

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Roddy Doyle is an internationally bestselling writer. His first three novels—*The Commitments*, *The Snapper*, and 1991 Booker Prize finalist *The Van*—are available both singly and in one volume as *The Barrytown Trilogy*, published by Penguin. He is also the author of the novels *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha* (1993 Booker Prize winner); *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors*; *A Star Called Henry*; *Oh, Play That Thing*; and *Paula Spencer* and a nonfiction book about his parents, *Rory & Ita*. Doyle has also written for the stage and the screen: the plays *Brownbread*, *War*, *Guess Who's Coming for the Dinner*, *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors*, and *The Playboy of the Western World* (as cowriter); the film adaptations of *The Commitments* (as cowriter), *The Snapper*, and *The Van*; *When Brendan Met Trudy* (an original screenplay); the four-part television series *Family* for the BBC; and the television play *Hell for Leather*. Roddy Doyle has also written the children's books *The Giggler Treatment*, *Rover Saves Christmas*, and *The Meanwhile Adventures*; the young adult novel *Wilderness*; and contributed to a variety of publications including *The New Yorker* and *McSweeney's*, the anthology *Speaking with the Angel* (edited by Nick Hornby), the serial novel *Yeats Is Dead!* (edited by Joseph O'Connor), and the young adult serial novel *Click*. He lives in Dublin.

# The Deportees and Other Stories

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Roddy Doyle



PENGUIN BOOKS

## Foreword

Maybe it was *Riverdance*. A bootleg video did the rounds of the rooms and the shanties of Lagos and, moved to froth by the sight of that long, straight line of Irish and Irish-American legs – *tap-tap-tap, tappy-tap* – thousands of Nigerians packed the bags and came to Ireland. *Please. Teach us how to do that.*

I suspect it was more complicated. It was about jobs and the E.U., and infrastructure and wise decisions, and accident. It was about education and energy, and words like ‘tax’ and ‘incentive’, and what happens when they are put beside each other. It was also about music and dancing and literature and football. It happened, I think, some time in the mid-90s. I went to bed in one country and woke up in a different one.

That was how it felt, for a while. It took getting used to. I’d written a novel, *The Van*, in 1990, about an unemployed plasterer. Five or six years later, there was no such thing as an unemployed plasterer. A few years on, all the plasterers seemed to be from Eastern Europe. In 1994 and 1995, I wrote *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors*. It was narrated by a woman called Paula Spencer, who earned her money cleaning offices. She went to work with other working-class women like herself. Ten years later, I wrote *Paula Spencer*. Paula was still cleaning offices but now she went to work alone and the other cleaners were men from Romania and Nigeria. In 1986, I wrote *The Commitments*. In that book, the main character, a young

man called Jimmy Rabbitte, delivers a line that became quite famous: —The Irish are the niggers of Europe. Twenty years on, there are thousands of Africans living in Ireland and, if I was writing that book today, I wouldn’t use that line. It wouldn’t actually occur to me, because Ireland has become one of the wealthiest countries in Europe and the line would make no sense.

In April 2000, two Nigerian journalists living in Dublin, Abel Ugba and Chinedu Onyejelem, started publishing a multicultural paper called *Metro Eireann*. I read an article about these men in the *Irish Times*, and decided that I’d like to meet them. Three or four years into our new national prosperity, I was already reading and hearing elegies to the simpler times, before we became so materialistic – the happy days when more people left Ireland than were born here; when we were afraid to ask anyone what they did for a living, because the answer might be ‘Nothing’; when we sent our pennies and our second-hand clothes to Africa but never saw a flesh-and-blood African. The words ‘racist’ and ‘racism’ were being flung around the place, and the stories were doing the rounds. An African woman got a brand new buggy from the Social Welfare and left it at the bus stop because she couldn’t be bothered carrying it onto the bus, and she knew she could get a new one. A man looked over his garden wall and found a gang of Muslims next door on the patio, slaughtering an Irish sheep. A Polish woman rented a flat and, before the landlord had time to bank the deposit, she’d turned it into a brothel, herself and her seven sisters and their cousin, the pimp. I heard those three, and more, from taxi drivers. I thought I’d like to make up a few of my own.

I met Abel Ugba and asked him if I could write for *Metro Eireann* and, while we talked, the idea for the first story came to me. An Irishman’s daughter brings home

a Nigerian boyfriend – enough to get me going. Abel suggested 800 words a month; the paper was a monthly. (It's now weekly.) I had the title, 'Guess Who's Coming for the Dinner', before I got home. Since then I've completed eight stories. There's a love story, a horror story, a sequel, sort of, to *The Commitments*. Almost all of them have one thing in common. Someone born in Ireland meets someone who has come to live here. The love, and the horror; excitement, and exploitation; friendship, and misunderstanding. The plots and possibilities are, almost literally, endless. Today, one in every ten people living in Ireland wasn't born here. The story – someone new meets someone old – has become an unavoidable one. Hop on a Dublin bus, determined to sit beside someone who was born and bred in Dublin, and you'll probably be standing all the way.

The stories are all written in 800-word chapters. It's a restraint, and a good deal of the fun. I once read about a character in a U.S. TV daytime soap who went upstairs for his tennis racket, and never came back down. No one missed or asked about him; daytime life went on. The stories in this book have their tennis-racket moments. Characters disappear, because I forgot about them. Questions are asked and, sometimes, not quite answered. The stories have never been carefully planned. I send off a chapter to the *Metro Eireann* editor, Chinedu Onyejelem, and, often, I haven't a clue what's going to happen next. And I don't have to care too much, until the next deadline begins to tap me on the shoulder. It's a fresh, small terror, once a month. I live a very quiet life; I love that monthly terror.

Dublin – December 2006

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## Guess Who's Coming for the Dinner

### 1 Larry Linnane Loved His Daughters

Larry Linnane liked having daughters. He got great value out of them, great crack.

The second kid had been a boy and that was great too, having a son, bringing him to the football – Under-7, Under-8, Under-9, all the way up until Laurence, the son, told him he thought he'd play better if Larry stayed at home.

And that was grand too, the rejection, part of watching them grow up, even though he pretended he was a bit hurt and, actually, he was a bit hurt. But it had all been fine because Mona, the wife, had bought him a Crunchie to cheer him up and they'd even made love in front of the telly because the house was empty for the first time in years.

And it became a habit – the sex, not the Crunchie – every time Laurence had a match, especially an away match, and especially enjoyable if it was raining out and he could think of Laurence getting drenched in Finglas West or Ballybrack while he lay on the couch with Mona under him or, on the really good days, Mona on top of him.

—Not bad for forty-five! Larry shouted once, just before they heard the door slamming, and they were sitting up, fully zipped and dressed, and doing the crossword by the time the lounge door opened and three of the four daughters trooped in.

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Irish terms you might not know: “wagon”—annoying woman; “slagging”—slinging criticism at; “ride”—someone who would be a big hit on Tinder; “estate agent”—someone who manages properties for rich people, a figure historically considered to be exploitative and general bad guys in Ireland; “Jaysus”—“Jesus” spoken with an Irish accent; “gobshite”—stupid jerk; “eejit”—idiot

And they refused to tell the girls why they were laughing and why they couldn't stop laughing.

—We're just thinking of poor Laurence out there in the rain, said Mona.

But it was the daughters who really made Larry laugh.

They said that girls were supposed to be the quiet ones but, whoever *they* were, they hadn't a clue. His gang, Jesus, there hadn't been a minute, not a second's peace in the house since the eldest, Stephanie, was born, but especially since the other three came after Laurence. Tracy, Vanessa, Nicole, one after another, each one madder and louder than the last.

—Bitch!

—Wagon!

—Wagon yourself, yeh bitch!

Screaming, roaring, flinging each other down the stairs, tearing each other's hair out. The best of friends, in other words. And Larry loved every minute of it. The fights and reconciliations, the broken Barbies, stolen hairspray — Larry watched it all, sat in his corner like a ref who'd been bribed by both sides and soaked up every wallop and hug.

Larry was fifty now and the girls were women, fine, big, good-looking women and in no hurry to leave home, and that suited Larry just fine. Because they spoilt him crooked.

He knew there was a kettle in the kitchen — he'd bought it himself, in Power City — but, honest to God, he couldn't have told you exactly where it was.

—Would you like a biscuit with that cuppa, Da?

—Lovely.

—There's only plain ones left.

—Not to worry, said Larry. —I'll manage. Give us two, though, love. To make up for the chocolate.

They were always ironing and they never objected if one or two of Larry's shirts accidentally ended up on their pile. He loved the smell of the house — fresh clothes, all sorts of spray fighting for air supremacy. Larry could fart all day — and he did, at the weekends — and no one ever noticed or complained.

But it wasn't really about tea and ironing and the freedom to fart with impunity. What Larry really loved was the way the girls brought the world home to him. Every morning at breakfast, and when they came home for the dinner, before going out again, they talked and shouted, all of them together, and Mona in there with them.

—He said it was the Red Bull that made him do it!

—So I said, 'D'you call that a pay rise!'

—The strap was killing me!

—I'm thinkin' o' buyin' shares in Esat, did I tell yis?

—Nicearse.com. Have a look at it tomorrow.

Their voices reminded Larry of the Artane roundabout — mad, roaring traffic coming at him from all directions. And he loved it, just like he loved the Artane roundabout. Every time Larry drove onto and off that roundabout he felt modern, successful, Irish. And that was exactly how he felt when he listened to his daughters. He'd brought them up, him and Mona, to be independent young ones, and that was exactly what they were. And he trusted them, completely. He was particularly proud of himself when they were talking about sex. That was the real test, he knew — a da listening to his daughters talking about their plumbing — and they did, not a bother on them — and about their sex lives, confidently, frankly and, yeah, filthily. And Larry passed the test with flying colours. Nothing his daughters said or did ever, ever shocked him.

Until Stephanie brought home the black fella.

## 2 A Black Man on the Kitchen Table

It was June, the first really decent day of the summer. Nicole was eating her dinner with her legs sticking out the kitchen door, grabbing the bit of sun before it was hijacked by next-door's wall. All four of the daughters had sunglasses parked on top of their heads. Laurence, the son, had sunglasses as well, like the ones Edgar Davids, the Dutch footballer, wore. On Edgar Davids they looked impressive, terrifying, even sexy. On Laurence they looked desperate — he looked like a day-old chick that had just been pushed out of the nest. Larry's heart went out to him.

And that was why he wasn't tuned in to the girls' chat that evening. He was trying to come up with a nice way to tell poor Laurence to bring the glasses back to the shop. So he'd heard none of the usual prying and slagging, the good-natured torture and confession that he loved so much.

He was wondering if Laurence still had the receipt for the goggles when he heard Vanessa asking, 'What's he do for his money?'

—He's an accountant, said Stephanie.

Larry sat up: no daughter of his was going to get stuck with a bloody accountant.

—At least, he would be, said Stephanie, —if they let him work.

—What's that mean? said Larry.

They all looked at him. The aggression and fear in his voice had shocked even him.

—They won't let him work, said Stephanie.

—Who won't?

—I don't know, she said. —The government.

—Why not?

—Because they haven't granted him asylum yet.

—He's a refugee?

—Yeah. I suppose so.

—Where's he from?

—Nigeria.

Larry waited for the gasps, but there were none, not even from Mona. He wished now he'd been listening earlier. This mightn't have been a boyfriend she was talking about at all; it could have been someone she'd never even met.

But Vanessa put him right.

—You should see him, Da. He's gorgeous.

And all the other girls nodded and agreed.

—Dead serious looking.

—A ride.

So, it wasn't that Stephanie actually brought home the black fella. It was the idea of him, the fact of his existence out there somewhere, the fact that she'd met him and danced with him and God-knows-what-elses with him. But, if it had been an actual black man that she'd plonked on the table in front of Larry, he couldn't have been more surprised, and angry, and hurt, and confused.

He stood up.

—He is *not* gorgeous! he shouted.

Nicole laughed, but stopped quickly.

—He's not gorgeous or anything else! Not in this house!

He realised he was standing up, but he didn't want to sit down again. He couldn't.

Mona spoke.

—What's wrong?

He looked at six faces looking up at him, waiting for the punchline, praying for it. Frightened faces, confused and angry.

There was nothing he could say. Nothing safe, nothing reassuring or even clear. He didn't know why he was standing there.

—Is it because he's black? said Mona.

Larry didn't let himself nod. He never thought he'd be a man who'd nod; yes, I object to another man's colour. Shame was rubbing now against his anger.

—Phil Lynott was black, love, Mona reminded him.

Phil Lynott had been singing 'Whiskey in the Jar' when Larry and Mona had stopped dancing and kissed for the first time.

And now he could talk.

—Phil Lynott was Irish! he said. —He was from Crumlin. He was fuckin' civilised!

And now Stephanie was right in front of him, tears streaming from her, and he couldn't hear a word she was screaming at him. And he couldn't see her himself now, his own tears were fighting their way out. And he wished, he wished to Christ that they could start all over again, that he could sit down and listen and stop it before all this had to happen.

It was Mona who rescued him.

—We'll have to meet him, she said.

This was just after she'd hit the table with the frying pan.

—No, said Larry.

—Yes, Larry, she said, and he knew she was right. If he kept saying No they'd all leave, all the girls. It was what he would have expected of them. 'Stand up for your rights.' That was what he'd roared after them every morning, on their way out to school. 'Get up, stand up. Don't give up the fight.'

The house was empty now. Mona had imposed a ragged peace. Larry and Stephanie had hugged each other, yards

of brittle space between them. The girls had taken her down to the local. They'd be talking about him now, he knew. Racist. Bastard. Racist. Pig. His cup was empty but he hadn't noticed the tea.

—It could be worse, love, said Mona.

Larry looked at her.

—He could have been an estate agent, she said.

### 3 AIDS, War, the Works

—Ben, said Mona, sounding just a little bit impatient.

—Ben?

—Yeah, she said. —It hasn't changed since the last time you asked.

—It's just, I'm hopeless with foreign names, said Larry.

And Mona slammed the door. Larry watched her out in the garden, murdering the hedge with bites of the shears that, he knew, were meant for him.

It had been a week since the blow-up with Stephanie, since the invite had gone out to the black lad — he kept forgetting his name. He really did.

—Ben.

And he — Ben — was coming tonight. Larry looked at his watch. In three or four hours.

He looked out at Mona.

She was worried as well, upset, just like him. He wasn't the only one who'd been lying awake at night. She'd been getting up, wandering around downstairs. She wasn't a happy woman out there.

It had been a week of politeness, smiles and heavy silences. He could hear cutlery on the plates for the first time in years. He tortured himself for things to say, nice things that would prove he wasn't a bigot.

—Does he know Kanu? he asked Stephanie. And he couldn't believe it as he heard himself.

—Who? said Stephanie.

—The footballer, said Larry. He was stuck now. —He's Nigerian. Plays for Arsenal.

—I don't know, said Stephanie. —Do you know Roy Keane?

—No.

—Well, then.

And then she smiled, and there was a hint of an apology in it; she didn't want to make a fool of him. And he'd smiled. They'd all smiled. But, still and all, it had been the worst week that Larry could remember. All week, he'd had to think, and ask himself rough questions.

He asked himself questions all the time. Where did I leave my keys? Will I have the last HobNob or will I leave it for Mona? But it was a long time since a question had made him squirm. And he'd been squirming all week.

He wasn't a racist. He was sure about that now, positive — he thought. When he watched a footballer, for example, he didn't see skin; he saw skill. Paul McGrath, black and brilliant. Gary Breen, white and shite. And it was the same with music. Phil Lynott, absolutely brilliant. Neil Diamond, absolutely shite. And politics. Mandela, a hero. Ahern, a chancer. And women too. Naomi Campbell — Jaysis. There wasn't a racist bone or muscle in his body, nothing tugging at him to change his mind about Stevie Wonder or Thierry Henry because they were black. And it worked the other way too. Gary Breen, black, still shite but no worse. Naomi Campbell, white, probably still gorgeous but better off black. Bertie Ahern, black — Larry laughed for the first time in a week.

But, why then? Why didn't he want a refugee in the family?

Well, there was AIDS for a start. Africa was riddled with it. And then there was — it wasn't the poverty, exactly — it was the hugeness of it, the Live Aid pictures, the thousands and thousands of people, the flies on their faces, the dead kids. Heartbreaking, but — what sort of a society was that? What sort of people came out of a place like that? And all the civil wars — machetes and machine-guns, and burning car tyres draped around people's necks, the savagery. Fair enough, the man was an accountant but that was the place he came from. And why had he left — what was wrong with Nigeria? He could be a criminal, like Al Pacino being thrown out of Cuba in *Scarface*. He could be one of those religious fanatics, or married already, two or three times for all they knew. And they'd never know — it was too far away. It was too different; that was it. Too unknowable, and too frightening for his daughter.

—Ben, he said quietly. —Howyeh, Ben. Great weather. Must remind you of home.

Could he say that? He didn't see why not. But he didn't want to hurt the lad's feelings, or get into trouble with the women. He'd be polite, fair. He'd like the lad — Ben — he'd shake his hand, and hold it long enough to prove that it wasn't about his skin.

But then what was going to happen?

He had his answers, his objections — AIDS, war, the works. But how could he list them off when they were having their dinner? And, more to the point, how could he do it if he wasn't certain, in his heart of hearts, that they were his real objections?

Larry was an honest man, but it was a long time since he'd had to prove it.

He looked at his watch.

The time was crawling. And that suited Larry just fine.

He was dreading the dinner, terrified of what was going to happen.

#### 4 A Gorgeous Smell

That was the bell.

Damn it, he had one leg in his underpants, the other one hanging over the floor. Larry had wanted to be down there to meet the black lad – Ben – at the door. *Hello, Ben* – not *howyeh*, he'd decided – 'Great weather. Must remind you of home.' But here he was, up in the bedroom, fighting his knickers. This wasn't what he'd planned at all. He didn't want Mona and the girls thinking that he was avoiding the lad, that he was being rude or just ignorant.

—Calm down, calm down, he told his fingers as they tried to button his shirt.

He'd decided against the suit. The young fella would probably be in a tracksuit. So Larry was dressing himself a bit up from that, just enough to impose his authority – the older man, the citizen, the firm but fair father. So he'd chosen the good trousers and a clean shirt, no tie. And his black shoes – where were the stupid bloody things?

Under the bloody bed. Bang in the middle, just out of reach. For a second – less than a second – he saw Mona down on her hunkers, shoving them in under there with the brush. But he shook himself; he was being stupid. He put on his runners; they were grand – nearly new, still white.

He took a quick goo at himself in the wardrobe mirror.

He'd do. He took the corner of toilet paper from just under his chin. The blood clot came with it. He was grand now, ready.

Down the stairs. Into the front room. There they all

were, squeezed in. He saw all the girls first, Stephanie and Vanessa and – where was the black fella? Maybe it hadn't been him at the door at all – but Tracy stepped aside and there he was.

In a fuckin' suit.

The best, most elegant suit Larry had ever been close to. A small lad – very, very black – and completely at home in the suit. The wall looked filthy behind him.

—Howyeh, Ben, said Larry.

Damn it, he'd said Howyeh.

He took the couple of steps to shake hands with him.

The first black hand Larry had ever shaken. He felt sophisticated – not a bother on him – shaking a black hand. Not even looking at it.

He'd been expecting someone like Eddie Murphy, without the grin and the shine. But that type of look. But this was more like meeting Sidney Poitier. Larry suddenly felt that he was the one being interviewed.

—Great weather, wha'. It must remind you of home.

And then he heard it. The rain. Whacking against the window behind him. He looked, and saw a sheet of the stuff charging down the glass.

Where had it come from? It had been lovely when he'd gone up to shave. He was still hanging onto the lad's hand. There was sweat in the clinch now, and it was Larry's. He was failing here.

But they were laughing, the girls, Mona, even young Laurence. They thought Larry had been joking. They were grateful. He was breaking the ice, making the lad feel at home. For a few seconds Larry forgot why they were all there, he forgot completely. He just wanted them all to love him. Especially the black lad in the suit.

He was on the verge of saying, 'Welcome to Ireland', when he remembered what had to be done – and he



looked properly at the lad for the first time and tried to see the religious fanatic, the AIDS carrier, the crook, the bigamist.

But all he could see was a small, handsome, intelligent man looking straight back at him. Not a scar or a squint; his eyes never budged from Larry's. Again, Larry felt a sudden, roaring need to impress him; a demand from his gut to be liked by him.

But the smell saved him.

It was too sweet to be aftershave and not sweet enough to be coming from Mona or the girls. It was the lad – Ben. He was wearing that men's stuff. Men's perfume.

Jesus.

Larry let go of his hand.

Larry had rules. He always held doors open for Mona when they went out together. He never let a woman cut his hair. He never put on anything that smelt – aftershave, bay rum, even talc if it was scented – they didn't get near Larry. A man with a smell was hiding something. That was what Larry believed.

And what was this guy hiding? Larry got ready to stare him out of it, to let him know that he *knew*. The suit hadn't fooled him. The suit and the—

Then Mona spoke.

—God, that's a gorgeous smell, she said.

And the girls, like little dogs in the back window of some gobshite's car, all nodded their heads.

And Ben smiled and turned away from Larry.

## 5 Spuds

Roast beef, boiled Wexford spuds, gravy you could dye your hair with – all of his favourite foods but all Larry

could smell was the black fella's perfume. But that was fine. It kept Larry – focused. That was the word.

—Lovely, he said to Mona, and pointed at the plate with his fork.

He watched the black fella putting away the spuds like he'd been born and bred in Gorey. His plate was never empty. He'd lift one spud and Mona or Stephanie would replace it with another from the bowl, and no objections from him either, a quiet Thank you every time.

—D'yeh have spuds like them in Nigeria? said Larry.

—No, said Ben.

—They're great, aren't they?

Ben looked at Larry, and Larry could tell: this guy knew what was what – you didn't slag Irish spuds at an Irish table, especially in the summer, even if the owner of the table had never dug up a potato in his life.

—They are delicious, said Ben. —Thank you.

—Thank the chef, said Larry.

—He's been thanking me non-stop since he came in the door, said Mona.

—So he should, said Larry.

And he pointed at the plate again.

—Magnificent, he said, and he looked at Ben. —Amn't I right?

—Ah, lay off, Da, will yeh, said Tracy. —He's the same every summer, she told Ben. —Going on and on about the new potatoes.

—It's like his fight for Irish freedom, said Mona. —Standing up for the spuds.

Larry smiled; he knew when he had to.

—What d'yis eat over in Nigeria, Ben? he asked.

—Anything they can get, said young Laurence.

And the roof came off the house.

There was what Laurence had said, yes; but there was also

the fact that he'd spoken at all. As far as Larry knew, they were the first words out of Laurence since Christmas, when he'd got sick in the hall and said, Sorry. By the time Larry got around to thinking about what he'd actually said, young Laurence was being walloped around the head and shoulders by five fine women — his four loving sisters and his ma.

—I was only joking!

—So am I! said Stephanie as she brought her dessert spoon down on his skull.

—Apologise!

—I'm sorry, right?

—Like you mean it!

Laurence was on the floor, trying to crawl to the door.

—Please, said Ben.

He stood up.

—Please. I accept the apology.

Everyone looked at him.

—I have become used to these insults, he said.

—Not in this house, you haven't, said Larry. And then, to Laurence: —Get up, yeh gobshite.

And they were all sitting down again, Laurence as well. Laurence half looked at Ben.

—I didn't mean anything, he said.

Ben nodded.

—Yes, he said. —But . . . nobody means anything.

—I didn't, said Laurence.

—Yes.

And Larry spoke.

—He means it.

—Yes.

Ben was looking straight back at Larry. There was no gratitude there, and no hint of a smile, no shrug. But there was no anger either, and no hurt that Larry could see. Larry knew, then and there: he liked Ben.

—Does it happen often, Ben? said Mona. —You know?

—Yes, said Ben. —I am afraid so.

—All the time, said Stephanie. —He can't walk down the street without someone shouting something at him.

—That's desperate, said Larry.

—And not just eejits like him, said Stephanie, pointing at young Laurence. —Respectable-looking people. You know, like. In suits. And women with their kids.

—God, said Mona.

She looked at Ben but she couldn't think of anything to say, nothing that wasn't empty.

—Well, said Larry. —All I can say is, on behalf of the Irish people, sorry. The Irish are warm, friendly people, Ben.

—Yeah, maybe, said Stephanie.

—Give me a chance, love, said Larry. —Ben, in 1985, when Live Aid was on, the Irish people gave more money than any other country in the world. A small, little country.

—So what? said Stephanie. —That's just stupid.

—Shut up, love, said Larry.

He was getting annoyed with her. He was trying to get to the point, to everything he wanted to say to Ben. He wanted to get there gently but firmly. And he didn't want to be misunderstood.

—But they're frightened, Ben, he said.

—I will not shut up, said Stephanie.

—Just shut it, for Jaysis sake, said Larry.

—You're just standing up for all those pricks—

—Please!

It was Ben. And he stood up again.

—Please.

He looked at Stephanie.

—Stephanie, your lack of respect for your father shocks me.

—Good man, Ben, said Larry.

—And your language, said Ben, and he looked from Stephanie to Larry. —I will not listen to this profanity. I find it most offensive.

And now Larry was standing up.

—You fuckin' what!?

## 6 The Naked Chef

They stood staring at each other, Larry and Ben. Larry could feel himself shaking. His face was burning. He could feel his heart kicking the blood straight to his cheeks and armpits.

And he looked across at the black fella. Not a bead of sweat that Larry could see. Did black people blush? If this guy did, Larry couldn't see it.

It wasn't fair. Larry felt exposed, stupid and even more angry and hopeless. And your man over there just looking back at him, like he was an ad on the side of a bus shelter.

—Get out of my house, said Larry.

He didn't know he'd been going to say it.

—If that is what you wish, said Ben.

It was too late to take it back, to sit down and start again. And Larry felt even more hopeless. He watched the black lad walk around the table towards the door.

But Mona stretched her legs, pushed her chair, so she was sitting right in front of Ben.

—Stay where you are, Ben, she said.

—But, said Ben, —it appears that I am not welcome.

—Three things, Ben, said Mona. —One. You *are* welcome. Two. I spent all day making the dessert; I got it off *The Naked Chef*—

—It better be all you got off the naked chef, said Tracy.

—Shut it, you, said Mona, and she looked back at Ben.

—So you're not leaving here until you've eaten your share of it. And three. Get down off your high horse, so we can have a nice chat with the coffee. Okay?

Ben looked down at Mona.

—What is the dessert? he said.

—Chocolate pudding.

—With cream?

—Yep.

—Then I will stay.

—Good man.

—Do I have no say in this? said Larry.

He knew the answer.

—No, said Mona.

But Larry's anger was spent and his brain was in gear again. He knew: he'd been rescued by Mona. And he'd seen the chocolate pudding.

He sat down.

And Ben sat down.

Stephanie went to get the pudding from the kitchen and Mona tried to fill the huge, heavy gap that was sitting on the table between Larry and Ben.

—So, Ben, she said. —Do you have family still in Nigeria?

—Yes, said Ben. —My mother died some years ago. Three years ago, last week.

—Oh, I'm sorry, said Mona.

And Larry wanted to say it too, but he didn't — he couldn't.

—My father lives in the house of one of my sisters, said Ben.

—Where? said Mona.

—Kaduna.

—I haven't heard of that one. All I know is Lagos.

Ben smiled and shrugged.

—Still, said Mona. I don't suppose you knew much about Ireland before you came, did you?

—No, said Ben. —That is right. I knew of Dublin. And Belfast, of course. Bombs and strife and Dr Ian Paisley. And I knew that someone called Dana won the Eurovision Song Contest.

They laughed, Larry and Laurence included.

—Where did you pick that up?

—I do not know, said Ben.

And Stephanie arrived back with the dessert and lowered it onto the table.

—Ah now, look at that.

They all admired, and sat back to make room for the pudding's glory. Mona stood. They watched her as she cut the pudding into eight slices. If she'd used a geometry set she couldn't have been fairer. She put a slice onto each plate. The plates were handed from sister to sister to brother to sister to black guest to sister to Da and, finally, Mona kept the last plate and sat down. They all picked up their forks.

—Now, said Larry. —We'll see if it tastes as good as it looks.

—Have you other family, Ben? said Mona.

—Yes, said Ben. —I have one brother.

—Younger, older?

—Older, said Ben. —It is delicious. Thank you.

And he smiled at Mona.

—I am glad I stayed.

Suddenly, the chocolate was gone from under Larry's nose and all he could smell was the black fella's perfume.

He's flirting with my missus, he said to himself. He's trying to get off with the whole fuckin' family.

—What does your brother do? Mona asked Ben.

—He is a doctor, said Ben. —That is — he *will* be a doctor. He will soon be resuming his studies.

—Why did he stop? said Larry.

—Larry.

Mona was warning Larry. She looked back at Ben.

—What about sisters? she said.

—I have three sisters. Two.

Ben looked very young now; he looked down at the table.

—Three, he said. —I have three sisters.

—What happened? said Mona.

Ben said nothing at first. Stephanie shrugged slightly; she didn't know what was happening.

—My sister, said Ben —My sister. Disappeared.

Suddenly, Larry felt very cold.

## 7 Two of Them

Larry looked across at Ben.

He could see anger and hurt, a face trying to control itself. The eyes wet, the makings of sweat on the forehead. Each breath a decision.

—It happened, said Ben, —it happened after I left Nigeria.

He stopped.

They waited.

—I left soon after my brother was arrested.

Larry knew what had happened. He knew what 'disappeared' meant. He'd seen a programme, years ago; women going to a dump in the outskirts of a city, in South America somewhere, searching every morning for the bodies of their husbands and sons. He'd missed the start of the programme; he'd just been flicking through the channels. But he'd watched, mesmerised, as the women

climbed huge mounds of steaming rubbish. One of them picking up a shirt; the shirt going from woman to woman.

They waited for Ben to talk.

Larry remembered hoping, praying – sitting up, clutching the arms of the chair – hoping to Christ that it wouldn't be a shirt that one of them knew. And then changing his mind. As he began to understand how long this had been going on. Some of these were old women who hadn't been old when they'd first walked out of the city to the dump. Searching for proof, bending down and rooting for it, dreading it. First thing, every morning, for the rest of their lives.

Larry wondered if he should ask the lad a question, just to give him a hand. But he knew: his voice, any other voice would have been an assault, just now. They could wait for Ben.

Ben fixed his eyes on the wall behind Mona.

—She went to work one day. But she did not go – she did not arrive. And she did not come home.

—What did she do, Ben? said Mona. —Her job, I mean.

—She was a teacher, said Ben.

—What was her name? said Stephanie.

—Jumi, said Ben.

They waited.

—I did not learn about it until much later. I was in Germany at that time. I had made no contact with my family. It was very difficult.

They waited. Ben looked at each of them.

—Somewhere between my mother's house and the school. Jumi—

He shrugged.

—Was your mother still alive at the time? said Mona.

—Yes.

—Oh, God love her.

—Yes.

—And they found no trace of her at all?

—If you mean my family, said Ben; —no, they found nothing. If you mean the authorities—

Again, he shrugged.

—My sister spoke her mind, he said. —It can be a dangerous activity. In some places and at certain times.

The silence had no edge to it. Ben looked at the faces that looked back at him.

Then Larry spoke.

—Just like that.

He said it softly.

—Yes, said Ben.

—I'm sorry for your troubles, Ben, said Larry.

Ben nodded, twice.

—Thank you.

Mona put her hand on Ben's, squeezed it and took her hand away.

And then Vanessa spoke.

—Is your brother out of jail there?

—Yes, said Ben. —Yes. He is a free man again.

—That's good, anyway.

—Yes.

And there was nothing for a while. Larry could think of nothing to say, nothing that wouldn't be awkward or stupid. So he kept his mouth shut.

It wasn't that he didn't want to talk. He did want to talk – badly. To talk – to say anything, any old shite at all. He just wanted to talk, and talk and talk. To hear his kids talking and laughing. To fill the room with their noise. To prove that they were all alive and solid.

But there was poor Ben. His mother, his sister, his brother. What could Larry ever say?

He saw Mona looking at him.

He nodded at his empty plate.

—Brilliant, he said.

—I made two of them, said Mona.

—What?

—There's another one in the fridge, said Mona.

They were all looking at Mona. God, they loved her; she always, always got it right.

—Will I get it? said Stephanie.

And now they looked at Ben.

It was up to him.

He saw that they were looking at him and his mouth opened slightly, and stayed that way for what seemed like hours. It was like he'd become a photograph of himself, his copied eyes fixed on Larry.

And then he turned to Mona and spoke.

—Jumi, he said. —Jumi loved a food we call *ogi*. It is quite like chocolate. So, yes. Please.

Stephanie legged it into the kitchen. And they could talk again now.

—Is your brother going to stay there? said Tracy.

—Yes, said Ben. —That is his intention. He has no wish to leave. He is optimistic.

—Is it safe?

—He thinks yes.

—Have you been back? said Mona.

—No, said Ben. —Not since I left. I would certainly like to.

—So, why don't you? said Larry.

And someone kicked him.

## 8 That African Stuff

Laurence.

It was Laurence who'd kicked him.

—What was that for? said Larry.

Bang on the shin.

—Apologise, said Laurence.

It was years since Larry'd been kicked.

—What for? he said.

Thirty-seven, as far as Larry remembered. A little get called Moocher Mooney had slid in on him, over the ball.

—You told him to go back to Nigeria, said Laurence.

—No, I didn't.

He looked across at Ben.

—I didn't.

—I understand, said Ben.

—I was only wondering. Why you hadn't been back; that's all.

He looked at Laurence.

—That's all.

—The journey would be too expensive, said Ben.

—Of course, yeah, said Larry.

He'd been thinking that, himself. It would have cost a packet, all the way to Lagos. Especially if you didn't have a job.

—And, said Ben, —if I were to leave Ireland, it would be difficult for me to get back in.

—But, said Larry. —D'you mind me asking? If your brother's grand about it. If he's happy to stay there. And he's going to study his doctoring, or whatever—

Ben finished the question for him.

—Why do I not go back?

—D'you see what I mean? said Larry.

—I want to live here, said Ben. —For now. I want my children—

Larry looked at Stephanie. But there was no blush there, no hidden eyes.

—to live as children do here. I want them to take

comfort for granted. I want money in my pocket. Is that wrong, do you think?

—No, said Larry. —Good luck to you. Is that last bit going spare? he asked Mona.

He leaned out to take the last bit of the pudding; it looked miserable there, all on its own. But, before he got to it, Mona had it up off the plate, on her knife, and she was bringing it over to Ben. But Stephanie's knife met Mona's and, for just a second or two, less, Larry's wife and his daughter were fencing each other — for the right to serve Ben the goo.

It fell onto the plate.

—Thank you, said Ben.

He brought a piece to his mouth while, there in front of his nose, two fine women fought to the death.

But they didn't. They copped on, even grinned.

—So, you're staying, said Larry to Ben.

—Yes, said Ben.

Larry was a hooor for saying things on the spur of the moment, just to be nice, things he often regretted saying, even before he'd finished. So, he waited; he held on.

And then he spoke, before anyone got there before him.

—Well, he said. —I'm sure yis'll make a very happy couple.

He meant it. He could see his grandchildren — he had to blink fast, to keep his tears to himself.

—What're you on about? said Stephanie.

—Well, said Larry.

He shrugged. There was nothing else he could say. *You have my blessing* was too formal, *fire away* was much too crude.

—We're not going with each other, said Stephanie.

—What? said Larry. —After all that?

—What?

—This, said Larry.

He nodded at the table. —All of it, the whole thing. All the chat and that.

He looked over at Ben.

—Not that you're not welcome, mind.

And back at Stephanie.

—And you're not even going with the poor lad.

He tried not to sound too devastated.

—Why not?

—We're just friends, said Stephanie.

—But, said Larry, —he's—

He gave up.

He shrugged again.

—Sorry.

—*You* can go with him, Da, said Nicole.

—Feck off, you, said Larry.

He was happy enough. He wasn't a racist. There was a black man sitting across from him and he wanted to be his father-in-law. He wasn't sure why, but that didn't matter. Larry was happy with himself.

Ben stood up.

—I must go, he said. —The bus.

—I'll see you off the premises, said Larry.

He was surprised that none of the women followed them, after Ben had kissed all the cheeks and said his goodbyes.

And now they stood at the gate, just the pair of them.

—So— said Larry. —That went well, I thought.

—Yes, said Ben.

—They were fine, weren't they? said Larry. —The girls.

—Yes, said Ben.

—Tell us, said Larry.

He looked over his shoulder, into the empty hall.

—That stuff you have on you, said Larry.

—Yes? said Ben.

—The scent, said Larry. —The perfume; whatever the fuck. What's it called?

—Towering Ebony, said Ben.

—Grand. Thanks. Eh—

Larry looked over his shoulder again, and back at Ben.

—Where would I get a bottle? he said.

—There are several shops on Parnell Street.

—Of course, yeah. That sell all the African stuff. Would I be welcome in one of them places?

—Yes, of course.

—Grand, said Larry. —Well. Seeyeh so, Ben. It was nice meeting you.

—Yes, said Ben. —That name was Towering—

—I remember, said Larry.

They smiled at each other.