My mind's wandering on me again. Where was I? Yes, Jimmy washed himself in the scullery & I boiled a fresh egg for his tea. He didn't want any hot water for shaving for he said he wasn't going out. Merciful God, he wasn't going out! He said he was in no hurry for his tea & he'd wait until Mary & Anne had got theirs. He lay on the sofa..
his shirt was open at the neck & his face was red & fresh after the good washing he gave himself. I handed him his slippers that I had warming at the side of the hob & I lifted his working shoes to give them a brush or two for the morning. And when the girls had finished their tea I cleared away the soiled dishes & asked Jimmy to sit over to the table. The girls were brushing their hair at that looking-glass on the wall.
"where are you set for the night? You're in a hell of a hurry" Jimmy said.
"the pictures" .."who's taking you?" .."we're taking ourselves"
"you must have plenty of spondulics when you can go every night in the week to the damned pictures."
"it's our own money. We never see much of yours. You'd never ask us to the pictures ..not if you got in for nothing."
"I'd like my job taking you two anywhere."
I disremember rightly what happened after that but I think Mary sat on the sofa & Anne went upstairs for her good coat from the back of the door & I went out to the yard for a shovel of coal. That coal was always damp & I mind the way it hissed on the fire & Jimmy saying he must put sides on that shelter in the yard. It was then that I seen Mary standing on the fender & looking on the mantle piece & asking if I saw her half-crown. "it's there beside the clock where you left it," I said.
"it's not" she stood on a chair & lifted up the clock & looked under it & behind it.
"did you take it Mother?" .."I didn't lay a finger on it."
Anne came into the kitchen with her good coat on, ready for the road. I don't know what happened next for my mind is all in a tangle. But I remember both of them talking at once & asking Jimmy to fork up the half-crown & not be codding any more & keeping them late. Jimmy laughed & I thought by the way he laughed he was fooling them & hiding the money on them. They eyed the time by the clock & they shouted at him to stop the bloody nonsense & give them the half-crown & not keep them late.
"I didn't touch it, I tell you," he said.
"you're a liar!" they shouted back at him, & I told them to hush & not let the next-door neighbour hear them fighting.
"you're a liar!" Mary shouted again, for she had a she-devil's temper when you roused her. She tapped her foot on the floor & glared at him.
"you put your collar-stud on the mantelpiece when you were going to wash," she said, "the stud's there for all to see but the half-crown's not!"
Jimmy put down his cup & smiled at her.
"give it to them, son, if you have it, & don't keep them late," I said.
"didn't I tell you I never seen it!"
"you're a thief!" Mary screeched "that's what you are..a bloody thief!"
Jimmy jumped up from the table then & struck for her, for I remember Mary crying & expressions from her mouth that'd have shamed any decent-minded girl. Oh, them factories & warerooms is no place, let me tell you, to rear your children in; they hear every filth & it sticks in their minds like grease in an old pot. I done my best to quieten them & I told Jimmy he done wrong to hit her.

“I’ll do it again if she calls me a thief!”
“you’re a coward,” Anne said. “only a coward would strike a girl.”
Jimmy sat down again & I knew by the way his cup rattled on the saucer that he was sorry for what he’d done. I looked under the square of linoleum near the fender for the half-crown, & I looked under the sofa, & I took the tongs & searched in the ashes in the grate but I couldn’t find it.
“it’s no use looking for it,” Anne said. “that playboy has it well hid. Make him give it up to us.”
“Jimmy, son,” I said, “give them the half-crown. It didn’t fly off the mantelpiece by itself.”
He stared at me & I’ll remember that look to my dying day.
“so you don’t believe me either. As sure as there’s a God above me I didn’t take it.”
“you needn’t bring God into it.” I said, for I was annoyed at hearing him swear like that.
“he’d damn his soul over the head of it,” Mary shouted.
I don’t know what made me do it, but I remember asking Jimmy to turn out his pockets. Ah God forgive me for asking him to do the like of that! Sure I should have known he hadn’t it after he swore he hadn’t.
He got up from that side of the table near the looking-glass & he pushed his chair slowly..I’ll never forget that! He went upstairs to his room & after five or six minutes of rummaging & rumbling he came down the stairs & banged the front door on his way out.
“under God where is away to?” I said.
“he’s away to spend it,” Mary jeered.
I went upstairs to his room & saw nothing behind the back of the door only a bare coat hangar, & on my way downstairs I noticed his heavy overcoat was gone from the rack in the hall.
“he’s left us,” I said.
“he’d be good riddance if he did,” Mary said.
“he’ll come back,” I said, “Jimmy’s not the kind of boy that’d run away from home.”
Little did I know then, & it fifteen years ago, that he wouldn’t come back. Yes, indeed fifteen long & lonesome years.
She rocked herself gently on the chair & began to cry. Then she dried her eyes in her apron & looked slowly round the cheerless kitchen. There was no light in it except the dull glow of the fire, & in the window space a blue sky was sprinkled with stars.
She shuddered & as she leaned forward to lever up the coal in the grate there was a loud knock at the door that startled her. She rested the poker on the hob & waited.
The knock came again. She hoisted herself from the chair, & as she walked down the hallway she heard the impatient shuffle of feet outside. She opened the door slowly & a few boys shouted breathlessly at her; “hurry up, Missus, we’re going to light the bonfire now.”
She hesitated for a moment in the hallway, & then pulling a shawl over her shoulders she made her way down to the middle of the street. The street lamps were in darkness & there was nothing but the tapping of feet, the mumble of unseen crowds, & a warm smell of paraffin. Boys, strangely dressed & their faces painted, were screaming like Indians & applying torches of paper to the heap of stuff they had collected. Then in a few minutes there came a hurl & burl of flame, a crackling of sticks, & a cheer from the crowd that drowned the noises of the fire. The flames lit up the faces & hands of the crowd & tilted their shadows on the redbrick houses. Flames like flowing water sped over the old sofa, a bicycle tyre was a ring of flame, leafy branches of trees hissed in the heat, & a rubber boot entangled among the twigs was furred with flame & dripped drops of fire from its writhing toe.

The old woman moved out from the heat with its sickening smell of paraffin, & stood in the cooler shadows cast by the outer ring of swaying onlookers. No one noticed her. They began

to sing “Kevin Barry” & when the singing came to an end a loud cheer volleyed above the houses, squibs banged in the fire, & a rocket gushed into the sky trailing behind it an arc of bright blue stars. The noise frightened the old woman & she hurried away from it. Near her home she looked back & saw the smoke lighted up by the fire & heard an accordion playing an Irish reel. She didn’t stop to listen to it.
She went into the house & halting in the hallway she clasped her hands & cried “Mother of God, are you listening to me? Wherever Jimmy is this night tell him that I believe him..tell him that from me!”

[the half-crown ; Michael McLaverty]