

1964

MAM SAYS THE BABY CAN'T SEE PROPERLY, NOT YET. He can't even see his own hands or feet. See, there's this veil in front of his eyes that makes everything fuzzy, so he can see the shapes of us moving around and he can hear all our voices coming out of the shapes, but he doesn't really know who we are, not yet. Mam says that any day now the veil's going to get these tiny holes in it and that bit by bit the holes will get bigger, till there's no veil left at all.

When this happens he'll be able to see us: he'll be able to see himself. He'll look at us all and he'll know all our voices. Then we won't be shapes anymore. We'll be his family instead.

Today is the baby's christening day. He got a name. A name that means light. But it means something else as well: it means not hot and not cold. That can be good or that can be bad. Say if you want to make tea and the water is only lukewarm, then it's bad. But say if Deirdre's bath water is lukewarm then it's good. Because

Deirdre might scald herself if the water is too hot. She loves the curly steam and tries to grab it and hold it in her hands, so you can't take your eyes off her for a second, Mam says.

The priest poured water over the baby's head and then his name was Luke. He held the baby's head in one hand and the other hand tipped out the water. It fell over the back of the baby's head and squeezed through the priest's big white fingers. Then the baby's mouth went wide open all the way up to his forehead. He sucked in a huge breath and when he let it out again, you never heard such a roar in your life. It was even louder than Deirdre can go. It flooded the church right up to the ceiling. It made loads of echoes that splashed off the walls.

Nothing wrong with his lungs anyway, Uncle Bren said and the adults looked at each other with smiley eyes. When Deirdre screeches they look at the ground.

The baby was tired out after his roar. He fell asleep in Aunt Sal's arms on the way back from the church. That fella, she said, he has me two arms broke.

Now he's awake again, propped up in his cot so everyone can see his dress called a robe.

If you stick the heels of your hands into your eyes and press them in as hard as they go, when you take them away and squish up your eyes you can see like maybe the baby can see. There's loads of spots, orange and yellow, and puddles of colour and millions of stars. You wait till they fade and the room comes back and when you look into the cot again there's something different about him this time. As if he can see. Or nearly see anyway. He's all excited,

squinting and blinking, his little tongue sticks in and out. His little fingers scrub the air like he's pulling away the last bit of veil, and his feet punch the end of his dress. And you can guess what it is that has him excited: he's looking at the hole getting bigger and bigger, and the room getting clearer, the way the telly does when you twist the knob and the interference melts away. Imagine the shock in his little heart when he finds out there's more to see than blobs and blurs and noises running around that don't belong anywhere. You better tell Mam.

Mam, you say, the baby can see.

But Mam isn't here. Mam! Mam!

You run into the bedroom. No sign of Mam. Just empty coats plonked on the bed, and a roundy mouth putting on lipstick, and a woman's eyes over the mouth looking out at you through the mirror.

Where's Mam?

Urhhh?

My Mam?

Haven't a clue dear.

You can't find Mam anywhere so you come back to the living-room, and his eyes are like a camera moving around. Stopping on one thing: *blink*. Then moving off somewhere else: *blink*. Like he's filling up his head with photographs of the house. But the house isn't itself today. The house is strange with glasses from the pub and ashtrays from the pub and empty corners with no piles of washing and no newspapers shoved under the sofa. Suppose he thinks his house is always like this? With stuff on the table you're not allowed touch: trifle bowls and fancy plates, roundy roses squashed in a vase and billions of biscuits and little pink buns and a

big white table-cloth that makes the table look like a cake.

And everywhere bottles: on top of the sideboard, in brown bags in the hall or in a crate behind the back door. Uncle Matt drinks from a bottle that's big and fat with a picture of a woodpecker on the front. It hisses and spits when he twists the knob off, then comes out lovely, red and all bubbly, like lemonade. But it doesn't smell like lemonade. It smells like sick.

A crowd of aunties sitting in a row or getting up sometimes to pass out the sandwiches.

A load of cousins milling around or stopping sometimes to tell tales on each other.

Men at the wall looking at their watches, filling slanty glasses with slanty bottles of stout.

A queue of people, bursting to go, outside the door of the toilet.

And visitors, visitors all over the place, and all the noise that visitors make, and all the smoke that visitors blow goes twirling up to the ceiling.

Dad, you say, I think – I think the baby can see.

Open the window, Dad says, flapping his hand at the fog of smoke. Go on open it quick before the poor baba chokes.

The window's too tight so you call Jeannie over and tell her that maybe the baby can see. One, two, three, you push the window open together and the fog of smoke stretches itself out and comes snuffling across the room.

You lean over the cot, shove your head in, so maybe he'll look at you this time. You call Brian over. He gets off Aunt Sal's lap, goes down on his hunkers and squeezes his fat cheeks into the bars of the cot. Then Jeannie's face comes in at the baby, shaking her curly hair. Oh you cutey

little cutey, you fat little cutey, can you see me? I'm your sister. Yes I am. Yes I –

Get away from that cot, Aunt Sal says with her empty lap. Get away from that cot, before you turn it over. Get away, I said, NOW. Then she goes back to eating her sandwich.

When the men eat sandwiches they open their gobs wide and stuff them in. When the women eat sandwiches they pluck them with their fingers bit by bit.

It makes your hand look like a goose's head eating sandwiches that way; it makes your fingers look like the beak. Sometimes they lift the top slice and take a peep in case they don't like what's inside, then they close the bread over and even if they don't like what's inside they eat it up anyway.

Dad, I think – I think the baby can see.

But Dad's in the corner now talking to his friends looking at their watches and some of the uncles are looking at the aunties to see if they're looking back. Talking about leaving the house and going down to the pub. Mam will go mad. She kept on saying, all day yesterday, all the day before, You better not. You better not. Even think about going to the pub.

But Dad hates houses and he hates sitting down. Dad likes the pub. When you go on a visit, he says, No thanks, no tea for me. Then he nods his head at the man in the house. Are you right? he says. We'll leave the girls to their chat. And off they go.

Then it's dark on the way home in the back of the car. And in the front Dad says loads of long sentences and Mam must be tired after her chat because she says hardly anything at all.

And you can look at the windows in town full of bright, in shops or on top of big buses. And you can feel your face wobbling like jelly when the car goes out of town and over the cobblestones, and you can see all the dark houses on all the dark roads; then you can lie down and look at the orange street lights, pulling you home on a long orange string.

When you go to a birthday party, you get jelly and icecream, cake and chocolate Rice Krispie buns. You say, Thank you very much for the lovely party, then go home with everyone else. If it's your birthday party, you say, Thanks very much for coming to my party and for the lovely present and all. When everyone's gone you look at the presents again, say which is your favourite and which is your worst. You spread out the cards, read all the poems inside; you suck the icing off the end of the candles. Then you say thanks to Mam for the lovely party and help her to clean up the table.

But when the adults have a party it isn't the same. They go a bit funny. Sometimes they sing and that can be good. They laugh and clap and make noble calls: that means you have to sing if you're picked even if you don't want to. Mam and Dad are happy when there's singing going on. Mam knows loads of songs: the one about summertime, the one about diamonds, the one where she wants an old-fashioned millionaire. Mam is the best singer of all. She sings like someone off the pictures. Aunt June's the scariest with her voice all shaky and dry. Uncle Matt's funny doing his letting on he's a woman walk with Aunt Winnie's hand-bag. Then everyone says he's a scream. Dad doesn't sing but he makes loads of jokes. Everyone's happy and everyone

claps. Then it's time to go home and Mam and Dad stop enjoying themselves again.

If the party is in your house then Dad just goes to bed and Mam stays up and finishes her drink and smokes on her own. Then the next day the house is all smelly and you have to open the windows and make sure you empty all the bottles down the sink before you put them in the brown bags outside the back door.

Sometimes there's no singing only talking, except it's not really talking it's shouting instead. They don't listen to each other, because they're only waiting on their turn to shout. They say the same things over and over. They talk about things that happened years ago. Then there might be a row. Everyone goes home at different times. If one of them goes home too early the people who are left behind always say something about them. You hear loads of stuff because they forget to send you out. They're too busy shouting so they don't notice anything. They never notice anything. Even now they don't notice that the baby can see.