to me, and some of the pieces as yet were missing. In six months Mr Dukelow had become a better butcher than my father and my father was jealous of that. Jealousy had caused him to see Mr Dukelow as a monster; jealousy had spread from him in different directions until it wrapped my mother and myself, and tortured my father's pride until he felt he must get his own back and prove himself in some way.

'I'll say goodbye,' said Mr Dukelow, and I hated my father then for his silly pettiness. I wanted Mr Dukelow to go to my mother and kiss her as my father had kissed Bridget. I wanted him to kiss Bridget too, in a way more elegant than the way of my father.

But none of that happened, nor did I ask why, in the face of everything, my father was being described as a decent man. Mr Dukelow left the kitchen, having shaken hands with the three of us. I sat down again at the table while my mother and Bridget prepared the tea. They did not say anything, but I thought to myself that I could see in Bridget's flushed face a reflection of what was passing in her mind: that Mr Dukelow was a nicer man than the porter at the Munster and Leinster Bank. My mother's face was expressionless, but I thought to myself that I knew what expression would be there if my mother cared to permit its presence.

Again I pretended I was reading the comic, but all the time I was thinking about what had silently occurred in our house and how for no sensible reason at all my father's rumbustiousness had spoilt everything. No one but my father could not love Mr Dukelow: no one in the wide world, I thought, except that red-faced man with stumps on his hands, who fell over chairs when he'd been down in Neenan's, who swayed and couldn't read the time. I thought about the ugliness of my father's jealous nature and the gentleness it had taken exception to. 'Sent up from Satan,' his stumbling voice had ridiculously announced. 'Sent up to make wickedness.' How could it be, I wondered, that I was the child of one instead of the other?

‘Well, mister-me-buck,’ said my father, returning to the kitchen after a time. When I looked at him I began to cry and my mother took me up to bed, saying I was tired.