



They must attend to the guests, she tells me. Mother and that wretched shadow of a man clinging at her heels. I am to play under the table. Strictly speaking, I am only to stay put under the table; whether I play or not is entrusted to my own sound judgment.

Kindness itself, she even turns out a drawer for my benefit. I comprehend her intentions perfectly well, but I keep my finer models in another drawer entirely. In spite of mounting hardship, I press on and judiciously stroke a figure-eight into the carpet.

As the afternoon progresses, the adult voices, caustic in isolation, meld into an amoe-bic whole. This affords me at least some respite from their vacuous observations concerning who time has treated unkindly, or who has been notably absent, or who they suspect is a latent homosexual.

The tablecloth lifts. The dome light above haloes her darkened countenance, save where pearls glimmer against her neckline. She directs me to keep my effects from straying into their adult environs. The victims of this most tragic motor accident, which regrettably

proved fatal for all involved parties, fail to merit her sympathy. Then come the heartfelt condolences. What cheap theatre! She feigns deafness even as she draws a fastener across her thin, unpainted lips. The man who is not Father calls for an ashtay in that sycophantic baritone he affects. She rises. I blow a raspberry at their shins.

A large, burnished brogue catapults a virgin packet of cigarettes squarely onto my private racing grounds. To my vexation, they prove not chocolate. Rather, these contain dark, coarse hair—the very kind Mother keeps between her legs to hide how God caused her thing to fall off. She says I have grown too big to bathe with her.

The projectile's absence finally registers overhead. Mother, back so soon, to what do I owe the pleasure? No, Mother, I have discerned nothing of the sort. No, Mother, I would not lie. She still believes I think Father is travelling. Adults are embarrassing. Death is embarrassing.