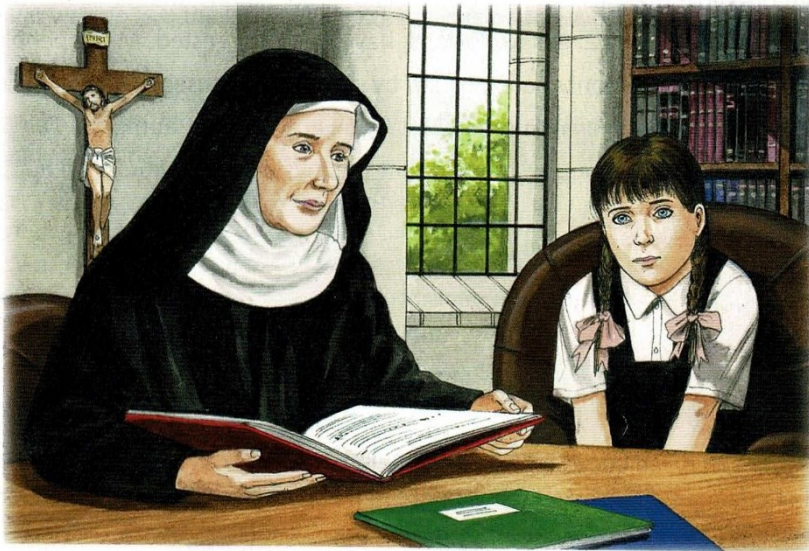


The Maguires

Bernadette, also known as Blue, would love to find a family of her own and leave the orphanage. The Maguire family want to foster a little girl as they have three boys of their own. Blue hopes that they will be a nice family. She goes to visit them but she is not so sure that all is what it seems.

Blue's longing to find a family of her own continued, even after her disappointment with the Hickeys. She was sure that somewhere in the world there was someone she could love or care for who would love her right back.

Sister Gabriel was the nun in charge of placements. Blue was called to see her and when she told the nun of her wish Sister Gabriel's face filled with concern. 'You know how difficult it is to find a placement once you get older, Bernadette. All the families tend to want the same thing, a baby or a small child.'



'I know,' said Blue. But she was adamant she wanted to try and find a family of her own, no matter what.

'I really want to try again, Sister.'

The nun studied the girl in front of her with the piercing blue eyes, who seemed to have spent more time in her office over the past four years than most. A wild child, unsettled, bold, troublesome, lonely were just some of the many words she'd written on the file. Finding a family who would want to take her on would be difficult. Sister Gabriel turned over page after page of her file.

'I do have another couple here on my list, the Maguires. Small farmers, they only recently applied for a visit. They have three children, three boys I believe.'

Three boys. Blue imagined that could be fun.

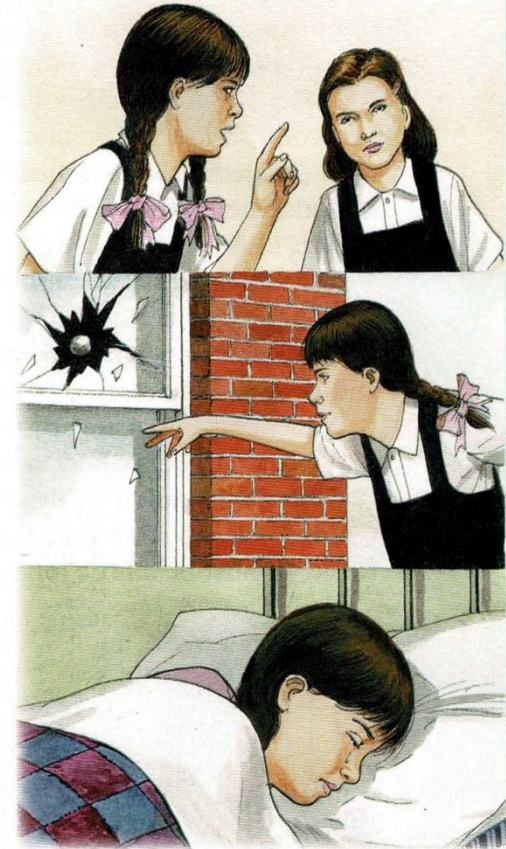
'Apparently Mrs Maguire would really like to host or foster a girl about your age for the summer, as she wants some female company.'

Blue's heart lifted. Someone who wanted a girl, wanted a girl to talk to.

'I could set up a preliminary visit with them if you want. It would be a chance for all of you to get to know each other.'

'Yes, please,' agreed Blue, keeping her fingers crossed.

Sister Gabriel arranged for the Maguires to come and meet herself and Blue at Larch Hill first.



Blue was nervous when she stepped into the parlour. She shook each of them by the hand as the nun introduced them. Mr Maguire was a small man with a big round belly and heavy cheeks, who said very little. Mrs Maguire was the total opposite, a tall thin woman with hard, tight features. Her sharp eyes scrutinised every inch of the parlour while they spoke.

Blue listened as the adults discussed her.

'What about school? Is she bright and good at school and her work?' asked the woman.

'Bernadette is an excellent student, very good at her work,' smiled Sister Gabriel. 'All her teachers over the years have said it.'

A look passed between the couple.

'What about her health?'

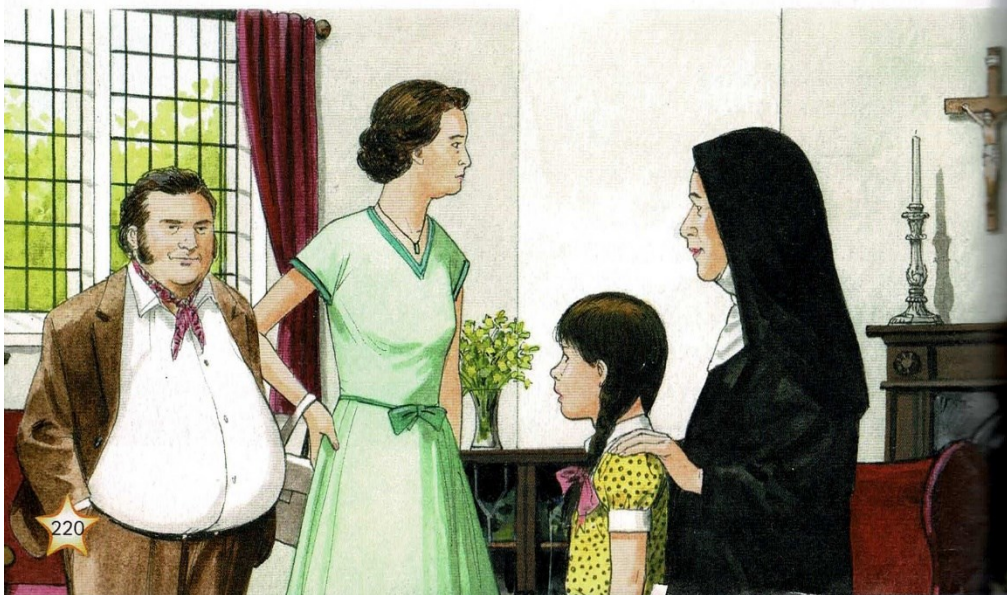
Blue tried to sit up straight and look the epitome of fitness and good health.

'Excellent.'

'Well, that's very good to hear,' nodded Mr Maguire.

'We wouldn't want a sickly child.'

'I believe you are an only child?' Mrs Maguire turned to Blue. 'It must be a little lonely being on your own?'



Blue felt the familiar lump in her throat, as she gave her standard reply. 'In Larch Hill we are never really on our own as there are lots of other children here. Still, it would be nice to have somebody ...'

Her words hung in the air.

She could see Mr Maguire shifting in the big armchair as Mrs Maguire smiled. 'We have three sons, you know. The boys are a great help to Ted with the farm and the animals, but having a girl about the place would be nice.'

By the end of the meeting Sister Gabriel had arranged for Blue to visit the Maguire home the following weekend and stay overnight on Saturday.

'I think you're daft,' warned Mary, as they got ready for bed that night, 'wanting to go and stay with total strangers and waste your time on them.'

'They might be nice,' Blue smiled, hopeful that it was the truth.

'I think it's fishy if they've already got three kids of their own and they're suddenly looking to foster someone.'



'They've only got boys,' she explained.

'So they want someone to dress up in pink dresses and tie bows in her hair, is that it?'

Blue hoped not. She certainly wasn't the pretty, girly type, if that's what the Maguires were expecting.

'Mind your own business, Mary Doyle, and I'll mind mine,' shouted Blue, wiping her face on a towel and banging the door of the bathroom shut behind her.

* * *

Mr Maguire collected her on Saturday morning in a rather battered-looking Ford Anglia. Sister Gabriel had told her the family ran a small dairy just outside the city. Blue imagined fields and animals and a big, warm farmhouse, and had to



admit to slight disappointment as the car pulled up in a yard to the side of a shabby-looking house, in sore need of painting, and a ramshackle collection of outhouses where the cows were kept. The yard was muddy and dirty and everything seemed to smell. She wrinkled her nose.

'Animals and farms smell,' remarked Mr Maguire. 'You'd best get used to it.'

She followed him into a narrow hallway. Mr Maguire took her coat and hung it on the mahogany coat-stand. Blue caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror, her face pale and nervous, her eyes anxious, her hair looking straggly and unkempt despite her best efforts to look neat and tidy. Mrs Maguire suddenly appeared and politely welcomed her, leading the way into the front sitting room. The air smelled of stale cigarette smoke and everything from the large couch and armchairs to the floral-patterned carpets and curtains seemed to be coated in a dim layer of smoky brownness.

'Sit down, Bernadette, and make yourself comfortable. You are most welcome to our home.' The woman smiled.

Blue shifted on the couch. There was an awkward pause, nobody knowing what to say.

'I've just made a pot of tea and some scones,' said Mrs Maguire, disappearing into the kitchen. 'We could all do with a cup, I'm sure.'

Blue followed her, offering to help. The kitchen was small and poky compared to Larch Hill. There was a gas cooker and a fridge and a row of blue-painted presses along one wall.



There was a narrow formica table where, obviously, the family normally dined. Mrs Maguire lit a cigarette, the smoke seeming to calm her as she pointed out where things were and filled a jug with milk.

'You can take that in now, like a good girl.'

Blue placed the tray on the coffee table, leaving space for Mrs Maguire to bring the teapot.

The tea was strong, the scones warm and delicious and Mrs Maguire's thin face lit up with appreciation at Blue's praise.

'I'll give you some to take back to Larch Hill,' she promised.

Blue hoped that there would be a few cherry ones.

'Where are the boys?' asked Blue.

'Frank and Dermot are out playing football and won't be home for another hour or two at least, and Paddy is outside somewhere, playing,' laughed their mother. 'Boys will be boys. They are never around when you need them.'

After a while Mrs Maguire decided to show Blue the rest of the house. There was a small scullery behind the kitchen and a dark, narrow room, which held a long mahogany table and six chairs.

'We hardly use this room,' explained Mrs Maguire. Blue had already guessed that, by the musty smell and the boxes stacked in the four corners.

Upstairs there were four bedrooms and a bathroom.

'This is your room,' Mrs Maguire opened the door to the smallest bedroom.



It barely held the narrow bed and heavy, oak wardrobe. There was a green sateen quilt on the bed and heavy brown and beige curtains, which almost covered the small window that overlooked the farmyard. The room was filled with the smell from the yard. Any hopes of Mary's pink girly bedroom were immediately dashed and Blue swallowed hard, trying to imagine herself sleeping in the lonely bed in that awful room.



'I was trying to air it before you came,' the woman apologised, pulling the window closed. 'You can hang your clothes up here.' Blue felt ashamed when she saw the hangers dangling in the empty space, wishing she had some nice things to hang up instead of the single bottle-green jumper and some tatty, faded underwear.

When they got back downstairs, the Maguires' ten-year-old son Paddy had appeared, and he was busy polishing off two buttered scones. He stared blankly up at her.

'Paddy, be a good boy and show Bernadette the cows,' prompted his mother.

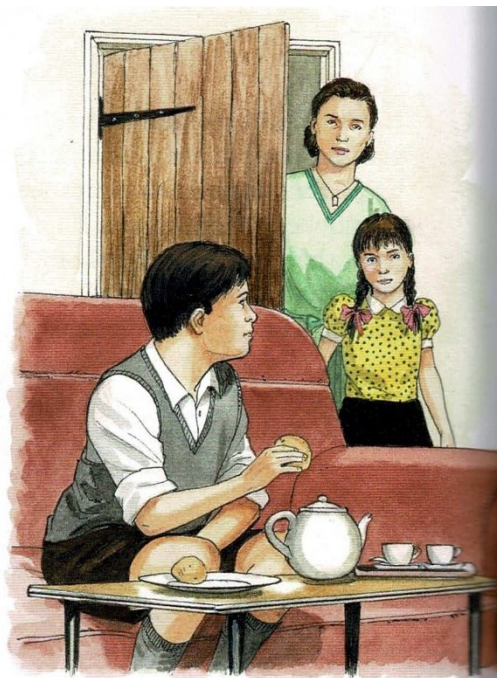
Blue was glad to get outside in the fresh air and followed the boy across the yard, trying not to step in dirt and dung in her good black shoes.

He climbed up on a gate, pointing as he told her the names of some of their small dairy herd. The cows mooed balefully at them.

'Are you coming to live with us?' he asked, unnerving her.

'I don't know yet.' She shrugged.

He made no other comment and asked no other question of her, which she thought was a bit strange, as he showed her how to pat the cows' heads and give them a handful of straw to eat. Over at the far end of the yard there was a pigsty with a large sow and eight pink piglets, all running and squirming and trying to climb up on their mother.



Blue thought the baby pigs were the cutest animals she had ever seen as they squealed and pushed against each other.

'What are they called?'

'They've got no names.'

Blue reached out towards a small piglet, who tottered over to her searching for food, the little wet snout twitching at her fingers.

'He's so sweet.'

'It's a she.'

'Well, she's beautiful ... she should be called Bonnie.'

Patrick laughed.

Blue thought of the fun she could have naming all the piglets.

Mrs Maguire was in the kitchen and was in the middle of cutting up meat for a stew when she went back inside.

'Can I help?' she offered.

Mrs Maguire gave a huge grin. 'In a month of Sundays the boys would never lift a finger to help me in the kitchen,'

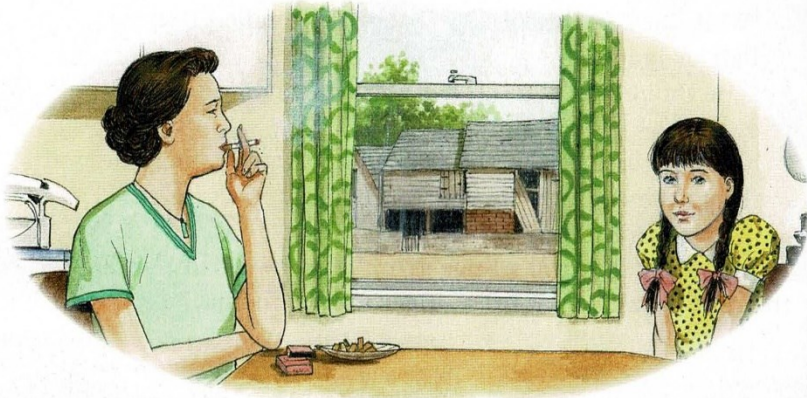
she exclaimed, 'and here you are only a minute in the place and you know what's needed. You chop up those carrots there and I'll do the onions.'

Work was something everyone in Larch Hill was well used to. By the time Blue had finished Mrs Maguire was sitting at the kitchen table lighting up another cigarette from the red Carroll's Number One packet.

'Don't ever start smoking, dear, for 'tis the very devil to give up,' the woman cautioned, taking a huge drag of the cigarette.

Blue watched, fascinated, as she smoked one cigarette, then another, stubbing them out in an old cockle shell that she used as an ashtray. Mrs Maguire talked a lot about the boys and Blue was more than curious to meet the other two. From what she could gather, nothing was too much for the Maguire boys as far as their mother was concerned.

From A Girl Called Blue, by Marita Conlon-McKenna. The O'Brien Press Ltd.

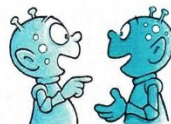


A Let's chat

What is the (a) nicest, (b) most annoying and (c) most upsetting thing about being a child? What difficulties do adults face compared to children?

B First impressions

As I read the story, I was saddened by ...



C Seek and search

- 1 Name the nun who was in charge of placements.
- 2 What was Blue's proper first name?
- 3 What was the name of the orphanage?
- 4 In what model of car did Mr Maguire collect Blue?
- 5 Where did Mr Maguire hang Blue's coat?
- 6 What name did Blue want to give the small piglet?



D Quest and query

- 1 How do we know that Blue could be a *difficult* child?
- 2 How do we know that Blue was lonely because she was an only child?
- 3 What sentence shows us that Blue was annoyed with Mary Doyle?
- 4 Were the house and farm as Blue imagined they would be? Explain.
- 5 What damage had the cigarette smoke done in the house?
- 6 Give four reasons why you should never start smoking.



E Word watch

Rewrite the following passage using the words in the box, which are from the story.

arranged adamant preliminary concerned discussed scrutinised health

Mr Maguire did not sleep well because he was _____ about one of his piglets. He called the vet and had a _____ discussion with him. The vet _____ to call to the farm at noon. The vet then _____ every inch of the poor piglet's body. He was _____ that the piglet had no serious disease. Having _____ the situation with Mr Maguire, the vet told him that the piglet should be back to full _____ in no time.

F Watch your Ps and Qs

List the following words from the story under the following headings: nouns, verbs, adverbs, adjectives, pronouns, prepositions or conjunctions.

- | | | | |
|-----------|------------|--------------|--------------|
| 1 studied | 2 lonely | 3 while | 4 small |
| 5 they | 6 but | 7 and | 8 over |
| 9 sharp | 10 musty | 11 balefully | 12 collected |
| 13 jumper | 14 thought | 15 piglets | 16 curtains |



G Sounds abound

Break the following words from the story into three, four or five syllables.

- | | |
|------------------------|---------------------|
| 1 disappointment _____ | 2 troublesome _____ |
| 3 imagined _____ | 4 preliminary _____ |
| 5 scrutinised _____ | 6 continued _____ |
| 7 ramshackle _____ | 8 excellent _____ |
| 9 delicious _____ | 10 politely _____ |
| 11 families _____ | 12 recently _____ |
| 13 epitome _____ | 14 polishing _____ |



H Flights of fancy

Imagine you are Blue and you have been fostered by the Maguire family. Write three paragraphs about your experiences while with them. **Digital**

I Spark starters

Find out about the different types of farming in Ireland: tillage farming, dairy farming, beef farming, pig farming and poultry farming. Write a fact file on each.

