

A close-up, black and white photograph of a horse's eye. The eye is dark and glossy, with a reflection of light. The surrounding skin is light-colored and has a fine, pebbled texture. The horse's mane is visible on the right side, appearing as a series of vertical, slightly blurred strands. The overall composition is intimate and focuses on the texture and detail of the horse's face.

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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**UCHENNA'S
APPLES**

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A close-up, black and white photograph of a horse's eye. The eye is dark and reflective, looking slightly to the left. The surrounding skin and hair are detailed, showing the texture of the horse's coat. The background is a soft, out-of-focus grey.

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1: Over The Wall

The clock on Uchenna's classroom wall said 2:37 PM, and it felt as if it had been saying that for at least two hours. Uchenna glanced wearily away from it and down at the spiral notebook and textbook open on her desk. The notebook page was covered with fairly neat notes and some sketches that were trying to be ponies, except that their legs looked wrong somehow. The left-hand textbook page had a brown stain on it which wasn't Uchenna's fault—she never spilled stuff on her books, even the schoolbooks. *What is that?* she wondered, while Mrs. Hanlon's voice droned on and on. *Coke, maybe. Jeez, I wish I had a Coke right now, I'm falling asleep here....*

“And next month begins the season that leads up to which of the great quarter-day holidays?” Mrs. Hanlon said. Then came one of those long horrible pauses that meant the teacher was trying to figure out which of the class to torment next. The question was always: did you put your hand up and try to keep her from calling on you by acting too much like you absolutely knew the answer? Or did you just hold still and avoid looking directly at her, the way you avoided looking at a growling dog behind somebody's gate when you walked past it? Both tactics had their advantages, but—

“Uchenna,” Mrs. Hanlon said.

Uchenna sighed, because she knew why she'd been called on. *I'm supposed to make some of the rest of them feel dumb,* she thought. *Because she wants them to think that if I can know this, then any of them can. Like we don't all have the same homework—*

“Samhain, miss,” Uchenna said, and pronounced it correctly: *sow-en*.

“That's right,” Mrs. Hanlon said. “The ancient Celtic season that corresponds to Autumn in the present calendar. And what modern holiday coincides with the beginning of Samhain?”

Another long pause. Uchenna stole a look at the clock. It now said 2:38 PM. *Oh, pleeeeeease,* she thought, *please hurry up and be two forty!* Because then the bell would ring and they could all go home. Thursday would at last be over. Only one day more of school for the week, and then there would be a whole weekend of days of no school. *I hate it when it's just been summer and then all of a sudden you're stuck in school forever or until Christmas, whichever comes first.*

“Seamus.”

“Uh...”

Uchenna didn't quite drop her head onto her arms, now folded on her desk. *He actually has to think about it. Holy God just listen to him actually thinking about it...*

“Uh...” Uchenna stole a glance at Seamus, as some of her other classmates were doing: they didn't believe it either. Seamus was sitting there with the expression of a deer caught in the headlights, absolutely frozen and without a clue of any kind. His blush of utter embarrassment was ascending straight up his broad freckled face into his ginger-red hairline, and past it. Slowly hands were starting

to go up around the room—not all that eagerly: no one liked to make Seamus look dumb. *Oh, come on, come on*, Uchenna thought, *how hard can it be, Seamus, think—*

“Hallowe’en!” Seamus said suddenly, almost in a squeak.

The class didn’t quite break out in applause, though a rustle of relief did go around. “That’s right,” Mrs. Hanlon said, throwing a glance at the clock. “So our Irish prehistory unit starting next week is going to begin with a look at how the old holidays still affect the new ones: or don’t affect them. Your homework assignment for this weekend will be to go to the library and start researching the old pagan calendar system and the way that it was affected by the arrival of Christianity...”

Mrs. Hanlon turned to the blackboard and started writing down the address of the Web page where the details about the homework assignment would be found. Uchenna picked up her pencil and jotted the address down above the picture she’d been drawing, taking a moment to scowl at the ponies’ knees. *Was I drawing those backwards? Is that the problem? Or maybe I’m putting in an extra joint.* She resolved to look up some pictures of horses on the Internet tonight and make sure how horses’ knees went.

The bell rang. *At last!* Uchenna thought, reaching around for her bookbag to start throwing her books into it. “Everybody make sure you get this down,” Mrs. Hanlon was shouting over the immediate din of voices and scraping of chairs and desks: “Monday there’s going to be a quiz on the weekend reading—”

A general groan of annoyance went up, mixed with the instant sound of people pushing each other out into the hall, along with about twenty cellphones going off within seconds of the bell stopping. Uchenna picked up her bag and made for the door, pausing by Seamus’s desk. He was still putting his books away, and didn’t look like he was in a big hurry to go out where most of the others were already. He glanced up at her.

“My mind just went blank,” he said to Uchenna. “Maybe it’s Alzheimer’s.”

She gave him a look. “You plank, you’ve gotta be like eighty to have Alzheimer’s.”

“I dunno,” Seamus said. “I could be something new. Real early onset.”

“You could be an early-onset hypochondriac,” Uchenna said, rolling her eyes. “I think you just get tense.”

Seamus sighed. “Wouldn’t argue that,” he said. “Thanks, Chen.”

Uchenna nodded, headed past him out into the hall. People were pushing and shoving in all directions, talking a mile a minute, wandering along with their heads bowed as they texted each other, hurrying off to meet friends, or just making for the main front hall and the doors leading out to the front schoolyard. Uchenna had a better view of this than many of them because she was one of the tallest kids in school. This was a relatively new development: she’d had the growth spurt suddenly last spring, and some of the kids who’d been pushing Uchenna around for the previous year had been most shocked and annoyed by the change.

Some of them, though, just went right on acting the way they had before, as if they thought that somehow things might go back to the way they'd been before. This occasionally produced comical results. "Bein' real smart there today, Four One Nine," said a voice from behind her.

Uchenna rolled her eyes and didn't even bother turning around, knowing what she would have seen: those wicked little eyes in that oh-so-smackable face that always left her wondering whether she should give in to the urge just this once. *Well, maybe not right here.* "Being real chicken there today, Eamonn," Uchenna said, heading for the doors. "Shouldn't say stuff like that behind my back if you don't have the guts to say it to my face. Be a shame to have to give you another little blue present to take home to your mammy."

From behind her, voices went *ooooooo*, and a lot of them started snickering at Eamonn. At least Eamonn didn't say anything further, which was good. Now that Uchenna was the size she was, she still didn't like to take advantage of it by beating up on idiots just because she could. *But Eamonn's such a temptation...*

She sighed and slowed up a little so as not to plow into the usual crowd of kids now struggling to get out the front door. Even though their school, St. John the Evangelist, was a new one, a handsome glass and brick building built from scratch over the last couple of years like everything else in Adamstown, somebody plainly hadn't given much thought to how eager five hundred or so modern school kids were to get out of that building at the end of the day. *Or else the architects thought that everybody was as polite and well-behaved as they were when they were in school,* Uchenna thought, grinning. *Back in 1980, when teachers could still hit kids, and dinosaurs walked the Earth.*

The crush at the door gave way a little as more kids managed to push through and spill down onto the steps. Uchenna got through one of the swinging doors and headed over to the side of the steps, where she was out of the way of the stampede and had a moment to swing her bookbag up over her shoulder and look out over the schoolyard between the steps down from the doors and the street. The empty paved yard was a sea of mostly light faces above school uniforms—dark blue jackets and trousers for the boys, identical jackets and blue-and-green plaid skirts for the girls, some of them way further above the girls' knees than they were supposed to be. But that was the endless game of brinksmanship you played with the school: get the skirt high up enough to keep the boys looking, but not so high that the school would send you home to find a longer skirt.

Uchenna scanned the schoolyard covertly as she waited there, looking to see what colors the other girls' hair was getting to be. Bright colors were supposedly against school rules, but that hadn't stopped a whole lot of girls from getting streaks. *That's it,* Uchenna thought, *look at Sinead D'Olier and her crowd over there! They're all purple streaked all of a sudden. I'm gonna get that too. Mam will let me if they have it, I know she will. Meanwhile, where's Emer?*

She was tempted to get the phone out and text her, but there were already about three hundred kids on their phones out here, texting, talking, or calling their folks to pick them up—those who weren't already lined up in the long string of cars and SUVs that went trailing away from the school's front gates, halfway to the road that ran parallel to the train tracks and the Adamstown train station. *Probably get nothing but 'network busy' for the next ten minutes,* Uchenna thought, and leaned against the wall by the furthest right-hand door, looking out across what she could see of town. *No rush, it's not like it's raining today...*

That by itself was a pleasant change. The end of the summer had been disappointingly wet. Then, typically, a spell of dry clear weather had set in over mid-September and the beginning of October, when everybody was stuck inside school again and couldn't really enjoy it. Out past the edges of town the older, taller beech trees and the low beech and hawthorn hedgerows were all going the normal autumnal gold and brown—not particularly emphatic colors, such as the ferocious New England scarlets that Emer kept saying she missed: it didn't get cold enough here at night to turn the trees such shades. *Just brown*, Uchenna thought. *Like the town...*

She sometimes wondered why, when everything here was new and they could have done anything, the builders had nonetheless gone in so much for all the same kinds of colors—browns and fawns and beiges, with here and there some gold-tinted glass. *They could have varied it a little*, Uchenna thought. But then maybe they were afraid that too much color would have made the place stick out too much—not fit into the landscape. It was only five years ago that none of this had been here at all: the center of the town, the shops, the apartment buildings, the school, the medical center, the five thousand homes. All of this had been nothing but a gigantic boggy greenfield site next to the main train line into Dublin, a weed-infested cow pasture of heroic proportions. “It used to flood all the time,” her dad had told her before they started talking about moving here. “After a wet summer it looked like a lake. Hope they’ve fixed that...”

But they had fixed it. Back maybe ten years ago, when the economy had started growing so fast, some property developer had realized that there was a market for a whole lot more houses near Dublin. The developer had had what must have sounded, at first, like a crazy idea. *Let's build a whole new town! Not just houses, but everything the people there will need. Stores, shops, schools, everything. Let's put it right by the train line so people can save energy by commuting into town that way.*

“And then let's sit back and let them give us lots and lots of lovely money for all this fancy new real estate,” Uchenna said under her breath, looking out across the nearly-finished breadth of Adamstown town center as it glinted in the muted, misty three o'clock sunshine. Well, that was a lot of what being in Ireland was about, these days. When the place had started getting wealthy, all kinds of people had started coming here who'd never have bothered before. Some Irish people complained about that. And now that the country was in money trouble because stupid banks had given too much money to rich developers who couldn't pay it back, the same people were complaining because so many of the people who'd come in the boom times were starting to leave. Uchenna had heard more than enough of the complaints in her time, and she was only twelve. *I wonder will they get over all this trouble by the time I'm twenty? she wondered. Or will I have to go somewhere else?...*

The scrum down in the schoolyard was starting to thin out somewhat now as kids flowed out of the gates, or got into cars and were driven away. Uchenna grimaced at that, for most of the kids at St. John's lived in Adamstown, and would therefore not have to walk much more than a mile or two to go home. *Do their parents really think they're gonna get mugged going home?* she wondered. Oh, yeah, occasionally someone got stupid about showing off a new cellphone and got it taken off them, or they got knocked off their bike: there were always little gangs and cliques in town that liked making people's lives miserable. But that kind of thing was rare. Mostly this was a pretty good place to live—

The door to her left swung open. A short girl came through, her long pale blonde hair streaming back over her shoulders in the sucked-in wind that poured past as she came through the door.

“Emer!”

Emer Daley's head snapped around. "Chen! There you are."

Emer hurried over to her, slinging her bag over her shoulder. She always looked so little to Uchenna these days: maybe it was something to do with her growth spurt. *Delicate*, Uchenna thought: *that's the word for her*. Emer was wide-eyed, fine-featured, fragile-looking, maybe even a little on the skinny side, though God knew there was nothing wrong with her appetite when you got her near a burger place or a chippie: in the presence of anything fried she turned into the human version of a Great White. "Eames, where were you? Thought you were going to meet me here as soon as we got out?"

"I'm here now," Emer said.

"Took you long enough! What were you doing?"

"Had to stop," Emer said. "Gossip."

Uchenna gave Emer an odd look. Emer was shy with most people: it was one of the first things Uchenna had noticed about her when she moved here, possibly even one of the things that had drawn them together. But then Emer was half American, and Americans weren't supposed to be shy. Either way, gossip wasn't something Emer normally paid much attention to. "Because usually it's about me she would say. "And I know the truth better than they do anyway..." But Emer's eyes were glinting with excitement. This, too, was unusual for her: Emer put a lot of emphasis on looking cool and laid back at all times, this also apparently being part of the American thing, or the way she handled it here.

"Well, okay," Uchenna said, "so gossip from who?"

"Donal and Ruairi," Emer said.

Uchenna put her eyebrows up at that, for Donal and Ruairi were two fifth-form boys who were best friends and who seemed to share a gift for finding out about any interesting news as soon as it happened. "Oh, ho," Uchenna said, dropping her voice and glancing around her. "You were eavesdropping."

"Well, how else would I have heard it, it's not like they're going to hunt *me* down and tell me!"

"Fine. So what is it?"

Emer glanced around. The few other kids who had been standing on the top step had gone off. She bent her head down close by Uchenna's. "We've got tinkers!" she whispered.

"What?" Uchenna looked around. "Where?"

"Not here, you think they'd come *here* so close to the school and the shops? They'd just get arrested something."

Uchenna shrugged. This being Ireland, there were always Travelling people around: families who lived in caravans or mobile homes as their ancestors had for sometimes hundreds of years, and didn't want to settle down into houses. They did all kinds of casual work—fixing leaky roofs and paving driveways, recovering old slates and fireplaces from demolished houses, breaking up old cars for parts. But the "settled community" tended to look at them suspiciously a lot of the time because

Travellers often made a real mess of the places where they were camped, and a lot of them were supposed to be thieves who'd steal things from people's yards whenever they could. Some Travellers were really poor: some of them looked poor, but were really rich from the honest (or dishonest) work they did. "Well, *what?*" Uchenna said. "Oh no! Don't tell me the playing field's full of caravans all of a sudden! Or the park—" That was something that happened without warning in some parts of the country: a park or field would suddenly turn without warning into a gathering place for Travelers, crowded with ramshackle caravans and RVs, and it would take months for the county council to get rid of them and get everything cleaned up again.

"No, it's okay," Emer said as they cut across the corner into Uchenna's street, past the big boulder set in the ground that had the words ADAMSTOWN CIRCLE WEST cut into it. "Stop looking so shocked! Your precious hockey field is safe."

"Well, it better be, we have a game with Naas on Saturday," Uchenna said. "So where are the tinkers, then?"

"Nobody knows."

"You are turning into Mystery Girl all of a sudden," Uchenna said, giving Emer a weird look. "If nobody knows where the tinkers are, then how do we know they're here in the first place?"

"It's the horses," Emer said.

Uchenna stopped where she was on the sidewalk and looked at Emer. "Horses *here?*" she said. "Oh, wait a minute. Is this some horses from one of the big stud farms out behind the development? What that big one's name?"

"Airlie Stud," Emer said. "Nope. These are not any of those fancy purebreds. Donal and Ruairi say they're tinker ponies."

Uchenna shook her head. "Okay, so where are they?"

"Out behind my house!" Emer said. "Well, almost. You know where the second field back is, on the right side of my circle? In there. We should go see."

Uchenna looked at her friend a little oddly as they headed down the steps together. "Didn't think you were all that much of a horse person," Uchenna said.

"I'm not! But I've never seen any of these up close. Can't wait."

"You're never going to go in the *field* with them?" Uchenna said, mystified by the sudden interest.

"I am! I've always wanted to see some of these shaggy ones up close. Now they're right behind my house, almost. It's like they're mine." Emer was actually grinning, and those pale blue eyes of hers were alight with excitement as the breeze whipped her hair around. "Nobody can say anything to me I go look at them. And anyway, if we don't do it now, they might be gone in the morning!"

"Yeah, they might," Uchenna said. "And don't you think you should be careful? Because whatever tinkers put them there might get pissed off at you if they see you messing with them." *And there mig*

be trouble, Uchenna thought. Traveling people had a reputation for being violent sometimes, especially when settled people meddled in their doings.

“Well, I’m not gonna mess with them. But anyway, there’s no sign of any tinkers around right now,” Emer said. “Which is really weird.”

“Yeah, you’d be right there,” Uchenna said, pausing for a moment in the school gateway. From off to their left, in the distance, came the clear, carrying *honk* of a northbound train slowing down to come into the Adamstown station: up on the platform she could see some of the kids from school, waiting to catch the train into Dublin or up toward the shopping centre at Tallaght and the Luas tram line there.

“You think anybody else is over there right now?” Uchenna said, considering.

“I don’t know,” Emer said. “But if they are, they won’t stay forever. It’ll start getting dark in a while and when it does, we can just slip over there. I have a way back into that field, a few houses down from mine. They don’t have a wall: it’s a chainlink fence, and it’s loose on one side. We can just walk through. Or there are about five other ways to get back there.”

Uchenna turned and paused to look both ways down the street in front of the school, making sure no late school-run SUVs were bearing down on them: then the two of them went across. “Well, I guess I was going to see how these horses’ knees go,” Uchenna said. “I can do that looking through the fence.”

“Oh, come on, you know you want to go in the field with them!”

They turned down the street and headed westward down the sidewalk, past the plateglass-windowed stores and the multistory apartments in the town-center part of Adamstown, toward the housing-development side. “In the *mud*? Girl, you are insane.”

“There’s no mud!”

“It’s a field,” Uchenna said, quoting her dad. “There’s always mud.” But at the same time, she was thinking, *If I don’t go in there with her, she’s gonna get herself trampled or something. Two of us will be safer than one. Especially if somebody comes along. And if you’re going to be in a field with horses, maybe you should bring them something—*

That was when the idea hit her. “Okay,” Uchenna said. “I’ll go with you. But we have to go to my house first.”

“Why?”

“I have a plan.”

“What? Tell me!”

“No,” Uchenna said.

“Yes!”

“No!”

And they kept saying *Yes!* and *No!* to each other—with occasional breaks for laughter and argument, and some discussion of the day at school—for something like ten of the fifteen minutes it took them to walk the mile past the town center to the place where the biggest housing developments started. They were both lucky to live in two of the largest and oldest ones, but then both their sets of parents were pretty well off, like a lot of other people in Adamstown—that being mostly how you were able to afford to live there. There was, of course, some so-called “socially affordable” housing off to one side closer to the town: poky-looking little pebble-dashed two bedroom houses squashed together side by side in long terraces, very flimsy and cheap-looking next to the big handsome four- and five-bedroom houses scattered around the outside of the Adamstown development and the big apartments concentrated by the train station. Uchenna had heard her dad saying quietly to her mam that he thought the socially-affordable houses had been built badly on purpose, so that the developer—forced to build them by the government, and now apparently unable to sell them—would eventually have an excuse to pull them down and build something more expensive on the same site.

On this side of town, though, the houses were big and separate from one another, with large green yards and attached two-car garages, or separate ones with carports between them and the houses. There were three big circles back here with houses arranged all around them: Uchenna’s was the third one, the middlemost circle which was also furthest back on the westward side. Right out the back of the circle, between the houses and past the side walls that separated their back yards, you could just get a glimpse of the high concrete wall that separated the circle from the empty green field behind it. Away westward, past the fields and the hedgerows that separated them, a long low bumpy green-tinted line could be seen: the silhouette of the little line of hills separating this part of County Dublin from the eastward side of County Meath.

As they headed back into the circle, Uchenna could see her mam’s big Toyota Landcruiser parked in the driveway already. “Is she off today?” Emer said. “Usually she’s not here yet.”

“No, she just gets done faster sometimes on Thursdays,” Uchenna said. “Some of the people she takes care of in the hospital have dialysis today, so they come in really early in the morning and she sees them then.”

They swung up past the SUV and headed for the back door, up at the side of the house before the garage. Most of the houses in the circle looked pretty much alike: a big living room and kitchen and utility room and one bedroom and bathroom downstairs, then three more bedrooms and two bathrooms upstairs, with the upstairs windows sticking out under separate dormers from the blue slate roof. Uchenna’s house was the only one in the circle that was painted white: it had been the showhouse for the development, the first one built, and it had older plantings around it than the other houses, as well as a trimmed hedge on each side instead of the concrete-block walls that the newer houses had.

She rattled the latch of the back door and found it unlocked. Uchenna pushed the door in. The utility room was humming with a wash running in the washing machine: a couple of plastic laundry baskets full of dirty clothes stood around on the tile floor, waiting their turn to be washed. “Mam?” Uchenna said.

“In here, sweet,” said her mother from the kitchen.

They went in. The kitchen was bigger than those in some of the other houses in the circle, partly because it had been an office as well when the house was still the showhouse. A round dining table

stood by the rear window that looked out on the back yard: toward the front of the kitchen, the breakfast bar looked through into the living room. In there, the big widescreen TV was showing one of the local TV station's afternoon talk shows, where a man was busily cooking while the two female hosts looked on. Relaxing against the breakfast bar, sipping a mug of tea and idly watching the TV while holding the wireless phone against her head, was Uchenna's Mam. Flora Alele Debe-McConno was easily six feet tall: a little broad-shouldered, but otherwise slender and high-cheekboned, with a gorgeous smooth dark complexion and beautiful eyes that were tilted up at the corners. This catlike tilt often made Uchenna's dad call her mam Kitty or Flowerpuss, which in turn occasionally caused Uchenna's mam to whack her dad in the head with a pillow or pretend to strangle him with her stethoscope. She was still wearing her white medical coat from work, and hadn't gotten around to taking off the bright patterned scarf that she had put on over her cornrows for the wards.

"Hi Uchenna's Mam!" Emer said.

"Hallo Emer dear," Uchenna's Mam said, glancing over at them and smiling. "You two are early today. No sports?"

"Not till tomorrow, Mam," Uchenna said, dumping her schoolbag on the back table and then going to hug her mam. "Hockey practice then. You on hold?"

"Waiting for daddy," Uchenna's mam said. "He said maybe we would go out for dinner tonight. But I think he has to work late. His software team just got broken up again, he's got to put some new people into the open positions..." She sighed and turned away to lean the back of her head against the breakfast bar instead of the front. "What's the homework like tonight, girls?"

"Got it mostly done already," Uchenna said. "But we have to go to the library." She threw Emer a cunning look that said, *No we don't, just play along with me.*

"You could've stopped there on the way home," Uchenna's mam said. "Not like you to backtrack, sweet." Then she rolled her eyes in annoyance at the phone. "The world's biggest software company, she said, "you'd think they could afford some hold music that didn't sound like a broken music box."

"I just wanted to dump my bag, mam," Uchenna said. "And there's some stuff in the back office I needed."

"Okay," her mam said. "So what about dinner, girls? If your dad wants to go after all," she said, glancing at Uchenna.

"Ooh, I don't know yet..." Uchenna said. "And we should ask Emer's mom."

"I think she'll be okay," Emer said. "I'll call."

Uchenna's mam suddenly waved at them to be quiet a moment. "Barry? Yes, of course I am. No. No, can't." She made a helpless look, waved at Uchenna again as she and Emer headed out the back door.

The two of them headed back under the carport and into the back yard. It was shaped like a third of a doughnut, with the house being where the hole would have been. Right behind the house was a decking patio with some lawn furniture and an umbrella table, everything still covered up after the recent rain.

But away from the deck led a flagstone path across the rear lawn, and at the far side of the lawn, under the curved wall, was a tall, broad-crowned tree. Under the tree was a little two-roomed house with a low peaked bungalow roof just like the one on the main house.

“This is so cool,” Emer said as they made their way back under the branches of the tree, where they shaded the little house’s tiny front porch and scaled-down wooden front door. “I wish I had something like this...”

Uchenna went fishing for the little key she kept hanging on a chain around her neck. She pulled it out and unlocked the front door. There was no question that the “back office” was very cool. When this had been a show house, the little house out in the back had been the development’s main site office, a supplement to the tables that got stacked full of paperwork and brochures up in what was now the house’s living room and kitchen. When Uchenna’s folks had bought the house, her dad had looked at this little temporary building, under the tree, and said, “I wonder...” and had then wound up paying the company a little extra to keep it in place.

She remembered her mam giving him a strange look at the time. “What for, Barry?” she’d said.

“Oh, I don’t know. An office...”

When she’d heard that, her mam had laughed. Because he was a software project leader, Uchenna’s dad already spent so much time up at Microsoft that her mam sometimes teased him about needing to buy a second home up on the corporate campus by the airport. Sure enough, he never spent any time at all in the little shed out in the back, and Uchenna took it over within about a month of them moving in.

Now she and Emer slipped in and Uchenna closed the front door after them. It made a sound only a little more solid than the sound you got from closing one of the kitchen cupboards. The shed’s walls were thin, the ceiling was thin, even the floor bounced a little when you stepped on it: the little sliding windows were single-glazed and their frames were about as heavy as the upstairs shower stall in the house. The blue and green carpet tiles on the floor were peeling away at the corners in places, and the curtains hanging at the windows were made of the kind of cheap thin blue plaid plastic normally used to cover picnic tables. But Uchenna didn’t care. Against the plain white walls of the long room she had everything she needed—an old sofa from the family’s last house, a couple of chests of drawers from her mam and dad’s old bedroom, the old desk from her bedroom back in the first little house in Stillorgan. And there were a lot of things out here she didn’t strictly need, like just about every stuffed toy her folks had ever given her since she was five. She could never bear to get rid of them, and now the forty or fifty members of the Zoo Crew, as Uchenna called them, were piled up at the end of the room in a trainwreck of wildly colored plush and pile. But they just made it all seem that much more homelike to her, emphasizing that this was *her* space. Out here Uchenna could do her schoolwork without feeling like her folks were hanging over her shoulder watching her: and outside she could hear the quiet, or the birds singing, if she didn’t feel like running her CD player.

Right now, though, Uchenna dropped to her knees in front of one of the chests of drawers and started rummaging through the drawers, one after another. Emer stood over her and looked at what Uchenna was doing with mild bemusement. “Look at all the junk in there...” she said.

“Not junk!” said Uchenna, slamming one drawer shut and opening another. “Artifacts.”

Emer giggled at the fancy vocabulary. Uchenna ignored her, pushing the wildly assorted drawer-contents aside. “Here’s what we need...”

From under a pile of old socks and manga books and plastic jewelry and comics and pens and pencils and plastic-covered childhood diaries she pulled out a plastic shopping bag. “Here,” she said, and handed it to Emer, and went hunting for another.

Emer looked at the bag, then gave Uchenna a puzzled glance. “We could have bought these at the Spa for fifteen cent,” she said.

Uchenna shook her head. “Twenty-five,” she said. “They raised it last month.” She grinned at her friend. “You really weren’t listening in the current events unit yesterday, were you. Anyway, why pay when you’ve got them? We’re recycling. And not just these.”

Emer looked mystified as Uchenna got up off her knees and headed for the door. “What?” she said. And then, “Oh! Wait, I get it—”

Uchenna went out the door and stood peering up into the tree. Emer paused on the doorstep. “You want me to lock this now?”

“Yeah, sure—”

Emer pulled the door closed and came out onto the lawn to join Uchenna. “Anyway, it’s a brilliant idea,” Emer said.

Uchenna grinned. “Yeah, if we can just get some down...”

The tree above them was yet another leftover from past times...but this one was from a time long before the showhouse, before anyone had even thought of Adamstown. Once there had been not just pasture land here, but farmland too. Indeed there were still lots of little once-upon-a-farm fields scattered around the outer edges of the town, tiny hedged-in pieces of property the developers hadn’t been interested in buying and which weren’t big enough for the farmers to sell to anyone else. Some of them still had remnants of old farm buildings in them, broken-down pigsties or cattle sheds, now reduced to piles of gray stone and rubble with ancient trees growing through them. And some of those trees were fruit trees, survivors or escapees from some old orchard that had been located near here. This one, an apple tree, had been left inside the boundary of the development by accident, so the developers had told Uchenna’s dad. Someone had made some kind of surveying error that would have cost too much to fix, so they’d left the tree where it was and built the wall as planned right behind it. But the accident was a happy one as far as Uchenna was concerned. The tree’s droopy branches shaded the little Back Office shed, protecting it from the hottest weather in the summertime. And it looked much better than the other plantings around the development, most of which were brand new, spindly little rowan trees about five feet tall and about as thick as pencils.

Uchenna loved the apple tree because it was old... possibly one of the very few things in Adamstown that were. Well, maybe not *incredibly* old. When a branch on it had gotten cracked last year during a storm, and her dad had gone up on a ladder and sawn it down, Uchenna had seen that the branch had about sixty rings on it. But much more important than the tree’s age—though it was cool that it was older than her dad or mam—were the apples. They were starting to peep out from between the

branches now: but they hadn't yet begun to fall. They were quite big apples already, and they were green.

Standing beside Uchenna, Emer looked up into the branches. "It's a great idea," she said, "but someone's gonna have to climb up there after them, and I know who that's gonna be."

"I can climb!" Uchenna said.

"You can *fall*," Emer said, sounding resigned. "I saw you on the ropes in PE last week. Let me." She went over around the back side of the Back Office, where the tree trunk rose up out of the space between the wall and the shed, and started to climb up the slightly slanted lower part of the trunk. "How many do you want?"

Uchenna shook her head. "Don't know. How many do you think it'll take to keep some horses still long enough to see how their legs go?"

Emer paused at the place where the trunk switched back on itself, choosing which of the next two big branches to climb on. "Hey, I'm no horse expert. You tell me."

"It'd help if I knew how many there were...."

"Five," Emer said, struggling up and out of sight. A rain of small branches and loose bark started coming down: Uchenna tried to move away from the tree enough to avoid the junk coming down without losing sight of Emer.

"Two each?" Emer said. Two came thumping down onto the grass under the tree, one of them narrowly missing Uchenna's head.

"Better make it three," Uchenna said, thinking about the horses' legs again. "I'm going to have to draw them, so they'd better stay where they are for a while."

"Is this something for art class?" Emer said, throwing down another three.

"Ow! No."

"Then why waste time drawing them?" Emer said. "Just use your phone to take pictures of how their knees go."

Uchenna shook her head in admiration. "I am not the brilliant one. *You* are!"

The only response was that more apples pelted down onto the grass. Uchenna let out a silent sigh of resignation. Sooner or later she was going to get Emer to agree out loud when someone said something nice about her, but she was probably going to have to trick her friend into it: the self-confidence thing was the only American trait that didn't seem to have made it across the water with Emer. Everything else was there, including the loudness, which it had taken her a year or so to get under control, but was fortunately still there when needed.

Uchenna took a count of the apples that were on the ground. "Okay," she said, "maybe just a few more and the bag'll be full."

Two more thumped down, and there was a pause. The third one hit Uchenna right on the foot.

“Ow!” She hopped around, picking up the apple and staring up into the leaves, half tempted to throw back up there. “You did that on purpose!”

Emer’s face looked out from the leaves. “If I’d meant to hit you,” she said, looking annoyed, “no way it’d have taken me *that* long.”

Uchenna had to grin. While Emer hated all the sports their school played, she loved one that almost wasn’t played in Ireland: baseball. Back at her old school in America she’d been a pitcher on the girl softball team, and every now and then, when she and Uchenna would play catch in her yard, Emer would demonstrate that when she wanted to hit something, or alternately *not* to hit it, that was exactly what happened. “I guess that one bounced off a branch?” Uchenna said.

“Bloody right.”

Uchenna grinned harder. Emer normally didn’t use even mild swearwords: when one popped out, it was a sign it was time to stop teasing her. “Okay,” Uchenna said. “Looks like enough.”

“Great.”

Emer shinnied down again and stood there brushing herself off while Uchenna bagged the apples. Then the two of them headed back past the house. Even through the door to the kitchen, Uchenna could hear her mam was still on the phone. “Well, when do you think?—Okay— no, that’s fine with me, but if you can’t—”

“Shouldn’t we tell her where we’re going?” Emer whispered as they headed down the driveway.

“Why? She wants me, she’ll call,” Uchenna said. “They haven’t decided what they want to do yet. And it’s not like we can’t be back in ten minutes. Now—which way should we go?”

Emer glanced around. “Follow me,” she said.

2: In The Field

It wasn't that Uchenna couldn't think of a way to get where they were going. The space beyond the concrete walls at the back of the developed properties was full of little paths worn through the crabgrass, leading to places where the hedgerows of the older fields still traced a maze of lines drawn in thorny greenery across the landscape. Every kid who lived in this part of Adamstown knew at least three or four different ways to leave the house and get around the developments with varying levels of speed or difficulty, and with or without being seen. But personal preference was also an issue, and since Emer knew where she was going, Uchenna was willing to believe she knew the best way to get there. Now Emer led her out of Uchenna's circle the way they'd come, angled over toward the next circle of houses on the north side, and there took a narrow dirt path just to the right of the house that was nearest the spot where the three circles touched. That path went between the little patch of grass where the boulder with the circle's name on it stood and the wall of the nearest house, one of the few in the circle that was empty at the moment.

At the end of the path was a gap between the house's side wall and the wall that defined the edge of the next development along. Emer and Uchenna slipped down between these walls, watching where they walked, because the hard dirt of the path was littered with junk: stomped-on energy drink cans, broken vodka bottles. At the far end of the path Emer paused, waving a hand back at Uchenna for her to wait while Emer stuck her head around the corner and had a look around. Then she glanced back at Uchenna. "It's okay," she said. "I don't see anybody. Come on—"

They headed out into the open space, staying on the path close to the wall that shut away the next part of the Adamstown development on their right. To their left was a wide landscape of green patches of field hemmed in by uneven hedges, with a long line of high-tension towers striding along from north to south about half a mile away. Even at this distance you could hear the whining of the wind in those big wires, a faint noise that fought successfully with the lower, rushing sound of the nearby N7 motorway as the traffic tore along it towards Naas. In the late afternoon sky, the black bird-shapes of rooks wheeled and dipped in the wind, playing with the air and making distant metallic gronking noises.

They went along at a fast walk for about five minutes before one of the hedges in front of them ran directly into the wall to their right, actually growing up against it somewhat now. Here Emer waved Uchenna off to the left, and they followed the hedge to a place where there was a hole in it big enough for them to creep through. "Watch the thorns—" Emer said, ducking through the hole.

I should have changed first...! Uchenna thought: she was not going to get through that hole as easily as Emer. But she pushed the apple bag through the hole, then grabbed her skirt with both hands and tightened it around her before she slipped herself into the gap in the hedge. The spikes and spines of the hawthorn bushes that made up the hedge grazed Uchenna in a few places, and she sucked in breath as one of them dug hard into her arm as she came out on the other side.

"You okay?" Emer said as Uchenna straightened up.

"It got me a little," Uchenna said, brushing at the scratch on her arm. "Not bad. Come on."

~~Past the hedge, it was easier to see the developments further on. The trampled-down path angled away from the wall on the right, where the developed part of Adamstown pinched in a little and then bubbled out again in another set of circles. These were smaller than Uchenna's, as were the houses in them: in the second phase of building, the construction company had probably decided it could make more money by packing more houses onto the same amount of land. Behind them, on the field side of the wall, there were also more houses that weren't part of the development. Here little dirt or gravel roads, or tiny rubble-paved driveways, ran from small isolated cottages or old farmhouses to the narrow road that ran behind Adamstown and up to the wider county road north of the development and the school: and many more scraggly hedgerows divided the houses and their little fields from one another.~~

Emer paused again before they took the path that headed off to their left. She glanced behind them to see if anyone had followed them: but there was no one in sight. "Great. See them, there they are—!"

She trotted ahead on the path, Uchenna following. Another hedgerow lay across the path ahead of them, but at an angle: it was met by yet another hedge near the development wall, not far from where Emer's house was—in fact Uchenna could see Emer's upstairs bedroom window from here. The two of them angled rightwards around the place where the hedges met.

And there, inside the hedge, grazing, were the horses.

It seemed quiet, all of a sudden, as the two of them stood there and looked into the field. Five horses were there, as Emer had said. All of them were black and white, in various patterns, except for one that was almost all dirty white. Uchenna stared at them: and one after another, the horses' heads came up, and they stared back. Even the smallest of them was as tall at the shoulder as she was. *They're really big!* she thought. *Even the little one. I don't want to go in there, I don't care what Emer says!*

But Emer was already working her way down toward where there was a gap in the old hedge that faced the development. Someone had banged an old wooden post into the ground there, maybe a chunk of a broken telephone pole, and had tied an ancient salvaged tubular metal yard gate to it. The other side of the gate was simply tied with more frayed moss-green rope to the thick branches of the hawthorn bush on the far side of the gap in the hedge. "Come on!" Emer said, and got up on the first rung of the yard gate, starting to climb over it.

"You're gonna fall right on your head," Uchenna said under her breath, hurrying forward to hold the gate so that it wouldn't wobble while Emer was on it. "Will you just *wait?*"

"Thanks," Emer said, getting one foot up onto the second-from-the-top rung of the gate. She swung herself around so that she was on the inside facing out, and started climbing down again.

As she came down inside, Uchenna looked at where Emer was standing. "My dad was right," she said. "There's the mud."

Emer looked at it and sniffed. "It's hardly wet," she said. "Just soft where they've been stepping on it a lot. Come on." She put the bag down and held the gate.

The horses, one by one, were lowering their heads to graze again. Once they were all grazing, Uchenna

went up the gate. She did it more slowly than Emer, partly because she suddenly really did not want to be doing this. “If they start looking at me or anything—” she said as she climbed.

Emer didn't say a word, but her smile was both understanding and scornful. Uchenna swallowed and then set her face in what was meant to look like an I-don't-care expression: but whether it would fool Emer was another story. *And whether it'll fool them—!* Uchenna swung herself around with her back to the field, as Emer had, and burst into a sweat. Suddenly the breeze which would have been a comfort right now had dropped away to nothing: and everything had gone very quiet—she could actually hear the soft tearing sound of the horses pulling up their mouthfuls of grass from the ground. *Fine. As long as they're biting the grass and not me—*

She came down and turned right around. As she did, once more the horses' heads came up. “Uh oh...” Uchenna said.

But nothing else happened for the moment, except the horses' jaws went around and around while they chewed their last mouthfuls and stared at the girls. Uchenna wasn't anywhere near feeling relaxed, but she leaned against the gate and looked the horses over, fairly certain she wasn't going to have to run away just now.

They looked nothing like the horses that Uchenna sometimes saw on the racing channel that her dad watched on weekend afternoons. Those were glossy creatures with long slender legs, narrow heads, straight noses and flowing tails. *These* horses were big-barreled, with heavyish legs, outward-curving noses, and big broad hooves plastered with dried mud: some of the hooves had long straggly dirty hair hanging down behind them. And the horses weren't all one color, like the racehorses usually were. They were patchy, with big blotches of color on them, mostly black on white: though a couple of them had brown patches that overlapped the black ones in places. All of them had big dark eyes that seemed to be looking at Uchenna and Emer almost sadly: but it looked like a patient hopeless sort of sorrow, the kind that would just sigh at life and say “Oh well.”

“They really are big,” Uchenna said under her breath. When they shifted, you could feel the thump of their hooves against the ground. “Specially that one.”

She pointed with her chin at the one horse that wasn't patchy-colored, just dingy white. The horse's belly was twice the size of those of the other horses, and hung down further: when the horse moved, it did so slowly, as if all that weight was a burden.

“Yeah, which reminds me,” Emer said. “When's your mam's due date?”

“*That* reminds you?” Uchenna said, shocked.

Emer gave Uchenna a you-poor-innocent kind of look. “Chen,” she said, “that's a *mammy* horse. Or she's gonna be a mammy real soon. What'd you think, that she'd just been hitting the chips too hard?”

Uchenna went hot. “Look,” she said, “I don't know how to tell the boys from the girls with these guys. They're not exactly my main subject.”

“The boys have boy stuff hanging down,” Emer said, pointing. “Or most of it. See that one's butt? They took them off. It's called ‘gelding’, it makes them not go crazy around the girls.”

Uchenna raised her eyebrows, thinking that there were some boys at school who should be told about this technique, if only to see the looks on their faces. “So we’ve got one, two...three guys.”

“And two girls. Maybe the other girl is a friend of the mammy’s.”

“Well, they get apples first,” Uchenna said.

Each of them cautiously threw an apple toward the mammy horse and her friend. The horses started with surprise: the mammy horse’s friend, mostly black with a white nose, actually reared up on her hind legs a little to get away from the apple, and at the big sudden motion a flush of terror went right over Uchenna in a wave. But a moment later the horses quieted down and stood still again, and looked at the apples suspiciously.

“Come on, guys,” Uchenna said under her breath, “you think we hauled these all the way over here for our health?” She took another apple out of the bag and rolled it over toward one of the boy horses, one who was mostly white with a black patch on his back like a saddle, and had a black nose-end. When it stopped rolling, he looked at it, then dropped his nose to it and smelled it, making a loud whuffly noise. “Eames,” Uchenna said, watching him, “how come they’re all so shaggy? I didn’t know horses came like that.”

Emer shrugged. “It’s like people,” she said: “you have to give them haircuts every now and then. Also I think when you leave them out in the open a lot, the hair grows faster so they don’t get cold.”

The boy horse with the black patch was starting to work out that the apple was something nice. He bit it in two: Uchenna could hear the sharp crunch of it from ten feet away. Then he straightened up, chewing, and the two other boy horses looked at him with interest. One of them went over to the other half of the apple, snuffled at it, and picked it up in his mouth, mumbling it around like he wasn’t sure what to do with it.

“Where did they come from?” Emer said, leaning beside her and holding out the plastic bag to Uchenna. The second boy horse was chewing, now, and the third one had come over to him to see what he had.

Emer shook her head as she dug into the bag for another apple. “It’s too far to walk them over here from the road,” she said. “Somebody must have brought them in a trailer or something...”

“But why?” Uchenna said. “Who do they belong to?” She pulled out an apple too, threw it toward the mammy horse.

Emer shook her head again. “Maybe somebody who knows whoever owns this field,” she said. “I think people rent their fields out sometimes so that other people can graze their cows or sheep or whatever on them...”

Uchenna shrugged. Though she’d been born in Ireland, this was part of life here she didn’t really know much about. She was a city kid: or at least she’d thought of herself that way until the family moved here. The family’s previous house had been buried deep in miles and miles of suburbs, all front yards and driveways as far as the eye could see: pastures and fields with crops growing in them were something you didn’t see until you got on the motorway to go for a Sunday drive or to go to the

airport. She could still remember her shock when the family had flown back from London, once, and she'd looked down as they landed and seen the cows grazing in fields just past the runway.

Now one of the boy horses took a couple of steps toward them. Uchenna began feeling nervous again as the other horses' heads had come up, and they were watching their braver friend to see what he did. "How many apples have we got left?" she said to Emer.

Emer dug around in the rusty plastic bag. "Six..."

"No way this is going to come out even," Uchenna said, as a second of the boy horses took a step toward them. "That first one's taking everybody else's share. Greedy pig!— Look, just throw the apples out there, let them sort it out."

Emer rolled the remaining apples across the grass to the horses. The two boys and the mammy horse and black-and-white friend moved forward, nosing at the apples as Uchenna turned to climb back up the gate. It wobbled.

"Hey, wait for me," Emer said. But Uchenna was halfway over already. Emer braced the gate while the horses snuffled at the apples, picking them up and then chomping on them, so that small pieces and chunks sprayed in various directions around the grass. Uchenna turned and hopped down and braced the gate for Emer: Emer climbed up and over, and came down beside Uchenna.

For a few moments more they watched the horses squabble gently over the remaining bits of apple on the poached-up ground, snorting at each other and shoving each other out of the way. Only the mammy horse hung back, watching the others, looking sad and extremely heavy: when she moved, she let out a little whuff of breath that almost sounded like a moan.

"She hardly got any," Uchenna said under her breath. "Poor thing." She glanced around the little field. It wasn't big—maybe the size of the property her house stood on, or a little more than that. And there wasn't that much grass in it. A lot of what there was had already been grazed down short. "This can't be all they eat," she said to Emer. "It's almost all gone, and they just got here."

Emer shook her head. "I think they have to have other food too," she said. "I don't know. Oats? Some kind of grain, anyway. And hay sometimes."

"We should keep an eye on them," Uchenna said. "See who brings them food."

"See *if* anybody brings them food..." Uchenna said.

In her pocket, her phone suddenly rang, starting to sing "Don't Worry, Be Happy" at the top of its little lungs. In the field, the horses shied and stamped their feet: two of them actually turned and ran to the other end of the little field, then turned around again and stood staring.

"Oh no, it's mam," Uchenna said.

"Were we at the library yet?" Emer said as they hurried back along the path.

"I don't know," Uchenna said, "wait a moment..." She got the phone out, snapped it open. "Hello?"

“Where’d you go off to in such a hurry?” her mam said. “You dad finally got his mind made up, he’ll be home in an hour.”

“Are we going out?” Uchenna said, glancing over her shoulder at the field. Things seemed to be quieting down in there: and as they left, she saw one head come up: the dirty white head of the Mammy Horse, looking after them with that same sad, tired expression.

“No, he’s bringing pizza,” her mam said. “Will you stop at the Spar on the way back, sweet? Get a big bottle of white lemonade and a big bottle of Coke. And a loaf of bread: we’re almost out.”

“Okay, mam,” Uchenna said. “I’ll call you on the way back. Bye!” And she hung up.

“Come on,” she said to Emer, turning around on the path. “We have to go to the shops.”

They headed back the way they’d come: the path past the field would bring them up against the development wall again, and a little further down that way was a path that would lead between two of the circles to the road that went up to the smaller of the two Adamstown shopping areas. “You didn’t even have to say we were at the library or whatever,” Emer said.

“I didn’t have to,” Uchenna said. “She talked herself into it.”

Emer smiled. “Parents,” she said. “Once you get them trained, they’re not so much trouble.”

Uchenna wasn’t so sure. Though her mam could be very easygoing, there were times—mostly when Uchenna’s dad got her thinking that way—that she could be really stern and tough to deal with. But Uchenna’s mind wasn’t on that right now. It was once more on the Mammy Horse, as they went past the tied-on tubular gate and past the little field again. As the path they were on went through another hedgerow and out the other side, Uchenna paused and looked back at the Mammy Horse, standing there with her head down, looking tired.

“It’s January, by the way,” Uchenna said.

“What?”

“Mam’s due date.”

“Oh!”

“January fourteenth.”

“Cool,” Emer said. But her glance followed Uchenna’s, back toward the field. “You’re gonna start worrying about *her* now,” Emer said, sounding resigned.

“I have other things to worry about,” Uchenna said. She started digging around in her pockets for her coin purse. “We have to get minerals at the Spar. And bread. Don’t know if I’ve got enough, and I don’t want to go all the way home again—”

But by the time they’d come out of the fields and back into the world of pavements and shops and concrete walls, and were walking up to the first apartment building, the one with the glass-fronted

Spar convenience store in it, they had gone through all available pockets and come up with six Euro and forty-three cent, which would be just about enough for what they had to buy. Uchenna and Emer pushed through the usual small front-of-store crowd of tweens and teens idling away the time before they had to go home, went in, and got the big bottles of lemon soda and Coke, and a loaf of the perfectly square plastic-wrapped bread that Uchenna's mam loved and her dad condemned as "sliced white bathroom sponge" while at the same time eating vast amounts of it toasted and smothered with butter. Uchenna's taste ran more to the crunchy French baguettes that the shop sold as sandwiches, but she didn't have enough for one right now, and anyway there would be pizza soon. "Is there enough for gum?" Emer said, poking through the change as they walked away from the counter with their bag of bottles and bread.

"You and your gum," Uchenna said. "You should get off that stuff. It makes you look like a camel."

Emer punched Uchenna in the arm, though not terribly hard. Uchenna snickered at her as they went out the automatic doors. There would have been more of this, but as they walked out of the store Emer's phone went off, peeping shrilly—it was one of those chirping ringtones that only kids and some freak adults could hear—and she pulled it out. "Yeah— Hi, Mom, oh I'm glad you called, I was going to call you, can I have supper at Uchenna's?— Yeah— Yeah, it's okay with her mam. Pizza. Yeah. Seven *thirty*? Oh, come on, mom, we'll hardly even have time to finish eating— Well, *nine!*" There was a long pause, during which Emer rolled her eyes expressively. "Okay, okay," she said at last. "Eight *thirty*. Yeah. Okay, bye."

Emer put her phone away with a sigh. "Blah blah blah school night, blah blah blah homework..." she said. "You know how she is."

"I thought you had her trained," Uchenna said.

Emer punched her again, harder this time. "Do I need this from you?"

Uchenna just laughed at her friend. The shadows were getting long and the sun had dipped down behind the hills to the west as they made their way back to Uchenna's circle and up the driveway. The circle was getting full of cars now as people got home from work or school at one of the colleges between here and Dublin. It wasn't long before Uchenna's dad came along in the family's other car, a Audi estate wagon. Uchenna and Emer ran out to help him bring the pizza in: as usual her dad had brought four of them, more than they could all possibly eat. "Old hacker's bad habits," he said as he came in after the girls and dropped his briefcase on the washing machine before going into the kitchen and hugging and kissing Uchenna's mam. "Always buy twice as much pizza as you need, you might want it in the middle of the night..."

Uchenna turned away to hide a grin, because sometimes they were so cute together even if they were old—the tall skinny redheaded guy with his freckles and buzzcut, and the tall handsome broad-shouldered black woman, out of her doctor-coat now and changed into jeans and a floppy T-shirt.

Supper was a casual business as usual when they weren't having guests or other family over. The table became a scatter of Independent Pizza boxes and plates and bottles and glasses and paper napkins, and two sets of conversations got going, crossing around and through each other many times: Uchenna and Emer talking about science projects and school lunches and the stupidity of boys, Uchenna's mam and dad talking about commuting problems and people at work and the newest really annoying

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