

Small Things Like These



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF CLAIRE KEEGAN

Claire Keegan is an Irish writer known for her short fiction. She was born in 1968 and grew up in a large family in County Wicklow, Ireland. Keegan attended college at Loyola University in New Orleans, studying English and political sciences. She received her master's in creative writing from the University of Wales and later earned an M.Phil at Trinity College Dublin. She published her debut collection of short stories, *Antarctica*, in 1999. It received the Rooney Prize for Irish Literature, as well as the inaugural William Trevor Prize. Her short story "Foster" was published in the *New Yorker* in 2010. The story was adapted for film as *An Cailín Ciúin* (A Quiet Girl) in 2022. Keegan's novella *Small Things like These* was published in 2021. It won the Orwell Prize for Political Fiction in 2022 and was shortlisted for the 2022 Booker Prize. Its film adaptation of the same name premiered at the 74th Berlin International Film Festival in 2024. Keegan's short fiction has won numerous awards, including the Olive Cook Award, the Davy Byrnes Irish Writing Award, and the Francis MacManus Award. Keegan has taught at numerous universities and been awarded numerous fellowships. Her most recent short story collection, *So Late in the Day*, was shortlisted for the Irish "Novel of the Year" award.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Although *Small Things Like These* is a work of fiction, the Magdalene laundry at the center of its plot is based on institutions that existed in history. Magdalene Laundries in Ireland (also called Magdalene asylums) date back to the 18th century. Although they were most often operated by Roman Catholic orders, the first laundry—the Dublin Magdalen Asylum—was run by the (Protestant) Church of Ireland and accepted only Protestant women. Ireland's Catholic laundries persisted into the late 20th century—the last one closed in 1996. Funded by the state and run by religious orders, laundries were established ostensibly to "save" the souls of so-called "fallen women," which primarily referred to sex workers in the 18th century. Later, other types of women were housed at laundries, including unwed mothers. The initial goal of laundries was to house sex workers and thereby curtail sex work and give sex workers a means to redeem their souls through hard—not to mention often unpaid and unrecognized—labor. In fact, the institutions did little to curb sex work, for they failed to address the rampant poverty and lack of a social safety net that created a demand for sex work and a supply of sex workers in the first place. Despite its failure to meet its intended goal, the laundries persisted and even

became more in demand due to the opportunity for free labor they offered. As such, laundries were key players in the broader, patriarchal oppression of women and girls in Ireland. As laundries grew in number, the treatment of women and girls housed there worsened, with frequent violence and abuse. The exact number of women and girls kept there is today not known—hardly any records exist for the women who were housed at laundries in the 19th and 20th centuries—but estimates are around 30,000. In Dublin in 1993, 133 unmarked graves were discovered on the property of Sisters of Our Lady of Charity, which operated a laundry. The discovery led to a public scandal, bringing to light the troubling history surrounding Ireland's Magdalene laundries, which had previously been shrouded in secrecy. Despite this, it was not until 2013 that the Irish government issued an apology to victims of the Magdalene laundries.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Although *Small Things like These* is a novel, Keegan is best known for her works of short fiction. Her short story collections include *Antarctica* (1999), *Walk the Blue Fields* (2007), *The Forester's Daughter* (2019), and *So Late in the Day* (2023). Her short story *Foster* was published in the *New Yorker* in 2010. Another notable Irish writer of short fiction is William Trevor, who is known for his novels as well. Similar to Keegan, Trevor's works often focus on marginalized people. His works often focused on tensions between Protestant and Catholic populations, a theme that Keegan alludes to in *Small Things like These* with the character of wealthy widow Mrs. Wilson. Finally, Keegan's novel looks critically at the subjugation of women in a culture heavily influenced by restrictive religious norms, Catholicism in the case of Keegan's fictional town of New Ross. Other Irish writers to write on these issues include Edna O'Brien, whose debut novel *The Country Girls* (1960s) scandalously spoke frankly about matters of sexuality from a female perspective. [Milkman](#) by Northern Irish writer Anna Burns is set during the Troubles in Northern Ireland and deals with similar issues of female oppression, but with greater emphasis on the sociopolitical circumstances of the time.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Small Things like These
- **When Published:** 2021
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Novel, Historical Fiction
- **Setting:** The fictional town of New Ross, Ireland, in 1985
- **Climax:** Furlong rescues Sarah Redmond from St. Margaret's

and brings her to his home.

- **Antagonist:** The Mother Superior, The Catholic Church
- **Point of View:** Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Smallest Thing. *Small Things like These* is the shortest book to be shortlisted for the Booker Prize.



PLOT SUMMARY

Autumn descends upon the small town of New Ross, Ireland. Townspeople call coal and timber merchant Bill Furlong with requests for urgent deliveries. During the busy season, Furlong does the deliveries himself while the yardmen prepare the next orders. He works hard to support his wife Eileen and their five daughters (Kathleen, Joan, Sheila, Grace, and Loretta), and he takes pride in his daughters' academic promise and in how well they seem to "blend in" with the other youths.

Furlong himself was born to an unwed, teenage mother. Luckily, his mother's employer, the Protestant widow Mrs. Wilson, kept Furlong's mother on when her family disowned her, even inviting the young mother and her child to live in her house. After his mother died when he was 12, Mrs. Wilson took young Furlong under her wing, helping him with his studies. She also ensured that he always knew his full potential, despite the scandal of his illegitimate birth. Furlong used to wonder who his father was. One drunken night, he asked Ned, the farmhand who lived at Mrs. Wilson's when Furlong and his mother were there, if he knew who the man was. Ned, however, pled ignorance, suggesting that perhaps Furlong's father was one of the Wilsons' wealthy English friends who used to visit the house.

Today, Furlong doesn't dwell much on the past. He's simply grateful for the life he has and for the relative acceptance he has managed to achieve in New Ross despite his shameful origins—the town is effectively ruled by St. Margaret's, the local convent, which doesn't look kindly on people it deems immoral.

Christmas draws nearer, and Furlong and his family attend festivities on the Town Square. Furlong delights in seeing his daughter Joan singing with the choir. Later that night, the family returns home, and the girls help Eileen with the Christmas cake before writing their letters to Santa. After the girls have gone to bed, Eileen and Furlong snatch up and read the letters, and they take pride in how ungreedy the girls have turned out—they've all requested simple, unassuming gifts from Santa. Eileen observes Furlong's withdrawn mood and asks if anything is bothering him. Furlong struggles to convey to his wife—who only worries about practical matters, not existential ones—the many anxieties that have been coursing through his mind as of late: his own mysterious past, his daughters growing up and "going out into that world of men,"

and all the suffering and poverty he witnesses as he ventures to the outskirts of town to make his deliveries.

One day, Furlong drives to the convent to make a delivery when he encounters a group of young women and girls furiously polishing the chapel floor. The girls appear disheveled, sickly, and malnourished. Without being told, Furlong intuitively feels that they must be residents of the convent's Magdalene laundry—an institution erected to save the sinful souls of so-called "fallen" women, the thought being that women who did sex work or became pregnant out of wedlock might redeem their souls through hard work. There are many rumors about the existence of the St. Margaret's laundry, and about the cruel treatment the young women suffer there, but Furlong hasn't believed any of them—until now. One of the girls (the Dublin girl) in the chapel sees Furlong and begs him to take her out of the convent and as far as the river, where she hopes to drown herself. But a nun enters the chapel to check on Furlong's delivery before he can say much in response.

In bed that night, Furlong tells Eileen about what he saw, expecting her to be just as appalled as he was. To his shock, she admits to knowing about the laundry. What's more, she strongly urges Furlong not to get involved, insisting that it's not his (or his family's) responsibility to help the young women there. She even suggests that the young women committed to the laundry have brought their suffering upon themselves. To add insult to injury, she makes a jab at Furlong's mother's shameful past, something she's never done before.

There's supposed to be snow Christmas week, and people call Furlong in a panic, requesting emergency deliveries. One delivery sends him back to the convent. On this occasion, he wanders past the coal shed and is shocked when he peers through the window and spots a girl (Sarah Redmond) inside, lying on the floor and surrounded in filth. The girl appears sickly and disheveled, as though she's been there all night long—and it's freezing out. Furlong helps the girl to her feet. As he leads her to the front **door** of the convent, she mumbles for Furlong to ask about her baby, which the nuns took away from her. Furlong is shocked. He knocks at the front door of the convent. Eventually the Mother Superior herself comes to the door. As she angrily confronts Sarah, demanding to know how she got inside the coal shed, Furlong notes how terrified Sarah appears. Then Mother Superior orders Sarah to go inside, have a bath, and get herself cleaned up. Then, she asks—or orders—Furlong to join her inside for some tea. Furlong, realizing he has no choice, follows the Mother Superior inside.

Beneath a portrait of Pope John Paul II, Furlong answers dutifully as the Mother Superior asks him about his daughters. Though she doesn't say so directly, she insinuates that she will deny Furlong's daughters admittance to St. Margaret's—the only good girls' secondary school in town—if Furlong makes any trouble over the laundry. Then she hands Furlong an envelope containing money as a Christmas gift.

Sarah returns, freshly bathed but still shaken and practically mute. Furlong tries to ask her how she came to be at the laundry and how he can help her, but a young nun coughs loudly, signaling to Furlong and Sarah that Sarah won't be permitted to say more on the subject. Furlong leaves. Later, he realizes he never asked about Sarah's baby.

Furlong returns home, and Eileen berates him for missing first Mass. She eagerly accepts the envelope the Mother Superior sent Furlong home with—it contains a 50-pound note. Furlong attends second Mass with his family but can't focus. He feels like a hypocrite for attending Mass, yet failing to do anything about the horrific cruelties he witnessed at the laundry. Defiantly, he refuses to accept communion.

After Mass, Furlong decides to pay Ned a visit at Mrs. Wilson's house. When he arrives, a woman he doesn't recognize answers the door and tells him Ned is at the hospital—he's been sick with pneumonia. She remarks that Furlong must be a relative of Ned's—they look so similar. Furlong, practically speechless, returns to his truck. At long last, he realizes what should have been obvious to him all along: Ned is likely his father. In a rush, he reflects on the sadness and selflessness of Ned's choice to keep his paternity a secret from Furlong, wanting Furlong to believe he came from more respectable stock than a mere farmhand.

Christmas draws nearer. On Christmas Eve, Furlong buys his men supper at Kehoe's. After the men have left, Furlong goes to Mrs. Kehoe to pay. Mrs. Kehoe, having heard about Furlong's so-called "run-in" with the Mother Superior, warns him to keep quiet: the nuns control everything in town, and there could be real consequences if Furlong makes trouble for them. Furlong thanks Mrs. Kehoe for her advice and leaves.

It's snowing now, and Furlong wanders the streets, getting a haircut and picking up a pair of **shoes** he ordered for Eileen's Christmas present. He walks onward but doesn't go home—instead, he walks until he reaches the convent. He goes straight to the coal shed, retrieves Sarah Redmond from it, and takes her home with him. In town, people notice Sarah's bare feet, realize that she's one of the laundry girls, and refuse to acknowledge Furlong or Sarah. Furlong no longer cares. As he approaches the door to his house, he reflects on the trouble his family will undoubtedly face as a result of his helping Sarah, but he chooses—perhaps foolishly—to believe it will all be okay.

backgrounds. Furlong was born to an unwed, teenaged mother who died when he was a boy. Fortunately, his mother's employer, Mrs. Wilson, took them in and ensured that Furlong had the support he needed to make a better life for himself. Despite this, the town never quite lets Furlong forget that his acceptance there is conditional—St. Margaret's, the Catholic Church that effectively runs the town, has not forgotten Furlong's shameful origins. Furlong's status as a perpetual outsider imbues him with a higher level of compassion than other townspeople. He is keenly aware of the hypocrisy of many churchgoers, who faithfully attend Mass each Sunday yet fail to live up to their religious morals in daily life. Furlong is horrified, then, when he witnesses the cruelty and abuse that takes place at the Magdalene laundry the convent operates. He's even more shocked to learn that much of the town knows about what goes on at the laundry but is content to turn a blind eye, not wanting to suffer the consequences of upsetting the convent's nuns. Although Furlong initially caves to this intimidation, ultimately, he decides to rescue a young mother he meets there, Sarah Redmond, regardless of the consequences he and his family may suffer as a result.

Eileen – Eileen is Bill Furlong's wife. She is grateful to Furlong for the long hours he works outside the house to financially support the family. Furlong, in turn, acknowledges the hard work Eileen has put into maintaining the household and raising their daughters. Although the couple's marriage is generally happy, Furlong sometimes struggles to relate to and confide in Eileen, who doesn't seem to share his existential, moral worries. He also wonders whether Eileen—who comes from a more respectable background than Furlong—might be happier married to someone else. Furlong struggles to understand Eileen's detached, unempathetic response to suffering and her lacking regard for people she doesn't consider her "own." When Furlong alerts Eileen to the abuse he witnessed at the Magdalene laundry at St. Margaret's, for instance, Eileen does not share his outrage or compulsion to do something about the abuse—indeed, she even insinuates that she already knew about the laundry. Instead, she advises Furlong to look the other way, and she even implies that the women and girls who have ended up at the laundry have brought their suffering on themselves.

Mrs. Wilson – Mrs. Wilson was Furlong's mother's employer, a Protestant woman of some means due to her late husband's pension. The widow kindly took in Furlong's mother after she became pregnant with Furlong—Furlong's mother's own family disowned her after they discovered the pregnancy. Mrs. Wilson took to Furlong, helping him with his studies and giving him paid work. More importantly, she made sure that Furlong knew his full potential, regardless of how the conservative, Catholic culture of New Ross looked down on him due to his shameful origins. Not only did Mrs. Wilson's generosity enable Furlong to lift himself from abject poverty and become an (at least



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Bill Furlong – Bill Furlong is the coal and timber merchant of New Ross. Furlong works hard to provide for his wife, Eileen, and their five daughters. Furlong takes pride in how well his daughters manage to "blend in" with the other youths of New Ross—that is, children who come from more respectable

somewhat) accepted member of New Ross society, but it also instilled in him a belief in one's ability to better oneself, and a heightened sense of compassion and empathy for others.

The Mother Superior – The Mother Superior is the corrupt nun who heads the convent at St. Margaret's, as well as the convent's Magdalene laundry. In New Ross, she functions as a symbolic and practical stand-in for the larger Catholic Church, deciding what is and isn't moral and doling out punishments for those whom Church doctrine deems fallen from grace. The Mother Superior's most notable features are her cruelty and her hypocrisy. Although she presents herself as a humble servant of God, she rules over New Ross with an iron fist, and she treats the girls and young women committed to the Magdalene laundry with vengeance and callousness rather than mercy. Notably, when she senses that Furlong may come forward about the abuse he has witnessed at the Magdalene laundry, she coerces him into keeping silent by implicitly threatening to take away his daughters' spots in the school at St. Margaret's, the only secondary school in town where girls can get a decent education.

Ned – Ned is a farmhand who lived at Mrs. Wilson's house when Furlong was growing up there. He, like Mrs. Wilson, treated Furlong with kindness. Ned took the young boy under his wing, teaching him how to shave and providing him with support after Furlong's mother's death. Early in Furlong's marriage to Eileen, Furlong visited Ned and asked him if he knew who Furlong's father was. Ned claimed he didn't, vaguely suggesting that perhaps one of the Wilsons' wealthy friends who used to visit was Furlong's father. Only in the story's present, by which time Ned is an older, sickly man, does Furlong realize that Ned is most likely his father. And he is deeply affected by the sadness and selflessness of Ned's choice to keep his paternity a secret from Furlong, encouraging the young boy to believe he came from better stock than the likes of a farmhand.

Sarah Redmond – Sarah Redmond is a young woman whom Furlong discovers locked inside the coal shed at the convent when making a delivery one day. Furlong recognizes Sarah as a likely resident of the convent's Magdalene laundry, and he is horrified at Sarah's poor condition—she is filthy, malnourished, and clearly traumatized. When he tries to get her to explain how she came to be locked inside the coal shed, she appears unwilling—or unable—to answer. Instead, she pleads with Furlong to ask the nuns about her baby, explaining that the nuns took him away from her. Furlong, shocked and scared, fails to do so during his later encounter with the Mother Superior. The story closes with Furlong, ashamed of his cowardice and hypocrisy, retrieving Sarah from the convent and taking her into his home, regardless of the consequences he and his family may face as a result.

Furlong's Mother – Furlong's mother, Sarah, died when Furlong was just 12 years old and only appears in the novel in

Furlong's memories. She was an unwed teenager when she became pregnant with Furlong, and her family disowned her when they discovered the pregnancy. Sarah's employer, the widow Mrs. Wilson, let her keep her job, and she even invited Sarah and young Furlong to live in her home. The similarities between Furlong's mother's situation and those of the young women Furlong encounters at the Magdalene laundry at St. Margaret's play a large role in his choice to take in Sarah Redmond, a young woman he meets at the laundry, no matter what social ostracization he might face as a result.

The Dublin Girl – The Dublin girl is one of the Magdalene laundry residents Furlong encounters when he first witnesses the wretched conditions in which the girls and women committed there live. Furlong stumbles upon a group of the laundry's residents polishing the chapel floor, and he's struck by how ill and disheveled the women appear. One girl, in an unmistakable Dublin accent, begs him to take her with him, insisting that Furlong need only take her as far as the river so she can drown herself.

Mrs. Kehoe – Mrs. Kehoe is a New Ross resident who operates Kehoe's, the local restaurant where Furlong's yardmen have supper after a long day's work. After word spreads of Furlong's "run-in" with the Mother Superior, Mrs. Kehoe warns Furlong not to make trouble over the Magdalene laundry business, warning him that the nuns control the town and could make things very bad for Furlong and his family.

The Young Nun – The young nun lives at St. Margaret's and answers to the Mother Superior. When Furlong tries to glean information from Sarah Redmond, one of the young women committed to the convent's horrific Magdalene Laundry, the young nun abruptly coughs—signaling to Sarah, and to Furlong, that Sarah isn't permitted to speak freely about what goes at the laundry or how she came to live there.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Kathleen – Kathleen is Furlong and Eileen's eldest daughter. She attends school at St. Margaret's, where she excels academically.

Joan – Joan is one of Furlong and Eileen's daughters, the second oldest. She, like her sisters, shows academic promise, and she's also recently joined the choir at St. Margaret's.

Sheila – Sheila is one of Furlong and Eileen's daughters, the middle child. She, like the rest of the Furlong girls, shows academic promise.

Grace – Grace is one of Furlong and Eileen's daughters, the second youngest. She, like her sisters, shows academic promise.

Loretta – Loretta is the youngest of Furlong and Eileen's daughters. She cries when she sees the man dressed as Santa at a Christmas celebration on the Town Square, and Furlong fears she won't have the strength required to get through life's

unceasing difficulties.

Mick Sinnott – Mick Sinnott lives in New Ross. He deals with alcoholism and struggles to provide for his family as a result. At one point, Eileen cites Mick as an example of someone who has brought their struggles on themselves, and her callousness shocks Furlong.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



SUBJUGATION OF WOMEN AND GIRLS

Small Things like These follows Bill Furlong, a timber and coal merchant, who makes a horrifying discovery while running a delivery to St.

Margaret's, the local convent. When he enters the chapel on the convent's grounds, he encounters a group of women and girls inside, fiercely polishing the floor. The girls are in poor shape: one has a severely infected eye. Another begs Furlong to help her escape the convent, expressing that she would settle for him dropping her off at the river's banks, for all she wants to do is drown herself. Furlong later confirms that these girls are from the Magdalene laundry, an institution operated by the convent's nuns and designed to "reform" fallen women and girls—that is, young women who engaged in sex work or who became pregnant out of wedlock. Historically, the objective of such institutions was to curtail sex work and to give "fallen" women and girls means to pay penance for their supposed sins. In reality, the women and girls confined to such institutions were subjected to abuse and inhumane labor conditions. Meanwhile, the objective of the laundries shifted over time from a method of upholding so-called moral order (at least in the eyes of the Church and the patriarchal hierarchy) to a convenient way to profit off the unpaid labor of women and girls. The book's horrific examination of Ireland's Magdalene laundries implicitly points to how the culture of Ireland at the end of the 20th century—particularly in small towns where the Church heavily influenced social norms—was harmful to women and girls, holding them to an unjust double standard with regard to sexuality and offering them limited opportunities for personal fulfillment and self-improvement.



RELIGIOUS HYPOCRISY AND ABUSE OF POWER

Small Things like These takes place in the small Irish town of New Ross, where St. Margaret's, the local convent, controls practically all aspects of daily life. The nuns

who run the convent use their immense influence to ensure that the townspeople uphold the Church's conservative social norms—even when the Church itself fails to live up to the values it preaches. The nuns who run the Magdalene laundry, for instance, hardly emulate the benevolence and compassion that Christian doctrine espouses: they treat the so-called "fallen women" who live and work in the laundry with immense cruelty, and at one point the Mother Superior speaks with disdain and judgment of the foreign people who arrive in Ireland to work.

Despite the hypocrisy of the nuns at St. Margaret's, however, the novel shows how the heavily Catholic culture of Ireland at the time allows the Church to maintain its control over New Ross and keep townspeople in check. As such, it's in a person's best interest to stay on the good side of the nuns and the institution they represent. The school at St. Margaret's, for instance, is the only real place for local girls to receive a decent education—and with it, any chance at carving out a better future for themselves. After Furlong discovers the truth about the abuse that goes on at the convent's Magdalene laundry, he is compelled to do something about it. The Mother Superior, however, makes it very clear what is at stake for Furlong should he attempt to challenge the Church: the school at St. Margaret's has limited enrollment, she reminds him, and wouldn't it be a shame if there were not enough openings for all his daughters to attend school there? The Mother Superior's warning, in essence, blackmails Furlong into silence, reminding him of the direct power she wields over the outcome of Furlong's and his family's lives. The book thus sheds light on both the abuse of power that the church is capable of, has historically participated in, and continues to enact to this day. Moreover, it criticizes the hypocrisy of religious authorities who fail to practice what they preach, demanding moral goodness and yet displaying no mercy, compassion, or benevolence themselves.



COMPLICITY

Small Things like These follows coal merchant Bill Furlong and the inner battle he undergoes after he discovers the abuse and cruelty that take place at the Magdalene laundry the local convent operates in his small town. The truth about the laundry is a shameful secret that many residents of New Ross essentially agree to overlook, fearing the consequences that they or their families might suffer should they come forward and anger the Church. The townspeople's willful ignorance serves as a launch point for the book to examine broader issues of what it means to be complicit in acts of injustice or immorality. The book asks readers to consider whether a person must actively participate in acts of evil or injustice to be guilty of those acts, or whether simply being aware of ongoing injustice and passively allowing it to continue constitutes complicity.

Furlong is appalled by what he sees at the convent: young women and girls—so-called “fallen women”—who are severely malnourished, worked to the bone, and experiencing such great suffering that some consider death a relief by contrast. He is even more disturbed by his wife Eileen’s reaction when he tells her about what he saw. Furlong expects Eileen to be as shocked and disturbed as he is, so it catches him off guard when he finds that Eileen is apparently well aware of the laundry’s existence—and has no interest in helping or demanding justice for the women and girls who are kept there. Eileen allows that what goes on at the laundry is cruel and inhumane, but she ultimately advises Furlong that it’s not his family’s responsibility to do anything to help the women and girls who experience abuse there. Although Eileen’s reaction is harsh and lacking in compassion, it reflects the power the convent holds over New Ross’s residents, as the Church has the power to destroy the livelihood of anyone who might challenge its authority. Still, it is ultimately the complicity of Eileen and people like her—however practical that complicity might be—that allows the atrocities to continue. In this way, then, the novel points to how a person needn’t actively participate in acts of injustice to be guilty of those acts: passively standing by and knowingly enabling injustice to persist is enough to make a person complicit in and guilty of injustice.



HUMANITY VS. SELFISHNESS

At the core of *Small Things like These* lies the question of what obligation a person has to help their fellow humans, and how a person’s relationship to others gives their life meaning. In particular, the novel considers whether one should prioritize helping oneself and one’s people, or whether the moral obligation to help others—regardless of how doing so might benefit oneself—is more important than self-preservation. Most people in New Ross seem to believe the former. Bill Furlong is an anomaly in this regard. Throughout the book, he repeatedly observes people who only seem interested in taking care of their own people and turn a blind eye when others are in trouble, and he thinks there’s something deeply wrong and inhuman about such selfishness. Furlong’s belief in a shared humanity is ultimately why he chooses to take in Sarah Redmond, a young woman committed to the Magdalene laundry, despite the ostracization his family might face as a result.

Furlong’s past may inform his compassionate outlook. The illegitimate son of an unwed, teenaged mother, Furlong comes from nothing and understands what it’s like to have no people of his own to look after him—his mother’s family disowned her after she fell pregnant. It was only due to the generosity of Mrs. Wilson, his mother’s employer, who chose to take on Furlong and his mother, that Furlong had a chance at making a better life for himself. But Mrs. Wilson’s situation was notably quite different from that of Furlong’s family and many other families

in Ireland in the 1980s, when many lived in poverty. Mrs. Wilson, a widow, had financial stability due to her late husband’s pension. This, in turn, allowed her to be selfless without having to worry about the potential consequences to her own welfare. Furlong, as he struggles to with the moral question of whether to help Sarah Redmond and risk ostracizing his family, faces considerably higher stakes. He can do the unquestionably morally right thing and help Sarah—but doing so may create great, unrecoverable hardship for his own family. The novel thus presents a complicated portrait of humanity and selflessness. While it suggests that a person’s life is made meaningful by their relationships and by the compassion and generosity they show others, its ambiguous ending—with Bill doing the right thing, but possibly on the cusp of ruin nevertheless—shows that a meaningful, moral life is not necessarily the same as a good life devoid of suffering.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



FEET AND SHOES

In *Small Things like These*, feet and shoes symbolize the relationship between a person’s moral obligation, willingness, and ability to treat others with mercy and compassion. Shoes typically reflect a person’s social rank—and their subsequent deservingness or worth. Early in the book, Furlong notes that he observed Eileen eyeing a pair of shoes she saw in a shop window, and he hints at his plans to buy them for her as a Christmas gift. In this context, the shoes symbolize Furlong and his family’s relative privilege and fortune. The girls and women who work at the Magdalene laundry the local convent operate, meanwhile, often go barefoot. Their lack of shoes represents not only their poverty, but also their low social rank. As a result of these “fallen women’s” supposed sinful natures, the Catholic Church—and the town of New Ross, whose social norms the Church shapes and regulates—deems them inferior and undeserving of mercy and compassion. Somewhat paradoxically, then, the women’s bare feet simultaneously reflect their need for compassion and the fact that (according to the hypocritical Catholic Church) that they are undeserving of that compassion.

Notable, too, is the subliminal religious imagery of feet. In the Book of John in the Christian Bible, there is a scene in which Jesus washes his disciples’ feet and encourages them to do the same to others. The basic moral of the story is twofold: Jesus is suggesting both that a person should humble themselves to help others, and also that everyone is deserving of help. Notably, the story challenges that a person’s rank or goodness has anything to do with their deservingness or their right to

dignity and respect. Jesus, despite being his disciples' leader, is equally as obligated to serve his disciples as they are to serve him, or to serve anyone else, for that matter. This lesson reflects the moral conflict at the heart of *Small Things like These*, in which Bill Furlong must rebel against the view of the local convent (and the town of New Ross as a whole) that people must earn compassion and human dignity. In Furlong's mind, a person's obligation to help others has nothing to do with whether they owe the person in need, or whether the person in need has earned compassion. Instead, the mere fact that a person is in a position to help (that they have shoes, so to speak) is enough to obligate them to help a person in need (a person who has no shoes). The closing scene of the novel, in which Furlong stands at the door of his home, clutching the new shoes he has purchased for Eileen, with the barefoot Sarah by his side, drives home this symbolism.



DOORS AND DOORWAYS

In *Small Things like These*, doors and doorways represent the conflict between Furlong's moral ideals and the various external forces that prevent him from acting on those ideals. Throughout the book, Furlong struggles to weigh his impulse to help others and fight back against inhumanity and injustice with the consequences that might result from his actions. The local convent effectively runs Furlong's hometown of New Ross, and anyone who goes against their rigid (and often hypocritically and ironically unmerciful) interpretation of Christianity risks social ostracization. Furlong, as the illegitimate son of an unwed mother, knows this all too well. He has only barely managed to achieve social acceptance among his fellow townspeople despite the so-called shameful circumstances of his birth, and he is well aware that everything he has worked so hard to achieve could be taken away from him if he does anything to make trouble for the nuns who run the convent. While delivering some coal to the convent one day, Furlong approaches the coal-house door and finds it locked. In reaction, he inwardly considers whether he "had not turned into a man consigned to doorways, for did he not spend the best part of his life standing outside of one or another, waiting for them to be opened." Symbolically, Furlong's observation comments on how his tenuous social acceptance has incapacitated him, rendering him passive and submissive. Fearful of losing what relative acceptance and respect he has worked all his life to achieve, he has made it a point to keep his head down and not do anything to upset anyone, lest his stirring of conflict result in his and his family's fall from grace. This poses a critical problem for Furlong after he discovers the Magdalene laundry the convent is running. Not only does Furlong see how desperately the girls and women who reside there are in need of help—but he also recognizes the harsh consequences anyone who moves to help them will

face for assisting these so-called "fallen women."

By the end of novel, though, Furlong can no longer take moral anguish his inaction causes him. No longer willing to be complicit in the rampant injustice and inhumanity he observes in the convent's treatment of the women and girls who work at the laundry, Furlong returns to the convent and retrieves Sarah, a young woman he met there, then escorts her back to his home. The novel closes with Furlong once more standing at a doorway, as he waits to enter his home with Sarah by his side. But whereas before Furlong has waited for others to open doors for him and allowed doors to be shut behind him, the novel ends with him on the verge of stepping through a doorway of his own accord. Symbolically, then, the final doorway of the novel reflects the triumph of Furlong's moral ideals over the external forces that have previously rendered him inactive and complicit in injustice and inhumanity.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Grove Press edition of *Small Things Like These* published in 2021.

Chapter 2 Quotes

●● As he grew, Mrs Wilson, who had no children of her own, took him under her wing, gave him little jobs and helped him along with his reading. She had a small library and didn't seem to care much for what judgments others passed but carried temperately along with her own life, living off the pension she received on account of her husband having been killed in the War, and what income that came from her small herd of well-minded Herefords, and Cheviot ewes.

Related Characters: Bill Furlong, Mrs. Wilson, Furlong's Mother

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

The above passage comes from a longer section in Chapter 2 that gives readers insight into Bill Furlong's upbringing. Here, the reader learns of the critical role that Mrs. Wilson, Furlong's mother's employer, played in Furlong's life. Furlong was born out of wedlock to a teenage mother whose family disowned her when they learned of the shameful (at least in the eyes of the Catholic Church) situation into which she'd gotten herself. Had Mrs. Wilson turned on Furlong's mother like the teenager's family (and the town of New Ross in general) had, Furlong might have

had a very different life from the one he has today. But Mrs. Wilson chose not to pass judgment on Furlong's mother. Not only did she let Furlong's mother keep her job, but she also "took [Furlong] under her wing," giving him work and helping him with his studies—things she certainly was not obligated to do.

This early passage also highlights the people and ideals that shaped Furlong during his formative years and influenced the morals he upholds as an adult. As this passage implies, most of Furlong's neighbors in New Ross are quick to pass judgment on others, turning a blind eye to suffering if they think it will damage their reputation about town to associate with people society and the Catholic Church, which dictates what sort of behavior is appropriate, deems immoral or indecent. Mrs. Wilson was unique in her refusal to let the Church's rigid and often harsh social mores influence her actions.

But, as this passage also points out, Mrs. Wilson had a lot of privilege relative to most of New Ross's population: she had money from her late husband's pension and from her farm, and this money gave her a certain degree of protection. Because of the security her wealth afforded her, Mrs. Wilson had less to lose if her association with so-called immoral people like Furlong and his mother caused the town to shun her. For others, whose livelihoods could be greatly impacted by social ostracization, going against social mores really isn't a feasible option.

☞ "You know some of these bring the hardship on themselves?"

'Tis not the child's doing, surely.'

'Sinnott was stotious at the phone box on Tuesday.'

'The poor man,' Furlong said, 'whatever ails him.'

Related Characters: Bill Furlong, Eileen (speaker), Mick Sinnott

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

This passage relates a minor argument Furlong gets into with his wife, Eileen, after he tells her he gave some spare change to Mick Sinnott's young son. Eileen is unhappy about her husband's act of charity, and she insinuates that people like Mick Sinnott—an alcoholic—"bring the hardship on themselves." As such, they don't deserve others'

generosity—and people like Furlong are naïve fools for helping them. Eileen's view is harsh, but it's not particularly uncommon in the town of New Ross, where most people struggle to make ends meet (during the 1980s, when the novel takes place, Ireland was in the middle of a great recession). Eileen's harsh condemnation of Furlong's generosity isn't necessarily a condemnation of generosity as a whole, but rather an instinct of self-preservation. Furlong works hard to support the family, of course, but the Furlongs still don't have much money to spare, and so every cent Furlong gives away to others is a cent he cannot put toward his own family.

Furlong's defense of his choice sheds light on his values. Unlike Eileen—and unlike most other characters in the book, as well as the nuns at the local convent—he doesn't believe that mercy, charity, or compassion are things a person has to earn. Whether Mick Sinnott has caused his family to suffer due to his alcoholism is irrelevant, in Furlong's mind. What matters is that Sinnott's child is suffering—and that Furlong, in that moment at least, had the means and opportunity to alleviate some of that suffering by giving the boy some pocket change.

Furlong's open-minded approach to charity, mercy, and compassion puts him at odds with his neighbors and the Catholic Church that effectively runs the town, and it will play a central role in the moral conflict he undergoes after he discovers the abuse and exploitation hiding in plain sight in the local convent. This passage is important, then, in that it lays out not only Furlong's moral ideals, but also how those views put him at odds with others.

☞ Some nights, Furlong lay there with Eileen, going over small things like these. Other times, after a day of heavy lifting or being delayed by a puncture and getting soaked out on the road, he'd come home and eat his fill and fall into bed early, then wake in the night sensing Eileen, heavy in sleep, at his side—and there he'd lie with his mind going round in circles, agitating, before finally he'd have to go down and put the kettle on, for tea.

Related Characters: Bill Furlong, Eileen, Mick Sinnott

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 11-12

Explanation and Analysis

This passage follows an argument that ensues between

Furlong and Eileen after Furlong admits that he gave some spare change to Mick Sinnott's boy earlier that day. Eileen argued that Sinnott, an alcoholic, brings his upon himself, and therefore he—and by extension his family—is undeserving of others' charity. Furlong disagreed, arguing that Sinnott's boy wasn't to blame for his father's struggles. Ultimately, the couple doesn't reach a compromise, and Furlong's focus shifts inward. Here, he considers his habit of waking in the night, his mind full of various worries, "going round in circles, agitating." This passage gives the reader additional insight into Furlong's character, highlighting the existential and moral anxieties that consume him.

Notably, the passage also includes the line that gives the book its title—"small things like these," referring to the argument Furlong and Eileen just had over Furlong's indiscriminate (and in Eileen's mind, foolish) generosity. The narration's use of the word "small" to describe what really amounts to a large, important moral issue—whether compassion and mercy are things a person owes to their fellow humans, or whether a person need only be compassionate to people who have somehow earned it—is significant. In using the diminutive phrase "small things" to describe important, meaningful subjects like morality and humanity, the novel points to the ways that people in general tend to overlook the small ways their actions affect others, or how the fleeting, seemingly inconsequential choices a person makes throughout the day can add up to shape the meaning and significance of their life.

☞ The times were raw but Furlong felt all the more determined to carry on, to keep his head down and stay on the right side of people, and to keep providing for his girls and see them getting on and completing their education at St Margaret's, the only good school for girls in the town.

Related Characters: Bill Furlong, Eileen, Furlong's Mother

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

This passage concludes Chapter 2, which gives readers insight into Furlong's background, family life, and character. This early chapter drives home just how far Furlong has come since his humble beginning as the illegitimate son of an unwed, teenage mother.

Today, Furlong works as a coal and timber merchant and shares five impressive, intelligent daughters with his wife,

Eileen. Although "times [a]re raw"—Ireland is in the midst of an economic recession, and practically everyone scrapes to get by—Furlong's lifetime of struggle has given him the strength to persist in the face of hardship. This passage highlights, in particular, Furlong's determination to provide for his daughters as the main driving force that pushes him to persist even when times are hard. The passage also lays out what a person who wishes to "carry on" in the face of hardship must do in order to succeed: in order to continue to give himself and his family a good life, Furlong must "keep his head down and stay on the right side of people." This notion that a person's success, financial stability, and general welfare is tied to their social acceptance is important. It foreshadows the eventual choice Furlong will be forced to make after he discovers the reality of the abuse that goes on at the local convent and must choose between compromising his morals and keep quiet about the abuse in order to "stay on the right side of people," or do the morally right thing, do what he can to help the convent's victims, and risk his and his family's security.

This passage, and the moral dilemma it foreshadows, come together to form the crux of one of the book's main questions: the role that extending mercy and compassion to others plays to create meaning in one's life, and the various obstacles that impede a person's ability or willingness to do good by others.

Chapter 3 Quotes

☞ Always it was the same, Furlong thought; always they carried mechanically on without pause, to the next job at hand. What would life be like, he wondered, if they were given time to think and reflect over things? Might their lives be different or much the same—or would they just lose the run of themselves?

Related Characters: Bill Furlong, Eileen

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 21

Explanation and Analysis

One night close to Christmas, Furlong is at home with his family, participating in various holiday festivities. They have hardly put the cake in the oven when Eileen announces that it's time for the girls to write their letters to Santa. The above passage describes Furlong's thoughts in response. Here, Furlong reflects on how his family is perpetually in motion: "always they carried mechanically on without pause, to the next job at hand." He goes on to wonder how this

quality impacts his family's worldviews and their overall quality of life, implicitly asking whether they might be different people if they were afforded the luxury of time, which the wealthy have but the poor must do without. Furlong's questions to himself here are important in that they lay the foundation for the book's broader examination of a person's moral obligations to others and the degree to which those obligations inform the meaning of a person's life.

Throughout the novella, various characters will challenge Furlong's impulse to help others indiscriminately. This quote alludes to the logic at the core of their criticisms: that a person has to look out for themselves and their family above all else. How able a person is to help others, then, depends on their life circumstances: how wealthy they are, how much they have to lose, and so on. Furlong's ruminations on how different his family might be, were they wealthy enough to afford the privilege of time to loaf and lounge around, gets at this idea. It highlights how a person's circumstances shape their character, how they think about their own life, and how they relate to others.

☞ 'You're a credit to yourself,' she'd told him. And for a whole day or more, Furlong had gone around feeling a foot taller, believing, in his heart, that he mattered as much as any other child.

Related Characters: Mrs. Wilson (speaker), Bill Furlong, Furlong's Mother

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 29

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes from one of Furlong's many flashbacks to his youth spent growing up under Mrs. Wilson's roof. As the story unfolds and the reader gains additional insight into Furlong's past, it becomes increasingly clear that while the financial security Mrs. Wilson provided Furlong was vitally important to the success he has managed to achieve as an adult, ultimately, the values she instilled in him played a much more critical role in shaping his character. Notably, she encouraged him to study, and she made sure he knew he was just as capable as anyone else—even if the heavily Catholic town of New Ross deemed him inferior due to his illegitimate birth. The above quote describes Mrs. Wilson's reaction when Furlong, having taken Mrs. Wilson's advice to study the dictionary to build his vocabulary, wins first prize for spelling at school. "You're a credit to yourself," she tells

him, emphasizing that while Mrs. Wilson's financial and moral support might have played a critical role in Furlong's upward trajectory, ultimately his achievements are the result of his own hard work and ability. Young Furlong relished Mrs. Wilson's praise and how it made him experience the rare feeling "that he mattered as much as any other child," a truth that the judgmental and cruel townspeople more often made him forget. Mrs. Wilson's support of Furlong instilled in him a belief in himself. But more than this, it taught him the value in going out of one's way to help others, even when one isn't required to, and even when those in need of help are the sort of people one's society deems undeserving of charity or compassion.

Chapter 4 Quotes

☞ 'Just take me as far as the river. That's all you need do.'

She was dead in earnest and the accent was Dublin.

'To the river?'

'Or you could just let me out at the gate.'

'It's not up to me, girl. I can't take you anywhere,' Furlong said, showing her his open, empty hands.

'Take me home with you, then. I'll work til I drop for ya, sir.'

'Haven't I five girls and a wife at home.'

'Well, I've nobody—and all I want to do is drown meself. Can you not even do that fukken much for us?'

Related Characters: Bill Furlong, The Dublin Girl (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 43-44

Explanation and Analysis

Furlong has just stumbled upon a group of women and girls polishing the floor of the chapel at the local convent. He realizes, by their disheveled and sickly appearance, that these must be residents of the Magdalene laundry the convent operates—and that all the rumors he's heard about the abuse and exploitation that goes on there may well be true. When he recovers from his shock enough to make his presence known, one of the girls responds, begging Furlong to "take me as far as the river." Despite her pleas for Furlong's help, Furlong insists that there's nothing he can do: with a wife and a houseful of daughters at home, he has no need for hired help. And besides, he has no authority over the girls and women committed to the Magdalene laundry, who are instead under the nuns' control.

The girl reacts combatively to Furlong's excuses and inaction, calling him out on how little he is willing to help the women and girls, despite it being abundantly clear to Furlong how miserable and desperate to escape the girls are. The Dublin girl, in fact, suggests here that she would prefer death to the conditions she has experienced at the laundry. If Furlong won't help her by giving her work, she suggests, he can at least take her to the river in which she wishes to drown herself. Still, despite the horrific condition in which Furlong finds the girls, and despite indisputable evidence of the abuse they suffer at the laundry, Furlong does nothing to help them. This passage is important because it highlights how far Furlong must come before he can really live out the morals he believes in. Furlong is appalled by how the girls appear to be treated at the laundry, and he is also disturbed by how little anyone in town seems to care about the injustice that is going on right beneath their noses. But until he can act on those feelings and do something to right the injustices he recognizes, he is no less complicit in the girls' and women's suffering than anyone else in New Ross.

☞ Furlong pulled up and bade the man good evening.
'Would you mind telling me where this road will take me?'
'This road?' The man put down the hook, leant on the handle, and stared in at him. 'This road will take you wherever you want to go, son.'

Related Characters: Bill Furlong (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 46

Explanation and Analysis

Furlong is driving away from the convent. He's frazzled, having just made the horrific discovery of abuse that goes on there, and gets turned around on the road. Spying a man up ahead, he pulls over to ask for directions. The man offers the cryptic remark in response.

The man's observation that the road will lead "wherever you want to go" is richly symbolic. Coming immediately after Furlong's horrific discovery of the convent's treatment of the women and girls committed to its laundry—a sort of asylum the convent runs to purportedly "reform" immoral women—the man's comment seemingly lays out the options available to Furlong going forward. Furlong, the man's remark suggests, has the ability to take things whichever

direction he would like. He can choose the safe, immoral route and forget what he saw at the asylum. This will ensure his and his family's continued social acceptance in New Ross, where a person's success depends on the Church's approval of them. Or he can choose the moral route and do something about the abuse he witnessed at the chapel—but risk endangering himself and his family in the process. As the man's cryptic remark here suggests, Furlong is physically capable of either option—it's just a matter of which figurative "road" he chooses to take, and the degree of suffering and misery he is willing to subject himself and his family to in order help others.

☞ 'What is it you know?' Furlong asked.

'There's nothing, only what I'm telling you,' she answered. 'And in any case, what do such things have to do with us? Aren't our girls well, and minded?'

'Our girls?' Furlong said. 'What has any of this to do with ours?'

'Not one thing,' she said. 'What have we to answer for?'

Related Characters: Bill Furlong, Eileen (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 47

Explanation and Analysis

This passage comes from a longer conversation between Furlong and Eileen that occurs after Furlong confides in her about his horrific discovery of the local convent's Magdalene laundry while making a delivery earlier that day. Furlong expected his wife to be just as shocked and outraged as he has been, so he's disturbed and caught off guard when Eileen admits not only that she's known about the laundry—but also that she's not all that bothered by it. She seems to acknowledge, albeit vaguely and noncommittally, that the abuse the laundry's residents experience isn't exactly good. But she then goes on to suggest that the girls and women who work there are to blame for the "trouble" that got them committed there in the first place—that is, the sexual behavior the Catholic Church, which runs Magdalene laundries like the one in New Ross, deems immoral.

Furlong is particularly troubled by Eileen's insistence that she and Furlong have no moral obligation to help the girls and women committed to the laundry. "And in any case," she asks of her husband, "what do such things have to do with us?" Eileen is effectively suggesting here that because the

Furlongs played no role in the laundry girls' moral demise, and because the mistreatment they experience at the laundry doesn't directly affect her family, the Furlongs aren't obligated to help the girls.

Eileen's harsh indifference to the girls' suffering reflects the broader mindset of other residents of New Ross, who all turn a blind eye to the horrors that go on at the laundry—while dutifully attending Mass on weekends. As the story unfolds, Furlong's tolerance for this hypocrisy—how can one call oneself a Christian when one's compassion for others is so limited and discriminatory?—will wane until he decides he has no choice but to “answer for” the suffering of the girls and women of the laundry, no matter the cost to his own wellbeing, and no matter his lack of wrongs to “answer for.”

convent, and any villager who creates trouble for the convent or challenges the Church is effectively shunned and prohibited from making a decent life for themselves in town. Eileen's cynical advice to Furlong, therefore, is to try not to think about all the evils of the world: “If you want to get on in life, there's things you have to ignore, so you can keep on.”

Eileen's advice is prudent, of course—lamenting all the evils and atrocities of the world, even the ones one can't possibly change, will only make a person overcome with sadness and disappointment at the unjust and cruel world in which they live. At the same time, though, the issue is that speaking up about the mistreatment of the laundry girls actually is something Furlong *can* do—he just has to be willing to accept the consequences that come with that choice.

☞ ‘Where does thinking get us?’ she said. ‘All thinking does is bring you down.’ She was touching the little pearly buttons on her nightdress, agitated. ‘If you want to get on in life, there’s things you have to ignore, so you can keep on.’

Related Characters: Eileen (speaker), Bill Furlong

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 48

Explanation and Analysis

This quote from Eileen comes from a longer conversation between Furlong and herself, which takes place after Furlong has told her about his horrific discovery of the Magdalene laundry the local convent is operating. Eileen responds not with the shock Furlong expects, but rather with agitation at Furlong for his moral outrage. She orders Furlong that he is not to do anything to help the girls or challenge their abusers.

This passage shows that Eileen isn't entirely unsympathetic to Furlong's moral outrage. It's just that she's aware of the practical reality of her situation—and how her family's relative poverty and powerlessness limits their ability to effect change and fight justice as they might want to in an ideal world. “Thinking”—that is, anguishing over the injustices one encounters in daily life—doesn't do anything to combat those injustices. It only makes a person miserable when they realize their limited capacity to act in ways that align with their morals. Furlong's family, for instance, has their hands tied when it comes to helping the laundry girls: their town of New Ross is effectively ruled by the local

☞ ‘Weren't Mrs Wilson's cares far from any of ours?’ Eileen said. ‘Sitting out in that big house with her pension and a farm of land and your mother and Ned working under her. Was she not one of the few women on this earth who could do as she pleased?’

Related Characters: Eileen (speaker), Bill Furlong, Mrs. Wilson, Ned, Furlong's Mother

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 49

Explanation and Analysis

This quote from Eileen concludes Chapter 4, ending the argument between Eileen and Furlong over Furlong's discovery of the horrific conditions of the local convent's Magdalene laundry. Eileen is adamant that they do not get involved since the laundry doesn't have anything to do with them. When Furlong, shocked at Eileen's lack of compassion for the women and girls committed to the laundry, cites Mrs. Wilson as an example of someone who did good for other people, even though she didn't have to, Eileen responds with the above quote. She essentially argues that Mrs. Wilson's financial security allowed her the privilege to care about things that other people—like the Furlongs and most other residents of New Ross, for instance—would be compelled to disregard in order to look after themselves.

Mrs. Wilson could count on the income she received from her late husband's pension and from her farm. Her financial security, Eileen argues here, was a privilege not many people had then or have now in Ross: it gave her the freedom to act however she pleased, regardless of the

social ostracization or disapproval her actions might cause. Unlike Furlong, who must foster warm relationships with the townsfolk so they continue to buy coal from him, Mrs. Wilson had no imperative to change her behavior to please others, as she doesn't rely on her neighbors for her income.

In addition, Furlong's illegitimate birth renders him a perpetual outsider in the heavily Catholic town, and he's always on thin ice with the nuns who run the local convent. As such, there would be major consequences if he were to take the controversial step to help any of the girls committed to the laundry, and his higher likelihood to suffer consequences gives him different "cares" from Mrs. Wilson's.

coal shed, and then having to choose how to respond to those injustices, isn't something that the ordinary, average person is equipped to do in their daily life: it's harrowing and exhausting work to be confronted with the world's horrors and then to have to weigh one's own moral obligation to become involved against the risk that comes with getting involved, which is what Furlong's discovery of Sarah forces him to do.

☞ 'And we see another of yours in the choir now. She doesn't look out of place.'

'They carry themselves well.'

'Won't they all soon find themselves next door, in time to come, God willing.'

'God willing, Mother.'

'It's just that there's so many nowadays. It's no easy task to find a place for everyone.'

Chapter 5 Quotes

☞ When he managed to get her out, and saw what was before him—a girl just about fit to stand, with her hair roughly cut—the ordinary part of him wished he'd never come near the place.

Related Characters: Bill Furlong, Eileen, Sarah Redmond

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 62

Explanation and Analysis

Sometime after he first discovers the truth about the Magdalene laundry the local convent operates, Furlong returns to the convent to make another delivery. On this occasion, he goes to the coal shed to drop off the convent's order—and discovers a girl (later revealed to be Sarah Redmond) locked inside. She's filthy and in a horrible state. In the above passage, Furlong has finally managed to get the girl out of the shed. As he recovers from the initial shock of his discovery, he takes in the girl's physical state and realizes the full extent of the abuse she has suffered. Furlong's initial reaction to this is to wish he had never discovered the girl at all and instead remained ignorant to her suffering: "the ordinary part of him wished he'd never come to this place." In describing the part of Furlong that wishes to remain ignorant to Sarah's suffering (and by extension, to the horrors of the Magdalene laundry as a whole), the narration echoes the observation Eileen made earlier about it being necessary to ignore certain unpleasant truths about the world in order to get by in daily, or "ordinary" life.

By extension, this passage suggests that acknowledging horrific injustices like the one Furlong encounters in the

Related Characters: Bill Furlong, The Mother Superior (speaker), Sarah Redmond

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 69

Explanation and Analysis

This dialogue between the Mother and Superior and Furlong comes from a longer conversation they have after Furlong's discovery of Sarah Redmond in the coal shed, which takes place after the Mother Superior effectively forces him to sit down with her for tea. The purpose of this is not a social visit. Instead, the Mother Superior indirectly warns Furlong to keep quiet about what he has just seen at the convent and not to do anything to help Sarah, implicitly threatening to take Furlong's daughters out of school if Furlong does anything to make trouble for the convent.

Here, the Mother Superior indirectly reminds Furlong of his tenuous social acceptance in New Ross: "She doesn't look out of place," the Mother Superior remarks about one of Furlong's daughters, implying that in fact, Furlong's daughter *should* look out of place due to her association with Furlong, a perpetual outsider, and that it is therefore surprising to see her (and her sisters) getting on so well in school and being so accepted by her peers.

The Mother Superior's next statement *seems* to express her hope that Furlong's younger daughters will follow in the older daughters' footsteps and attend St. Margaret's. But

the phrase “God willing” reveals the true meaning of her words. Taken at face value, “God willing” implies that the future of Furlong’s daughters has yet to be determined and that only God can know or control how things pan out for them. In fact, the Mother Superior, as head of the convent that operates the local girls’ school, holds total control over the girls’ fates. When she says, “God willing,” then, she is really saying “myself willing.” Her follow-up claim that it’s “no easy task” to ensure that every New Ross girl has a spot at St. Margaret’s confirms that she is making a veiled threat to Furlong, effectively reminding him that she can easily sabotage Furlong’s daughters’ futures by not granting them a spot at school and that Furlong should keep this in mind in his decision whether to make trouble with the convent over what he discovered there today.

Deciding to say no more, Furlong went on out and pulled the door closed, then stood on the front step until he heard someone inside, turning the key.

Related Characters: Bill Furlong, The Mother Superior, Sarah Redmond

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 76

Explanation and Analysis

This line concludes Chapter 5 and describes Furlong’s exit from the convent, which happens after the Mother Superior implicitly laid out exactly how she and the convent will retaliate against Furlong if he does anything to interfere in the Magdalene laundry the convent is operating. Essentially, the Mother Superior threatened to deny Furlong’s daughters entrance to St. Margaret’s school (the only decent secondary school for girls in town) if Furlong makes trouble for the convent. Furlong, whose only real care in life is to provide for his daughters and give them a chance at a better future, walks away defeated. He does not ask the nuns about Sarah Redmond’s baby—the one thing Sarah asked him to do. And he does not press the nuns for more answers about why Sarah was locked in the coal shed, nor does he make any genuine attempts to help her. Instead, Furlong accepts the envelope of cash the Mother Superior gave him—which is supposed to be a Christmas present, but in this context, it clearly functions as a bribe—and exits the convent, allowing its front door to be locked behind him.

Throughout the book, doors and doorways symbolize Furlong’s capacity, willingness, and ultimate choice to uphold his moral obligation to help others. Here, then, the locking door makes it clear to the reader and to Furlong himself that Furlong has recognized the morally right thing to do in this situation—to challenge the nuns, disobey their wishes, and give Sarah the help she so clearly needs—and yet has chosen to act out of self-interest and ignore the injustices he has just witnessed.

Chapter 6 Quotes

“Have ye change for the collection box?” Eileen asked the girls, smiling, as they were entering the chapel grounds. ‘Or has your daddy given it all away?’

Related Characters: Eileen (speaker), Bill Furlong, Mick Sinnott

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 79

Explanation and Analysis

Eileen speaks the above quote just before she, Furlong, and their daughters enter the chapel to attend Mass. Her remark is both an insult and an accusation. When Eileen suggests that Furlong may have “given [his money] all away,” she alludes to her and Furlong’s earlier argument about Furlong’s generosity, which Eileen considers foolish and excessive. In that argument, Eileen criticized Furlong’s choice to give his spare change to Mick Sinnott’s son, suggesting that Mick Sinnott has brought on his family’s suffering due to his alcoholism. Therefore, no one in New Ross is obligated to help them—especially if doing so takes away from a person’s ability to help their own family. Eileen is suggesting here that Furlong’s earlier impulse to give charity to Sinnott’s son reflects Furlong’s broader problematic tendency to give to others at the expense of his own family. By extension, she suggests that Furlong’s generosity isn’t morally upstanding at all, but rather makes him a bad father who prioritizes undeserving others.

Eileen’s insult reinforces the main conflict Furlong has struggled with throughout the story: whether a person should prioritize their own needs and the needs of their own people ahead of their obligation to help others, and whether the unintended consequences of helping others should factor into a person’s choice to do so. Eileen here suggests that when a person chooses to help others, they are by default acting against their (and their family’s) self-

interest. Because Furlong has “given [...] away” his money to others, the Furlongs now have no money to give to the Church, which reflects badly on the family. The implication of Eileen’s insult builds on the moral arguments that inform many of the book’s themes, while the petty and exaggerated quality of her argument highlights how her and Furlong’s different ideas about a person’s moral obligation to others continues to drive a wedge between them.

☛ What most tormented him was not so much how she’d been left in the coal shed or the stance of the Mother Superior; the worst was how the girl had been handled while he was present and how he’d allowed that and had not asked about her baby—the one thing she had asked him to do—and how he had taken the money and left her there at the table with nothing before her and the breast milk leaking under the little cardigan and staining her blouse, and how he’d gone on, like a hypocrite, to Mass.

Related Characters: Bill Furlong, The Mother Superior, Sarah Redmond

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 92

Explanation and Analysis

This passage reflects Furlong’s thoughts in the aftermath of his discovery of Sarah Redmond in the convent’s coal shed. Despite having seen clear evidence of the abuse she and the other girls committed to the laundry suffer there, and despite Sarah’s desperate plea for Furlong to ask about the baby that was taken from her, Furlong left the convent that day without doing much to challenge the nuns about the operation they run or to help Sarah. Afraid of how the nuns might retaliate against his family, should he interfere—that day, the Mother Superior effectively threatened to deny Furlong’s daughters entrance to the local girls’ school the convent runs—Furlong chose to turn a blind eye to the suffering he witnessed that day. This passage illustrates the moral anguish Furlong suffers as a result of his inaction. He clearly witnessed the nuns intimidate and demean Sarah into silence, recognized their behavior as wrong, and yet he did nothing. Although Furlong has not actively participated in Sarah’s suffering, he realizes in this passage that his inaction makes him just as complicit—and hypocritical—as everyone else in New Ross who turns a blind eye to the horrific conditions of the convent’s Magdalene laundry. This realization contributes to Furlong’s ultimate choice to return to the convent to rescue Sarah, regardless of the

consequences.

Chapter 7 Quotes

☛ People could be good, Furlong reminded himself, as he drove back to town; it was a matter of learning how to manage and balance the give-and-take in a way that let you get on with others as well as your own. But as soon as the thought came to him, he knew the thought itself was privileged and wondered why he hadn’t given the sweets and other things he’d been gifted at some of the houses to the less well-off he had met in others. Always, Christmas brought out the best and worst in people.

Related Characters: Bill Furlong, Sarah Redmond

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 95-96

Explanation and Analysis

This passage describes Furlong’s thoughts as he drives around town making deliveries in the days leading up to Christmas. Recalling the generosity of some of his clients who gave him Christmas gifts, he considers the inherent goodness of people. Furlong’s thoughts—and the disillusionment he then expresses about them—are particularly significant coming after his discovery of Sarah Redmond in the convent coal shed and his subsequent failure to help her. Furlong realizes that his belief in people’s fundamental goodness is directly tied to the generosity they showed him.

With some implied shame, he realizes how “privileged” and ignorant this assessment is. He has ignored, for instance, his own failure to pay forward the generosity of his wealthier clients. Furlong could have shared some of the “sweets and other things he’d been gifted” from his wealthier customers with customers of his who are too poor to offer Furlong any gifts themselves, and yet he failed to do so—for no real reason other than he had no incentive to do so, those clients’ welfare having neither a positive nor a negative impact on Furlong’s welfare.

When Furlong concludes this passage with the dismal observation, “Christmas brought out the best and worst in people,” he means that Christmas—a holiday associated with generosity and good will—encourages people to be compassionate and giving to others in ways that exceeds the generosity they demonstrate in ordinary life, when giving isn’t expected or encouraged. Furlong effectively

recognizes here the small ways in which he, like everyone else, fails to fulfill his obligation to help others when it's not expected of him and when there's no reward for doing so. Ultimately, Furlong's recognition of his own moral shortcomings and blind spots are important in that it lays the foundation for his eventual choice to help Sarah—to bring out his best, so to speak, even when it's not expected of him.

☞ ‘Take no offence, Bill,’ she said, touching his sleeve. ‘Tis no business of mine, as I’ve said, but surely you must know these nuns have a finger in every pie.’

He stood back and faced her. ‘Surely they’ve only as much power as we give them, Mrs Kehoe?’

‘I wouldn’t be so sure.’ She paused then and looked at him the way hugely practical women sometimes looked at men, as though they weren’t men at all but foolish boys. More than once, maybe more than several times, Eileen had done the same.

‘Don’t mind me,’ she said, ‘but you’ve worked hard, the same as myself, to get to where you are now. You’ve reared a fine family of girls—and you know there’s nothing only a wall separating that place from St Margaret’s.’

Related Characters: Bill Furlong, Mrs. Kehoe (speaker), The Mother Superior

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 98-99

Explanation and Analysis

This passage comes from a longer conversation between Furlong and Mrs. Kehoe as Furlong is paying Mrs. Kehoe for meals at her restaurant. Mrs. Kehoe has just informed Furlong that she heard about his recent “run-in” with the Mother Superior, and she cautions him not to make trouble with the convent, reminding him that the nuns there effectively run the town and could make things very bad for Furlong and his family if Furlong does anything to upset them. Furlong thanks Mrs. Kehoe for her concern but challenges her, nonetheless. His suggestion that the nuns have “only as much power as we give them” challenges Mrs. Kehoe to recognize how her and the other townspeople’s submission to the nuns in fact fuels the convent’s control of the town. He’s suggesting that if more people decided to defend themselves against the Catholic Church’s abuse of power, then it would lose its power.

Mrs. Kehoe’s response emphasizes the foolish idealism of Furlong’s argument, however. While in theory Furlong is correct—the people of New Ross do empower the convent by submitting to it—he ignores the reality of life in New Ross. For many residents, poverty and limited opportunities for employment or improvement are incapacitating forces. It’s just not worth it, Mrs. Kehoe is suggesting, to throw away all a person has worked to achieve for the sake of moral righteousness. As Mrs. Kehoe reminds Furlong here, his daughters’ educations and eventual livelihoods are at stake—does he really want to put all that in jeopardy to attempt the likely futile task of dismantling the convent’s hold on power? Mrs. Kehoe’s cynical advice to Furlong builds on the novel’s nuanced examination of the various forces that propel and discourage people from upholding their moral obligation. Selflessness might be a virtue, but the novel suggests that it’s also a privilege.

☞ As they carried on along and met more people Furlong did and did not know, he found himself asking was there any point in being alive without helping one another? Was it possible to carry on along through all the years, the decades, through an entire life, without once being brave enough to go against what was there and call yourself a Christian, and face yourself in the mirror?

Related Characters: Bill Furlong, Sarah Redmond

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 113

Explanation and Analysis

This passage describes Furlong’s experience after he rescues Sarah Redmond from the convent and escorts her back to his home. As Furlong passes through the Town Square, he considers the moral and existential significance of his actions.

The questions Furlong poses to himself help to clarify his ultimate conclusion about what makes a life meaningful. Throughout the book, Furlong has struggled to balance his impulse toward self-preservation with his moral obligation to help others. Although he is appalled by the horrific scenes that he witnesses at the local convent’s Magdalene laundry and condemns townspeople who know about the laundry yet do nothing to help the girls there, Furlong spends much of the novel not acting all that differently from the very people he criticizes. He recognizes the immorality and hypocrisy of the convent’s operation, yes, but he does not

act on his moral outrage. In this way, he is just as complicit as the people he criticizes—and, by virtue of his inaction, as complicit of the nuns who actively exploit and abuse the laundry's women and girls.

The rhetorical questions Furlong poses to himself in this scene confirm Furlong's belief in the essential importance of helping others. And the fact that he poses these questions to himself while actively engaged in helping another, escorting Sarah back to his home, shows that he is finally prepared to practice what he preaches—notably unlike the local convent, which repeatedly fails to demonstrate the compassion and mercy its religion purportedly values.

●● The worst was yet to come, he knew. Already he could feel a world of trouble waiting for him behind the next door, but the worst that could have happened was also already behind him; the thing not done, which could have been—which he could have to live with for the rest of his life. Whatever suffering he was now to meet was a long way from what the girl at his side had already endured, and might yet surpass. Climbing the street towards his own front door with the barefooted girl and the box of shoes, his fear more than outweighed every other feeling but in his foolish heart he not only hoped but legitimately believed that they would manage.

Related Characters: Bill Furlong, Eileen, Sarah Redmond

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 114

Explanation and Analysis

This passage concludes the book. Furlong has just rescued Sarah Redmond from the convent, leading her through town

to his home. As he stands at the door of his home with Sarah by his side, he considers the potential consequences of his decision to help Sarah. Furlong has no illusions about the consequences he will suffer as a result of his actions. When he observes, “The worst was yet to come,” he acknowledges not only the relation he will face from the convent but also from Eileen, who has repeatedly criticized Furlong's impulse to help others at his own family's expense. Yet the subsequent observations he makes in this passage underscore that none of that matters in the end. Whatever consequences Furlong will experience in the future pale in comparison to the suffering Sarah experienced at the convent.

Significantly, the narration notes the box of shoes in Furlong's hand, which it juxtaposes with Sarah's bare feet. In the novel, shoes and bare feet symbolize a person's capacity and moral obligation to give back to others. Here, Furlong's shoes—a gift for Eileen—represent his privilege, while Sarah's bare feet represent her lack thereof. The mere fact that Furlong has shoes, so to speak, while Sarah does not, is enough cause for him to help her.

Also notable is the passage's door symbolism. Throughout the book, doors and doorways represent the battle between Furlong's desire to act on his morals and the forces that prevent him from doing so. Previously, he allowed his fear of social ostracization to prevent him from doing what he knows is morally right—he has waited in doorways, so to speak, rather than walking through them. Now, he prepares to walk through the doorway of his home, signaling his new willingness to practice the morals he believes in. What will happen to Furlong after he passes through the doorway is uncertain—and indeed, this passage implies that nothing good awaits Furlong on the other side of the threshold. But in the end, the novel suggests that not walking through the door out of fear is by far the worse option, and one whose moral ramifications Furlong would have to deal with for the rest of his life.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

Autumn descends upon the town of New Ross, bringing unrelenting rain. The townspeople put up with the weather, adapting as the days grow gradually colder. Bill Furlong, the town's coal and timber merchant, remarks that he'll need new tires soon—he's constantly on the road, with new customers calling each day for urgent deliveries. During the busy season, Furlong takes care of deliveries himself while the yardmen prepare the next orders. At noon, they wash up and head over to Kehoe's for hot dinners, where Mrs. Kehoe gladly doles out the meat and vegetables to the grateful, hungry men.

The acceptance and ease with which the townspeople of New Ross respond to the changing season establish the town as a place where people navigate the challenges of life pragmatically and without a fuss. This ready acceptance of things as they are lends itself well to things one can't well control, like the weather, but it will play a major role in the book's central moral dilemma later on.



CHAPTER 2

Furlong grew up poor, born to a teenage mother who got pregnant while working as a domestic servant for Mrs. Wilson, the Protestant widow who lived in a huge house on the outskirts of town. Word of the pregnancy spread, and Furlong's mother's family cut ties with her. Mrs. Wilson, though, let Furlong's mother keep her job. She took her to the hospital, too, when it came time for her to give birth. Furlong grew up at Mrs. Wilson's house. Mrs. Wilson, who had no children of her own, helped him with his studies and gave him work to do. She supported herself with her husband's pension—he'd been killed in the War—and with income from her small herd of livestock. Ned, the farmhand, also lived at the house.

The social atmosphere of New Ross, Ireland, comes into focus in this early chapter with the detail of Furlong's mother's family disowning her as a result of her pregnancy and the illegitimate child that resulted from it. Ireland's culture in the decades after World War II was highly conservative with regard to sex and sexuality, in large part due to the heavy influence of the Catholic Church and the (Protestant) Church of Ireland. In addition to situating the fictional small town of New Ross within the broader culture atmosphere of Ireland in the 1980s, when Keegan's novella is set, this passage also signals Furlong's status as a perpetual outsider, however the town might make a show of accepting him on the surface.



Overall, everyone got along. And religion wasn't a source of tension, either: on Sundays, Ned would drive Mrs. Wilson to the Protestant Church, and then he'd take Furlong and Furlong's mother to chapel. Everyone would return home afterward and leave their respective bibles in the entryway until next Sunday. The schoolchildren would bully Furlong, though his living at Mrs. Wilson's house mitigated some of the abuse. Eventually he transferred to a technical school. His mother died when he was 12, suddenly, of a brain bleed. He never found out who his father was. Years after his mother's death, when he went to the registry office to get his birth certificate, the clerk gave him "an ugly smile" as he handed Furlong the birth certificate with "Unknown" written on it.

The detail of religion not being a big deal between the Catholic Furlongs and the Protestant Mrs. Wilson implies that this is not the norm—that to most people in New Ross, a person's religious affiliation matters a great deal in determining where and among whom they are accepted. This recollection from Furlong thus further establishes how central religion is to life in New Ross. The registry office clerk's "ugly smile" at Furlong reinforces this point, with the narration implying that the clerk is judging Furlong for his illegitimate birth and uncertain parentage, regarding it as something shameful.



Today, Furlong doesn't much dwell on the past. He lives in town with his wife, Eileen, and their five daughters, all of whom are doing well at school. His eldest two are now attending secondary school at St. Margaret's. Furlong sometimes watches his daughters "going through the small things" that constitute daily life and takes silent pride in them.

Furlong is proud of his daughters' success at school because it indicates their ability to overcome the supposed shame of Furlong's past. That is, they might come from a father of questionable roots (at least according to the judgmental perspective of the Church), but they themselves are accepted members of their society, at least enough to gain a place and succeed at the local (Catholic) girls' school.



One night, Furlong remarks to Eileen how lucky they are: they don't have much, but they're so much better off than others. Furlong recounts coming across Mick Sinnott's eldest child gathering sticks on the side of the road earlier that day. It had been raining out, and Furlong gave the child what spare change he had in his pocket. Eileen disapproves, suggesting that some people bring misfortune on themselves—Sinnott has a drinking problem. Furlong protests that surely Sinnott's child is blameless, but Eileen bristles.

Furlong and Eileen's disagreement over Furlong's choice to help Mick Sinnott's son reveals a critical difference in their characters. Furlong, perhaps due to his own so-called "shameful" past and his resultant status as a perpetual outsider, feels compelled to help the boy no matter how or why he's ended up in a place of struggle. Eileen, meanwhile, does not share Furlong's pull to help others—she takes a more unforgiving stance toward charity and believes a person has no moral imperative to help people in need.



Furlong sometimes thinks about his daughters "getting big and growing up, going out into that world of men." Still, he knows how good his family has it—and how easily they could lose it all. Times are rough in Ireland. Furlong has seen how the dole (welfare) queue lines grow ever longer. People constantly leave for England or America. One day he saw a young boy licking milk out of a bowl left outside the priest's house for a cat. Still, the hardship just pushes Furlong to keep working hard to give his family a good life, and to ensure that the girls complete their schooling at St. Margaret's, the town's only decent school for girls.

Furlong's musings reflect the broader socioeconomic issues of Ireland in the 1980s, when the book takes place—between 1980 and 1987, Ireland experienced a prolonged recession, with high rates of unemployment and lower standards of living. The dire state of Ireland in general heightens anxieties Furlong may already have had about his daughters' futures due to his own history of social ostracization. Prospects aren't great for Irish youth in general, but things are considerably worse for Furlongs' daughters, whose association with Furlong—the illegitimate son born to an unwed mother—and whose gender create additional obstacles for them.



CHAPTER 3

Christmas draws nearer. A nativity scene has been set up on the town square. Traditionally, the people of New Ross gather outside the Town Hall on the first Sunday of December to see the Christmas lights go on. Furlong and his family join in on the festivities. His daughters join the carol singers, and Furlong is pleased to see them accepted alongside the other children. A man dressed as Santa walks down the street, and Furlong's young daughter Loretta cries out in fear. Furlong consoles her, but inwardly he worries that she might not be brave enough to face the harsh world.

Again, Furlong's pride at seeing his daughters sing among the carolers reinforces how much he cares about the town's acceptance of his family. Even if no one has shown him any blatant animosity, one gets the sense that Furlong is perpetually on thin ice around town and that one misstep on his or a family member's part could send everything he's worked so hard to achieve crumbling to the floor. His fear for Loretta reinforces the uneven footing.



At home that evening, Eileen and the girls get to work baking the Christmas cake. Later, the girls write their letters to Santa. Inwardly, Furlong considers how hurried their lives are. Always, they are thinking about the next task that needs to be done. His thoughts drift back to one Christmas of his childhood. He had asked Santa to bring him either his father or a jigsaw puzzle of a farm. When he entered the drawing room, he found three wrapped parcels for him, from Mrs. Wilson and Ned. The parcels contained a nailbrush and a bar of soap, a hot water bottle, and a book—Dickens’s [A Christmas Carol](#). After opening them, Furlong ran outside to hide his disappointment and his tears.

Now, Furlong wonders where his father is. He often looks at the faces of grown men, trying to find some resemblance to himself. One night not long after he married Eileen, he paid Mrs. Wilson a visit, intending to ask her if she knew who his father was. But he worried she’d find the question insulting after all she’d done for him, and he couldn’t summon the courage to ask. Not long afterward, Mrs. Wilson had a stroke and was admitted to the hospital. Furlong went to visit her, and although she could recognize him, she was no longer able to speak.

In the present, Furlong’s daughter Sheila interrupts his thoughts when she rather “eerily” asks Furlong if Santa ever visited him when he was young. Furlong says yes, and that he brought him a jigsaw puzzle of a farm. Although the next day is a school day, the girls are allowed to stay up late. The girls finish their letters to Santa and put them in the mail. Then the family sits around the fire and toasts slabs of bread, which they slather with Marmite and lemon curd. Furlong feels happy but also anxious, a part of him wondering if there might never be a night as good as this one again.

At 11:00, Eileen sends the girls to bed. Furlong boils water for tea and thinks about the hot water bottle Ned gave him for Christmas all those years ago, and of [A Christmas Carol](#), which was from Mrs. Wilson. Though he’d been disappointed by the gift, he also found it comforting. He went along with Mrs. Wilson’s advice that he work through the book despite its difficulty, turning to a dictionary to look up words he didn’t know. She thought it was important to have a strong vocabulary. When he won first prize for spelling the next year, she proudly declared, “You’re a credit to yourself.”

*It seems that Furlong feels alienated even from his own family. Although it’s clear that he loves his wife and daughters and that they reciprocate that love, he still struggles to connect with them in daily life, becoming lost in his thoughts as they busy themselves with baking and other chores. This scene also hints at the rigid gender roles that govern life in New Ross—women and girls, it seems, are responsible for conventionally feminine domestic tasks, like baking. Furlong’s childhood memory serves to reinforce the scarcity, loneliness, and disappointment that defined his early years. The gift of Dickens’s [A Christmas Carol](#) is symbolically significant, as it explores themes of mercy, generosity, and compassion for one’s fellow humans—all of which are also at play in *Small Things* like These.*



Furlong’s recurring flashbacks to his childhood make clear that the mystery of his parentage and the fraught character of his youth in general still both affect him in deeply significant ways, even as a grown man. With Furlong’s mother deceased and Mrs. Wilson physically impaired following her stroke, it seems that Furlong may never discover the truth about his father. As a result of his failure to find any closure related to this, the shame he inherited by virtue of his birth lingers.



The reader knows that Furlong lies to Sheila here—he did not receive the coveted jigsaw puzzle from Santa, or from anyone. Back then, not receiving the puzzle for Christmas represented more than just a disappointment—it symbolized to Furlong his status as an outsider and a charity case for whom happy surprises were the exception, not the rule. His lie to Sheila, then, seems to reflect his lingering shame and sorrow over his past, and his fierce desire for his daughters to receive better care than he did.



Furlong’s gratitude for the gifts from Mrs. Wilson and Ned show how much he valued their compassion and care—and perhaps, too, how rare it was and still is for people to go out of their way to lend a hand to people in need. It seems, based on Eileen’s disapproval of Furlong’s helping Mick Sinnott’s young son, that people in New Ross tend to keep to themselves and look after their own. Mrs. Wilson was different in this regard, helping Furlong though she wasn’t obligated to and going above and beyond to let him know that he had the power to do good in life—that he wasn’t bound by society’s unjust ostracization of his mother. Mrs. Wilson’s compassion and benevolence seem to have worn off on Furlong.



After the girls have gone to sleep, Furlong and Eileen carefully open the letters to Santa. Eileen reads the letters and comments admirably on the “bit of manners” the girls have shown, “not asking for the sun and the stars.” Furlong says it’s mostly Eileen who’s responsible for how well the girls have turned out. Eileen replies that Furlong has done well to support the family. The couple decides on what to buy the girls based on what they’ve asked for in the letters. Then they each ask what the other might want for a gift. Furlong comments on the leather **shoes** he noticed Eileen eyeing in a shop window earlier that day. She praises him for noticing. Furlong himself suggests he might want a book—[David Copperfield](#), perhaps, which he has never read. Or maybe a big dictionary to keep in the house, for the girls.

After a pause, Eileen asks Furlong if anything is the matter—he’s seemed so distant tonight. Furlong envies Eileen’s calm—doesn’t she ever worry? Eileen, confused, asks if Furlong is talking about money—she thought they were in good shape this year, even if things are tough. Furlong tells Eileen he’s not sure what he’s worried about and to forget about it—maybe he’s just a bit off tonight. Inwardly, though, he asks, “What was it all for? [...] The work and the constant worry.” His thoughts drift back to a job he’d taken at a mushroom factory one summer when he was home from technical school. After a long, hard day of work, he looked down the line and saw new mushrooms already sprouting from the compost, and his mood fell as he thought about having to do all that work over again tomorrow.

For a moment, Furlong feels “a strong, foolish need” to talk about the memory with Eileen, but he thinks better of it. Instead, he listens as she tells him of the gossip she gleaned at the Square that day: about the middle-aged undertaker engaged to the young waitress half his age and about the barber’s son, who has been diagnosed with a rare cancer and only has a year left to live. Inwardly, Furlong wonders whether Eileen is happy with him and if she ever thinks she might be better off if she’d married someone else. He hears a lump of anthracite collapse in the cooker and adds more. Eileen takes the Christmas cake out of the oven and happily announces that the fruit hasn’t fallen to the bottom of the tin.

Furlong’s acknowledgment of all the hard work Eileen has put into raising their daughters signals his respect for her, and perhaps for women in general. He does not take for granted the work Eileen does because it happens to be unpaid, domestic labor or because he feels entitled, as her husband, to reap the benefits of that unpaid labor—he acknowledges its worth and is grateful for it. This scene is also important in that it introduces one of the book’s central symbols: shoes (and feet). That Eileen eyed the shoes in the store window (and that Furlong noticed and hints at buying them for her as a Christmas present) helps to establish shoes as a symbol of material wealth or good fortune.



This scene reinforces the differences between Furlong and Eileen. Eileen’s concerns are mostly pragmatic and have to do with day-to-day stressors like money or household repairs. Furlong’s, on the other hand, are more existential: he frets over the existential significance of the ordinary worries that occupy Eileen. What does it mean that Furlong and his family have such “constant worry,” perpetually fretting over the next chore that needs to be done or the next bill that must be paid? Furlong’s memory of the exhausting, unending work he did at the mushroom factory as a youth reinforces the perpetual struggle that has been—and in some ways continues to be—Furlong’s life. Moments like this one make clear that although he has always done what he needs to do to get by, it’s clear that he isn’t fully satisfied with his life.



Furlong’s choice not to share his memory of the mushroom factory with Eileen underscores the distance that exists between husband and wife. They are happy enough together, but it seems that they have different ideas about what makes a meaningful life and how a person ought to engage with the world around them. Eileen’s gossip suggests a detached, almost voyeuristic relationship to the other townspeople, meanwhile Furlong seems to desire a more involved, reciprocal relationship with his fellow humans—he wants to share in life with them, to help them and be helped by them.



CHAPTER 4

The convent, “a powerful-looking place on the hill at the far side of the river,” faces the town. The gardens are immaculately maintained, and people often comment on how picturesque the grounds appear. The nuns there run a training school for girls, as well as a laundry business. The laundry business has a good reputation about town.

But people also say other things about the convent—like that the so-called “training school” isn’t a training school at all, but that the girls who attend it are “of low character” and are there to “be[] reformed, doing penance by washing stains out of the dirty linen” all day long. A local nurse once treated a 15-year-old girl there who had varicose veins from standing too long. Other people say the place is an ordinary sort of place where unwed mothers go “to be hidden way until they had given birth,” after which their children are sent off and adopted by wealthy families in America—that the nuns are operating quite an “industry.” Furlong doesn’t believe any of these stories—he assumes it’s mostly just gossip.

One evening, Furlong drives to the convent to drop off a delivery. On his way to the coal house, Furlong walks past a chapel and finds over a dozen young women and girls inside, on their hands and knees, polishing the floor. He asks for Sister Carmel to get their attention, and when they see him, “they look[] like they’ve been scalded.” One girl, whose hair has been choppily cut and who has an infected eye, approaches Furlong and begs him to take her as far as the river. Or he can take her home with him. “I’ll work til I drop for ya, sir,” she promises. Furlong notes the girl’s Dublin accent. He says he can’t take the girl anywhere. The girl begs him at least take her to the river Barrow, for all she wants is to “drown [her]self.”

The narration’s description of the local convent as “a powerful-looking place on the hill” hints at its strong influence over life in New Ross. One gets the sense that the convent—and the powerful religious institution that runs it, the Catholic Church—keeps a close eye on the people of New Ross, who know to keep their behavior in line with Catholic social mores, lest they suffer the social ostracization that, say, Furlong’s mother experienced with her illegitimate pregnancy.



People in New Ross euphemistically refer to the convent’s laundry as a “training school” to conceal the reality of what really goes on there, or at least what the rumors say goes on there. The laundry/training school in question is a Magdalene laundry, an institution funded by the state and usually run by the Catholic Church at which women and girls of so-called “low character” (sex workers and unwed mothers, for instance) worked long, unpaid and frequently unrecognized hours to “be reformed.” In fact, as the nurse’s story about the 15-year-old girl with varicose veins suggests, the girls and women experienced horrific, frequently abusive working conditions. The existence of such a place in New Ross hints at the abuse of power and hypocrisy at play within the Church, which preaches tenets of mercy and compassion yet treats some of the most vulnerable members of society with cruelty and a total lack of mercy. In particular, this passage hints at the hypocrisy of the people of New Ross, who regularly attend Mass and cast judgment on so-called immoral people—yet turn a blind eye to the town’s laundry, which would, in a perfect world, prompt widespread moral outrage.



Furlong witnesses firsthand the exploitation the women and girls who have been committed to the laundry experience during their time there. The appearance of the girls and women in the chapel indicates that in addition to being overworked, residents of the laundry also don’t receive adequate healthcare—they’re being worked to the bone, maybe even worked to death. Indeed, as the Dublin girl’s plea to Furlong indicates, death might actually be a relief compared to the horrible conditions the girls and women are subjected to at the laundry.



A nun enters the chapel just then, and the Dublin girl falls silent. Furlong tells the nun he was looking for Sister Carmel—he's here to deliver logs and coal. The nun tells him Sister Carmel has gone to St. Margaret's, then she escorts Furlong out of the chapel. She implicitly chastises Furlong for upsetting the geese when he arrived, and this makes him not mention anything about the girl he spoke to. The nun goes to the lorry to inspect the delivery to make sure it matches the order, and then she sends Furlong on his way. As he leaves the convent, Furlong remembers that he noticed a padlock on the inside of the **door** to the chapel.

It's foggy by the time Furlong is on his way home, and he gets turned around. He pulls over when he sees a man walking along the side of the road, and he asks the man where the road will take him. "This road will take you wherever you want to go, son," the man replies.

In bed that night, Furlong decides—albeit reluctantly—to mention what he saw that day to Eileen. When he does, Eileen grows "rigid" and adamantly insists that what goes on at the convent "ha[s] nothing to do with them," and there's nothing they can do for the girls there. And besides, aren't her and Furlong's daughters "well, and minded?" Eileen tells Furlong that there are some things a person ought not think about—"If you want to get on in life, there's things you have to ignore, so you can keep on," she tells him. She accuses him of being "soft-hearted." Then she references the "trouble" that Furlong's own mother got herself into—a low blow.

The Dublin girl's silence in reaction to the nun's arrival indicates that the laundry uses fear to control its residents—the girl clearly doesn't feel free to speak openly in the nun's presence, at least not without risk of serious consequences. The padlock on the door that Furlong sees on his way out—which, the narration implies, keeps the laundry residents locked inside the chapel—further underscores the power and control the nuns hold over the women and girls in their care. This scene also introduces another of the book's key symbols: doors. Throughout the book, doors represent the boundary between self and other: the forces that bring people together in solidarity with one another, and the forces that keep people from reaching out and giving help to people in need.



This downright strange encounter with the stranger on the road seems to reflect Furlong's anxiety about what to do about the girls and women he saw at the chapel. When the man tells Furlong the "road will take you wherever you want to go," the metaphorical subtext is that Furlong has the power to move forward however he would like—he can take action against the inhumanity he just saw, or he can act out of self-preservation and keep what he saw to himself so as not to upset the nuns.



Eileen's harsh and unexpected response to Furlong's story about the chapel lays out in clear terms just how she expects him to act moving forward: he, like Eileen herself and the rest of New Ross, is to turn a blind eye to the abuse and suffering he witnessed at the convent. Her reasoning is harsh, but it's not arbitrary. She claims it's psychologically necessary to "ignore" certain upsetting facts of life to be able to "keep on living" in the face of great, unjust suffering that perhaps isn't easily remedied. The issue for Furlong, however, is that it's not just for his own good that he not get involved in the injustice he observed at the laundry—Eileen also seems to imply that the women and girls there are somehow deserving of their suffering. Harshes of all, though, is Eileen's move to cite Furlong's illegitimate birth as an example of the "trouble" the girls got in to to become committed to the laundry in the first place, and why they might deserve the mistreatment they experience there.



Things are tense for a time, and eventually Eileen apologizes. Still, she cautions Furlong to just mind his own business. The girls at the convent are there because they were raised “wild,” and then “when they got into trouble,” their people abandoned them. Furlong asks Eileen if she’d think differently if one of the girls were their own. Eileen says that’s the point: “*Tis not one of ours.*” Furlong, in response, asks what would have become of him if Mrs. Wilson had thought that way. Eileen says Mrs. Wilson was different—she had her big house and her pension. “Was she not one of the few women on this earth who could do as she pleased?”

Self-preservation fuels Eileen's worldview, however harsh or selfish it might be: to her, it's most important to take care of one's own and to be grateful for the good things one has in life. Life is so full of suffering and misfortune that one could lose everything in an instant—it's simply not worth the risk to help someone who isn't oneself or "one's own," so to speak. Furlong clearly isn't convinced by this, which is why he cites Mrs. Wilson as an example to the contrary. But Eileen makes a compelling, if cynical, retort in response: Mrs. Wilson, with her big house and her late husband's pension, was a woman of considerably greater means. This afforded her privileges that people like Furlong don't have.



CHAPTER 5

There's supposed to be snow on Christmas week, and so people panic and call Furlong for last-minute orders, fearing the weather will shut down the yard for days. Furlong leaves his eldest, Kathleen, who is off school, in charge of the office. On Sunday morning, Furlong leaves early to make deliveries. It's cold, and the streets are slick. When he reaches his front gate to head out that morning, he finds that it's frozen shut. He walks to a neighbor's house and knocks on the **door**. It's not “the woman of the house who answer[s],” but “youngish woman.” Her **feet** are bare, and Furlong can see that she's in the middle of making breakfast for the children. He explains about the frozen gate, and she offers him the tea kettle to thaw it. He thanks her and apologizes for the disturbance.

The presence of a door in this scene symbolizes one's engagement with the outside world—in this case, Furlong's interaction with the neighbor woman. Throughout the book, characters encounter situations in which they have a choice to reach out to others in need of help or to keep to themselves. The woman, despite her own struggles—symbolized by her bare feet—chooses to help Furlong. It's a brief interaction, but it critically builds on the book's discussions of how a person's relationship to others and willingness to look beyond their own immediate needs can add meaning to their life.



Furlong takes the kettle to the padlock and thaws it. When he returns, the woman invites him to have a cup of tea. For a moment, Furlong imagines what life might be like in that calming room, with this woman as his wife. He wonders if his father was one of the men who up and left for England. But Furlong pushes aside these thoughts and politely declines the woman's offer—he's got work to do and is already behind schedule. He wishes the woman a happy Christmas, and then he heads out on his way.

Furlong's vague musings about what his life might be like if he were married to this woman aren't serious, but they do suggest that her choice to help him, even if it's just giving him water to thaw the lock and then inviting him to warm up with a cup of tea, has affected him greatly. This builds on the book's—and Furlong's—broader point that life should be about more than just minimizing one's own suffering or working to better one's own life. It should also be about choosing to help others, even if one doesn't have to.



Furlong arrives at the convent and makes his way to the coal shed. He looks at the statue of Our Lady in the garden and thinks her eyes look “disappointed by the artificial flowers at her **feet**.” He hears voices nearby singing “Adeste Fideles” and wonders if it’s the girls in the training school. At the coal house, he finds the bolt frozen stiff from frost, and he considers whether he “had not turned into a man consigned to **doorways**,” noting how he “spend[s] the best part of his life standing outside of one or another, waiting for them to be opened.”

Furlong, unable to see inside the coal house, walks to his lorry to get a torch. When he returns to the coal house, he peers inside and sees a girl (Sarah) inside, lying on the floor, surrounded by excrement. She looks like she’s been there all night. Unsure of what to do, he removes his coat and drapes it over the girl. She’s in poor shape, and she stumbles as Furlong helps her to her **feet** and guides her to the front **door** of the convent. He tries to get her explain how she got to be inside the coal shed, but she doesn’t give him a straight answer. She asks if it’s the river Barrow before them, and Furlong says it is.

Furlong knocks on the **door** of the convent, and for a long time no one answers. When a young nun finally appears at the door and looks out at them, the girl (Sarah) cries out—then silences herself. Furlong and the girl continue to wait outside in the cold. The girl asks Furlong to ask the nuns about her baby—they took him away from her, and she worries that he must be hungry.

The artificial flowers at the feet of the Virgin Mary statue contrast sharply with the moment Furlong just shared with the neighbor woman. She helped him even though she had very little, and they shared a genuine moment of human connection as a result. The artificial flowers at the statue’s feet, on the other hand, suggest inauthenticity of the Church’s mercy, benevolence, and generosity. Finally, Furlong’s remark about his fate as “a man consigned to doorways” may be read multiple ways. On the one hand, it speaks to his status as a perpetual outsider—symbolically, he is always relegated to doorways, never (or hardly ever) invited fully inside. It also indicates Furlong’s frustration with his own inability or unwillingness to act when he sees injustice happening around him.



The scene that Furlong stumbles upon in the coal shed effectively confirms that the abuse that goes on at the laundry is far worse than what he saw in the chapel the other day—it seems that the girl (whose name is later revealed to be Sarah) has been locked inside the coal house all night, in dangerously cold conditions. Her bare feet symbolize her poverty and her helplessness. When Furlong approaches the convent door with the girl, it symbolizes the choice he now must make: whether to confront the nuns about the wretched condition in which he found the girl and risk facing retribution from the nuns, or whether to keep quiet and protect himself and his family.



The girl’s sudden outburst when she sees the young nun in the doorway is further proof of the abuse she has suffered at the convent. Her shocking reveal that she had a baby, and that the convent took him away from her adds another layer of horror to her situation. It also underscores the Church’s hypocrisy: separating a mother who wants to be a mother from her baby is cruel and unmerciful, quite the opposite of the benevolence and mercy the Church is supposed to show.



Before the girl can say more, the Mother Superior—someone Furlong rarely interacts with—answers the **door**. Gesturing toward the girl (Sarah), the Mother Superior apologizes that Furlong “had to encounter this.” Furlong tells the Mother Superior the girl was locked in the coal shed all night. In response, the Mother Superior simply orders the girl to get inside and have a bath. Furlong observes that the girl looks as though she’s “in a type of trance.” The Mother Superior insists on inviting Furlong inside for tea, ignoring his insistence that he be on his way.

Furlong, left with no choice, follows the Mother Superior into the immaculately clean convent. A picture of John Paul II hangs above the mantelpiece. Over tea, the Mother Superior, addressing Furlong as “Billy,” asks how everything is at home. She asks after his daughters, mentioning how she heard two of them were doing well in their musical studies at St. Margaret’s. Another of his daughters is in the choir. “She doesn’t look out of place,” the Mother Superior observes, and she muses that all of Furlong’s daughters may soon be pupils at St. Margaret’s—“God willing.” After all, placement at the school is not guaranteed—there are so many girls, and it can be difficult “to find a place for everyone.”

The Mother Superior gets up then and remarks how “disappointing” it must be to Furlong not to have a son to carry on his name. Furlong retorts that he took his mother’s name, and things turned out fine for him. And, he adds, “What have I against girls?” His mother was one once—and so was the Mother Superior. She says nothing in response.

The Mother Superior is the closest figure the book has to an antagonist. As head of the convent, she functions as a stand-in for the convent as a whole, and all the hypocrisy and injustice it participates in. The description of the girl as “in a type of trance” further underscores just how terrified she is of the Mother Superior and the nuns under her command. The ease with which the Mother Superior compels Furlong to come inside for tea, something he doesn’t want to do, shows that her power extends beyond the women and girls directly under her rule: everyone in town must submit to her, as well.



The picture of Pope John Paul II hanging above the mantelpiece once more points to the convent’s hypocrisy—on the surface (in its décor), it extols the virtue, benevolence, and goodness the Catholic Church claims to stand for. But in practice, it does not uphold the values it preaches. But the picture of the pope, the highest (human) authority figure within the Catholic Church, also comments implicitly on the broader hypocrisy of the Church at an institutional level. St. Margaret’s might be corrupt and exploitative, but it’s hardly an outlier in the broader scheme of things. The Mother Superior’s comment to Furlong about it being difficult “to find a place for everyone” at St. Margaret’s is an implicit but clear threat to Furlong. If he makes trouble about what he saw in the coal house today, his daughters will suffer the consequences, their places at school taken away from them as punishment for their father’s misbehavior.



The Mother Superior’s insinuation that Furlong must be disappointed that he only has daughters points to the Catholic Church’s broader dismissal or mistreatment of women and girls and its tendency to see them as inferior. Furlong’s defiant response is a defense of women and girls and also an implicit threat to the Mother Superior that he has heard her implicit command for him to keep quiet—but he won’t go down without a fight. He shows that he is willing to challenge Church authority in ways others in New Ross are not.



Just then, the girl (Sarah) from the coal shed reappears, her choppy hair badly combed out. The Mother Superior orders the girl to sit down and have some cake and tea. The girl obeys, clumsily picking at some cake. Just then, the Mother Superior demands to know why the girl was in the coal shed. The girl, terrified, freezes. She mumbles about playing hide and seek. Then she looks away and starts to sob. The Mother Superior suggests that the whole situation was “just a mistake,” and “all just a big nothing.” The girl says yes. Then the Mother Superior orders the young nun who first appeared at the **door** to give the girl some food.

Furlong watches silently as the young nun leads the girl (Sarah) away. He understands, intuitively, that the Mother Superior wants him gone now, yet they continue a stilted conversation anyway. The Mother Superior comments on the sailors bringing “foreigners” to town. Furlong observes that everyone has to come from somewhere—Jesus, after all, “was born in Bethlehem.” The Mother Superior scoffs and says “those fellows” are nothing like “Our Lord.”

Not long after, the Mother Superior rises to escort Furlong out. She gives him an envelope—a little something for Christmas. They pass by the kitchen, where the girl sits at a table while the young nun fries some eggs. Furlong pauses and asks the girl if he can help her. He asks her name, and she replies, quietly, “Sarah Redmond.” Sarah, Furlong muses aloud, was his own mother’s name. When he asks Sarah how she got to be at the convent, the young nun coughs loudly, and Furlong understands that the girl won’t be allowed to say anymore. He tells the girl his name is Bill Furlong and that she can find him in the coal yard. Then he leaves. On his way out, he hears someone turn the key in the **door** behind him.

The Mother Superior’s suggestion to the girl that the whole situation of the girl ending up in the coal shed was “just a mistake” and “all just a big nothing” is really a command and a threat: the Mother Superior, in all likelihood, knows or can surmise why the girl was placed in the coal house or why she might want to hide there—and she doesn’t care. The Mother Superior, in encouraging Sarah to admit that everything was “all just a big nothing,” is advising her to keep quiet about what happened to her and not let outsiders like Furlong in on the abuse she has endured at the laundry.



The Mother Superior’s callous disregard for the plight of immigrants in search of a better life almost comically reinforces her hypocrisy and the hypocrisy of the Church she represents. She does not extend the same mercy and dignity to her fellow humans that she extends to Jesus—which is, to add insult to injury, contrary to the teachings of Jesus, who instructed his followers to be neighborly, merciful, and forgiving.



In the abstract, the Mother Superior’s gift to Furlong might seem like a thoughtful gesture. In this context, however, it takes on a more sinister tone. Here, it becomes a bribe of sorts, an unsubtle reminder to Furlong that good will come to him and his family, but only if he behaves and does not speak up about the abuse he has witnessed at the convent’s laundry. When Furlong hears someone turn the key in the door behind him, it reinforces how like a prison the laundry is for its residents. It also symbolizes that Furlong has made his choice—to be quiet and do as the Mother Superior says. The immorality of this choice is clear to Furlong, and his heightened focus on the locking door behind him indicates that the ramifications of his choice will likely weigh on him as the story continues to unfold.



CHAPTER 6

Furlong returns home, and Eileen announces that he's missed first Mass. Furlong explains about being held up at the convent for tea and cake, and Eileen asks if they gave him "something else," noting that they usually give him a little something extra for Christmas. Furlong presents the envelope the Mother Superior handed him. Eileen opens it and finds a card inside, and a 50-pound note. She asks Furlong what's wrong—he seems off again—and orders him to get changed so they aren't late to second Mass. Furlong obliges, albeit "reluctant[ly]." At church, Eileen asks the girls if they have money for the collection, "Or has your daddy given it all away?" Furlong snaps at her for her cruelty.

Furlong sits in the pew beside his family, but his mind wanders, and Mass seems extra long that day. He gazes at the Stations of the Cross during the sermon. When it's time to receive Communion, Furlong declines it. At home later, the girls set up the Christmas tree and help Eileen ice the Christmas cake. Furlong, feeling claustrophobic, decides to go out to see Ned at Mrs. Wilson's old house.

On his way to see Ned, Furlong remembers going to see see Mrs. Wilson on a Sunday many years ago—Kathleen, his eldest, was just a baby then. On that day, Mrs. Wilson is gone, so Furlong visits with Ned instead. They enjoy a few stouts together, and Ned starts to reminisce about the old days, when Furlong was just an infant. Mrs. Wilson was so good to them all, Ned remembers, and never said a bad word about Furlong or Furlong's mother. And she's always looked after Ned, too.

The distance between Eileen and Furlong widens as Furlong grows increasingly resistant to turning a blind eye to the Church's abuse of power. Eileen, meanwhile—as the enthusiasm with which she asks after and accepts the Mother Superior's Christmas card indicates—remains committed to going along as though everything is fine and to staying out of the Church's business. Eileen's cruel jab at Furlong, which implies that Furlong has foolishly given away so much of his money that he has none left for his family, further underscores the tension in the couple's marriage.



Mass seems especially long to Furlong because the horrific scenes he witnessed at the convent—and Eileen's implied admission that people in town know about the laundry and choose not to intervene—make the hypocrisy of the Church and its attendees glaringly obvious. He seems ashamed to be among them and refuses Communion to try to set himself apart. Furlong's sudden desire to see Ned reflects his desire to return to company he felt was more genuine and benevolent.



The detail of Furlong, who seems not to drink all that much, sharing a few stouts with Ned builds tension, leading readers to guess that Furlong might make use of his uninhibited state to press Ned for details about the identity of Furlong's father. With the benefit of hindsight, of course, the reader knows that even if Furlong does ask Ned, Ned won't offer him any useful information, as Furlong still doesn't know his father's identity in the story's present. That opening up to each other still comes with some inhibition reinforces how difficult it can be to know how to engage meaningfully and humanely with others.



Ned remembers, though, that there was a period of time when he stole hay from Mrs. Wilson, sneaking out at night to deliver it to another milker Mrs. Wilson employed alongside Ned—the man’s donkey was doing poorly because it had nothing to eat. This went on for some time. One night, though, Ned encountered “something that wasn’t human, an ugly thing with no hands” on his way to meet the man, and that put an end to Ned’s stealing. He still feels bad about it to this day.

Ned’s bizarre encounter with this seemingly supernatural creature has multiple possible interpretations. One is that the creature is a manifestation of Ned’s guilt over stealing from Mrs. Wilson. By this logic, then, Ned’s story suggests that for many people, it takes an outside force to compel them to act according to their morals. This parallels the struggle Furlong is currently engaged in: he knows the right thing to do is to come forward with what he has learned about the laundry, or at least to help the girls there himself. But thus far, he has failed to act, seemingly waiting for a sign to point him in what he already knows is the right direction rather than compelling himself to act.



Furlong ends up drinking more with Ned. After a couple stouts, Furlong asks Ned if he knows who Furlong’s father is. Ned says he doesn’t, but that there was one summer when some “big relations of the Wilsons and friends of theirs” visited from England. Perhaps it was one of those men. But anyway, Ned asks Furlong, didn’t things turn out okay in the end? Before Furlong leaves, Ned gets out the concertina and plays some songs, singing along as he plays. One song affects Furlong so deeply that he asks Ned to play it again before he leaves.

As the reader may have guessed, Furlong’s drunkenness gives him the courage to ask Ned about his father’s identity. Ned’s vague answer doesn’t answer any questions but implies that Furlong, though illegitimate, has at least come from respectable stock: from wealthy, important “relations of the Wilsons and friends of theirs,” and from England to boot. It’s in keeping with Furlong’s character how little his potential father’s ties to high-society matter to Furlong—he cares more about how people are, how they engage with and reach out to others, not who or what they are. That’s why he is much more affected by Ned’s concertina playing than by the chance that he might come from a good family.



Back in the present, Furlong arrives at the old Wilson home and knocks on the **door**. A woman answers it. When Furlong asks after Ned, the woman, in a strong Enniscorthy accent, explains that Ned is recovering in the hospital—he’s been sick with pneumonia. Then she remarks how easily she can tell Furlong and Ned are related. Furlong, at first unable to speak, excuses himself. Driving home, he muses over how hard it is to see things that are so close to oneself—“It took a stranger to come out with things.” Then his thoughts drift back to the girl at the convent earlier—Sarah—and how he had done nothing to help her. He hadn’t even asked about her baby. And then he went, “like a hypocrite, to Mass.”

Enniscorthy is a town in County Wexford, Ireland. More significant than her accent, though, is the shocking observation the woman voices to Furlong: that he and Ned look so similar that she assumes—likely correctly—that they are related. The casual setting in which Furlong has this revelation feels anticlimactic, given how long he has anguished over the central mystery of his life. It’s notable that Furlong’s thoughts drift to Sarah immediately after learning the truth about Ned. His thought, “It took a stranger to come out with things,” speaks to the enormous impact that people can have on other people’s lives, even for what might seem like inconsequential reasons. The woman at Mrs. Wilson’s totally altered everything Furlong has thought about his identity and his life, just by making what she must surely have thought of as a simple observation. If she could so drastically alter Furlong’s life, Furlong’s train of thought in this passage seems to indicate, then perhaps Furlong can do the same for Sarah.



CHAPTER 7

In the days leading up to Christmas Eve, Furlong dreads going in to work. But he does anyway, and when he arrives, the workers are there already. Furlong considers how all his employees have turned out to be good, hardworking men. He remembers how Mrs. Wilson used to say, “To get the best out of people, you must always treat them well.” He feels grateful that he’s always taken his daughters “to both graveyards” over Christmas each year—to visit his mother’s gravestone and Mrs. Wilson’s. Furlong sets out in his lorry and can tell, from the black smoke it emits, that he will soon need to replace the engine—and that the new windows Eileen wants for the house will therefore have to wait.

Furlong goes about making his deliveries. He thanks customers for their Christmas cards and tries to linger a while at each home to chat. He tries to remind himself of people’s inherent goodness. Life, he tells himself, is just about “learning how to manage and balance the give-and-take in a way that let you get on with others as well as your own.” But then the hollowness of this thought hits him as he wonders why he didn’t think to give the sweets his well-off customers gave him to those customers who are clearly struggling.

When Furlong arrives back at the yard, his men are already eating their meals at Kehoe’s. Mrs. Kehoe sees Furlong and remarks how tired he must be after a long day of deliveries and orders him to sit down for a hot drink. Furlong obliges and agrees that he’s been busy, but it’ll be nice to have a few days off now. Mrs. Kehoe replies, “What it is to be a man [...] and to have days off,” then she laughs harshly.

Mrs. Wilson’s advice to Furlong has clearly shaped the worldview he has adopted as an adult—this is why he makes a point to visit Mrs. Wilson’s grave as well as his mother’s each year. But this worldview puts him at odds with many of the other characters in the book. Most of the religious authorities and townspeople Furlong interacts with—Eileen included—seem to believe people must earn the privilege of others treating them well, not that treating others well is a responsibility people should take upon themselves to carry out.



Furlong believes in being good and merciful to others, but his need to remind himself of it so often—and his realization there that he doesn’t always practice what he preaches—shows that care for others isn’t necessarily something that comes naturally to people. Instinctually, perhaps, a person is inclined to look after themselves and “[their] own,” and they must “learn[] how to manage and balance” care for others with care for themselves.



For as grateful as Furlong is to his wife and as aware as he is of the hurdles his daughters face due to their gender, Mrs. Kehoe’s remark in this scene, however jokingly she makes it, points to Furlong’s relative ignorance about the nonstop, exhausting nature of women’s work. Men like Furlong work hard out of the house and deserve to have days off, of course, but for women (in general) often the work never stops. Not only are they tasked with domestic chores and childrearing, but they also must contend with the myriad ways in which society oppresses them or holds them to an unequal double standard.



After a pause, Mrs. Kehoe asks if it's true that Furlong has had a chat with "herself above at the convent," referring to the Mother Superior. Furlong confirms the rumors, and Mrs. Kehoe continues. It's none of her business, of course, but she thinks it would be wise if Furlong didn't make trouble with the Mother Superior—the nuns hold a lot of power in town. Furlong replies, "Surely they've only as much power as we give them, Mrs. Kehoe?" But Mrs. Kehoe dismisses this point. Furlong has worked hard to give his family a good life—and, as Furlong ought to know, "there's nothing only a wall separating that place from St Margaret's." And completing their studies there is essential to his daughters' success in life. Furlong thanks Mrs. Kehoe for her advice. Then he pays for the men's suppers and heads out. He leaves Mrs. Kehoe the change she counted out for him.

Outside, it's started to snow. As Furlong walks past the Town Hall, he almost trips on a loose stone and has the sudden impulse to blame Mrs. Kehoe. Furlong carries on, looking inside shops for gifts for his family. At Stafford's shop, he asks Mrs. Stafford if she has "a jigsaw of a farm in five hundred pieces," but she says no.

Later, Furlong catches sight of himself in a mirror and decides he should get a haircut. There's a long line at the barber's. As he waits, he finds himself unable to chat with the others. Instead, he thinks about what Eileen mentioned earlier about the barber's dying son. He gazes at his own reflection in the mirror and tries to spot a resemblance to Ned. He wonders if the woman at Mrs. Wilson's house was mistaken, but he doubts it. He recalls how sad Ned had been after Furlong's mother's death, and how Ned had been the one to teach Furlong how to shave. He considers what "an act of daily grace" it must have been for Ned to conceal his paternity, wanting Furlong to believe he "had come from finer stock."

Mrs. Kehoe and Furlong's conversation in this scene builds on the argument Furlong had with Eileen earlier. Furlong takes issue with Mrs. Kehoe's recommendation that he avoid making trouble with the convent, suggesting that the convent and the broader religious institution it represents wouldn't have so much power if more people didn't allow themselves to be intimidated by the church. But Mrs. Kehoe, in noting that there's "only a wall separating [the laundry] from St. Margaret's]" shows that Furlong's stance is overly idealistic and does not account for the very real power the convent has to harm Furlong, his family, and anyone else who might try to challenge them. Should Furlong continue to make trouble with the Mother Superior, Mrs. Kehoe implies, it would be so easy for the Mother Superior to kick Furlong's daughters out of school in retaliation. Furlong is in the right, morally, of course, but Mrs. Kehoe's argument shows how difficult it can be in practice to do the right thing when one has so much to lose. Moral uprightness, in other words, while something everyone should aspire to, is in many ways a privilege that not all can afford.



Furlong's sudden impulse to blame Mrs. Furlong for his having tripped on a stone is illogical, of course, and serves to illustrate how much their conversation bothered him—it's distracting him so much that he can't mind where he's walking. Furlong's request for a jigsaw puzzle symbolizes his nostalgia for the relative innocence of his youth and his desire for order and meaning, something he has had increasingly less of since discovering the truth about the laundry.



It affects Furlong deeply to realize how oblivious he has been all these years, repeatedly and implausibly failing to recognize Ned as his father. He is ashamed, too, never to have noticed and been grateful for the subtle ways Ned performed fatherly duties in secret, itself an act of fatherly selflessness. In a highly judgmental and class stratified world, Ned wanted his son to dream that he might have come from good stock, despite his illegitimate birth.



After his haircut, Furlong stops at Hanrahan's to pick up the leather **shoes** he ordered for Eileen. The woman behind the counter is the wife of one of his best customers, but she acts indifferently toward Furlong now. Furlong pays for the shoes and exits the store. It's past dark now. He crosses the bridge over the Barrow and considers the rumor that it's cursed—supposedly, the abbot of the monastery placed a curse on it after the townspeople expelled the monks from the town for levying tolls on the river. The abbot warned the town that three of their own would die each year. Uneasily, Furlong recalls the Dublin girl he met at the chapel, how she'd begged him to take her to the river to drown.

It's unclear why the client's wife behind the counter treats Furlong indifferently, but her iciness could point to the beginnings of the town turning against Furlong due to his run-in with the Mother Superior—the fact that Mrs. Kehoe knew about it indicates that word has already begun to spread around town. Furlong's reflections on the cursed bridge speaks, perhaps, to the harm that the town has brought on itself by submitting to hypocritical, power-hungry religious authorities. In not even trying to defend themselves against the Church, they have as good as cursed themselves, dooming themselves to further oppression.



Furlong walks onward until he reaches the convent. He approaches the coal house, opens the **door**, and calls out for Sarah Redmond, telling her she's coming with him. As they walk back through town together, people whom Furlong has known for his whole life refuse to acknowledge him when they spot the girl's bare **feet** and realize she's not one of Furlong's. As they cross through town, Furlong wonders what the point of life is, if not to help others. He feels suddenly brave with the girl by his side. He thinks of Mrs. Wilson and how generous she was to him. Had it not been for her, what would have become of his mother? What would have become of Furlong himself?

This is a major turning point for Furlong's character. It marks the first time he has chosen to act on his moral conviction. Previously, he has anguished over perceived moral shortcomings, whether other people's or his own, but he has let his fear of social ostracization and his concern for his daughters' futures silence him into inaction. Retrieving Sarah from the convent shows that he's no longer willing to accept moral hypocrisy. The dismissive or judgmental looks the townspeople give Furlong when they see Sarah's bare feet and register that she must be from the laundry hints at the consequences Furlong will face as a result of his good deed—it will turn the town against him.



As Furlong approaches the **door** to his house, Sarah by his side, he knows there will be "a world of trouble waiting for him behind the next door," but he also knows whatever it is, it can't be harder than whatever Sarah has endured. Foolishly, he allows himself to "believe[] that they would manage."

Once more, Furlong finds himself before a door. But the door no longer symbolizes Furlong's powerlessness to effect change in his life—now, it represents his willingness to fight back against the forces that hold him back and coerce him into minding himself at the expense of others. Furlong's fate isn't certain—and indeed, his hope that he and his family will "manage," regardless of whether and how the town chooses to retaliate against Furlong for helping a "fallen woman" like Sarah, is in all likelihood foolishly optimistic. But Furlong's story ends with a sense of meaning and closure for his choice to reach out and engage with the world, extending mercy and compassion to another person at the expense of his own welfare.





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