

DONAGH MACDONAGH

THE HAPPY DAY (A Play For Voices)

CAST

HUGH	A man of about thirty five; his accent is educated Irish.
ANNE	His wife. Some years younger. Similar accent.
TOM	Their son. A child of seven.
MOLL	A virago of about forty. Harsh, violent voice. Country accent.
ELLEN	Her daughter. Aged about twelve.
HUGH (c)	Hugh as a child of seven.
SINGER	A ballad-singer
JACK	A small farmer. About thirty-five to forty. Coun- try accent.
MARY	His wife
TWO	A son and daughter of Jack and Mary, aged about ten to twelve. Country accents.
CHILDREN	Priest, Neighbours, a Centurion, and other Voices.

HUGH

*It is summer, anti-cyclone weather,
The barometer steady as the sun, and clouds
Harmless and light, like birds in the sky;
June weather then, June weather now,
A season of joy, but joy that's turning dim.*

ANNE

Come right home I told him, and now it's bedtime.

HUGH

He's only at his granny's.

ANNE

*He should be home, not waiting like a street musician
Hoping for half-crowns of cash or crowns of flattery.*

HUGH

That is the payment of such a day, willing ransom.

ANNE

I'll send him straight to bed.

HUGH

*This morning all was new; new shoes, new stockings,
Face polished like an apple, ribboned rosette,
The first prize in our show.*

ANNE

*And tall and straight, and big for seven they say;
But still he should be home.*

HUGH

Don't spoil his happiest day.

ANNE

*Happiest day. Happiest day,
That's all I've heard for weeks.
The preparation, rehearsals, sin and reparation,
Forgiveness and confession, and to-day
The early rising, taking him to church,*

*The sermon and the singing, the procession;
Still it was worth it
To see him shining like an Easter candle.*

HUGH

*Don't blame him so if he's late coming home.
Childhood is thoughtless as a fly,
And thankless as a cat.*

ANNE

*They'll give him too much money, turn his head,
Fill him with cakes and sweets, spoil his new suit
With spilled ice-cream and lemonade and milk,
And when he's sick, who'll nurse him? Not his granny!*

HUGH

*It doesn't matter. All he'll remember is:
That morning I was happy and that day,
And that evening when I came home late,
Too late, no one was angry, no one swore at me.*

*(There is the sound of a child's running
footsteps in the distance).*

ANNE

There he is now.

HUGH

Welcome him as if for the first or last time.

ANNE

All right, all right.

HUGH

*So he came home on stilts of excitement,
Money to jingle till it burnt its way to freedom,
Voice shrill to tell the headlands of the day.*

DONAGH MACDONAGH

*Ice-cream had stained his new grey pants and jacket,
Sweets wadded in his pocket, chocolate face,
But no one cursed at him and he was happy.
Even in bed the day was with him still.*

TOM

*After the Zoo we went to the carnival
And tried the hobby horses and the swings,
But grandpa said the chairplanes were dangerous.
The teacher said this was the happiest day of all our lives,
And he was right. (Pause) Daddy. (Pause)*

HUGH

Mmm.

TOM

Was yours like that?

HUGH

My what like what?

TOM

*The day of your first communion,
The perfect, beautifullest, happiest day of your life?*

HUGH

*Well, no. Or yes. In some ways yes,
In some ways very no. (Long pause)
It wasn't here in the city, among houses,
But far away in a little crooked village,
Mean as a dirty lie.
The village itself was mean, but round about
Were mountains like fi-fo-fums,
With old grey trees, a lake blue as an eye
And a little stream where trout turned somersaults,
And where one time I saw a kingfisher,
A turquoise streak down a corridor of trees.*

THE HAPPY DAY

TOM

What were you doing there?

HUGH

*I wasn't like you. I had no father or mother,
And so lived there with cousins
In a small, narrow house that crouched against a hill.
And in that house I wakened on a June morning.
Some day I'll tell you all about it,
Now go to sleep, your eyes are closing down.*

TOM

*Good-night, daddy. I'm sorry I was late.
But it was a gorgeous day. (Very sleepy) Good-night.*

HUGH

Good-night. Sleep well

HUGH (softly)

*In that dark and narrow house
I wakened on a June morning,
As clear and innocent as the eye of childhood.*

VOICE

*Up with the dawn on the best day of June,
The light clear as honey, the first birds inspired
Like poets mad drunk with melody,
Singing what poets aspire to,
And what they were singing was « This is the morning ».*

MOLL

*(shouting angrily from a distance) If you're going
to Mass get up out of that and don't expect me to wait
hand and foot on you. There's a basin of water here
in the kitchen to get the dirt off of you before you go.*

VOICE

*The sun that is shining on town and on country
Shows midsummer morning on its bright dial,
And this is the happiest day of a season
That's rosy with joy. Leaf, wing and flower
Are gilded with youth, because this is the morning,
The morning of perfect joy.*

MOLL

*If I have to tell you a second time, I'll come up
and leave you stretched.*

HUGH

*I came down the narrow stairs to the dim kitchen,
With hanks of onions and looped fly-papers hanging,
Carnival decorations, from the blackened ceiling.
An oleographed St. Patrick drove the snakes
From Erin's Isle; Emmet's drawn sword
Pointed to «Bless this House» above the fire.
Six kitchen chairs, grease-blackened,
A settle-bed, a table thick with unwashed mugs,
And a thin skin of turf-ash everywhere;
On a backless chair a cracked enamel basin,
Cold water, Sunlight soap, a greasy cloth.*

MOLL

*When you've washed, your new suit is there in the
parcel that came from Dublin.*

ELLEN

*Mammy, will we show him the presents that came from
Dublin too?*

MOLL

They can wait till he comes home.

ELLEN

*A watch that glows at night like Jack o' Lantern,
«Gulliver's Travels», «Robinson Crusoe», a box of
sweets, a train that runs on rails. And something else*

HUGH (c)

Oh, what is it?

ELLEN

Something that Mick Callaghan brought. A secret.

MOLL

Hurry up there now or you'll be late for Mass.

HUGH

*And so, alone, I started off for Mass,
New suit, new socks, new shirt,
New shoes that squeaked like crickets.
The road was downhill and I could see the village,
Thatched roofs and whitewashed houses, and the only colour
The gay red-painted carts in for the fair.
On a hill above the village stood the church
A great old relic like a beached three-master,
All that remained of a ruined monastery
That once had been the glory of the place,
And still could glory in its belfry.*

(Church bells in the distance)

VOICE

*The church was tall and proud, a Gothic dream
Pointing to heaven with a slender tower.
Choir, aisle and transept kept their sweet proportions,
Graceful and ordered as their builders' thoughts.
Around the walls forgotten names remembered
In coats of arms the families long gone
Which once were great; but where the azure windows*

DONAGH MACDONAGH

*Had strained a holy light, now there was yellow glass
In place of sea-cold blue and ocean green.*

(An organ softly plays a voluntary, the bells
are still heard behind).

HUGH

*The church was cool and damp, a Noah's Ark
Lit dimly by the sun and candlelight,
Big candles, tall and yellow, for the Mass,
And little flickering pennyworths for tears
Or hope, for thank-you-Lord and fears.
Above the altar in bright red and blue
Yellow and green and purple, brash as Italian skies,
A stained-glass window told of Resurrection.
The Lord, expressionless, with transfixed hand,
Showed us his bleeding heart, and, while the angels poised,
Offered His wounded foot once more to earth,
Returned, we knew, from Limbo's cobwebbed void.*

(A choir sings in plain chant under the speech).

CHOIR

Kyrie eleison. Christe eleison

HUGH

*The Mass, unchanging as a woven tapestry,
Moved through its customary liturgy,
Prayer and response, the hierophantic
Gesture, blessing, speech, the mystery
Hidden in language, symbol, Latin word,
Or Greek or Hebrew.
The mothers, fathers, children prayed
In simple phrases from the little books
Or thumbed their rosaries,
Words slipping through their minds like polished beads.*

PRIEST

Dominus vobiscum.

THE HAPPY DAY

RESPONSE

Et cum spiritu tuo.

PRIEST

Per omnia saecula saeculorum.

RESPONSE

Amen.

HUGH

*Soon now the little bell is rung
To tell us Christ is here, waiting for us.*

(The singing is silenced. There are
church noises).

*And so, led by the teacher we line up and walk,
Palm held to palm and finger-tip to tip,
Up to the ancient altar-rails,
Worn smooth by centuries of worship.
I kneel and take the pleated altar-cloth under my chin,
And hear approaching the words spoken in Capernaum.*

CENTURION

*Lord, I am not worthy that thou shouldst enter under
my roof, say but the word and thy servant shall be healed.*

VOICE

And his servant was healed in the selfsame hour.

PRIEST (approaching, but at a distance)

*Corpus Domini Nostri Jesu Christi
Custodiat animam tuam in vitam aeternam. Amen.*

(Only the first words are heard, the
rest being muttered under the breath).

PRIEST

Corpus Domini nostri Jesu Christi...

(The organ bursts out in a great paan of joy).

VOICE

*What joy can equal this, the sinful soul
Washed clean as is the beach that the great wave has swept?
For this the choral birds sing, sing in the amber dawn,
Te Deum to the stars dissolving into light.*

(The music changes).

HUGH

*Now Mass is over, genuflect and squeak
Out to the porch, the holy water cool
On fingertip and forehead, and the day is opened,
The lid turned back and daylight rushing in.*

(Country voices are heard, rushing on top
of one another).

VOICE 1

Joe, you were wonderful, never a falter.

VOICE 2

*Lovely new suit. Well you may wear, soon you may
tear, give the devil his own share.*

VOICE 3

Straighten your tie and pull up your socks

VOICE 1

There's bacon and eggs and sausage for breakfast.

VOICE 2

Here's five bob for you, Paddy. Go on now and take it.

HUGH

*I wandered away, having no one, and started for home.
The church stands high on a hill looking down on the village,
Looking west to the mountains and east to a river and lake,
To monastery ruins and a great house that's stripped now and
roofless,
The house of the settler whose arms are inscribed in the church
But whose name and whose race is forgotten.
The village is busy this morning with cattle and sheep
And their buyers and sellers, the big-booted men from the
mountains,*

(Fair day sounds).

*And their women in shawls, with butter and eggs on their carts.
And the frown in their minds that the night will still find
them here waiting.
The ten public-houses are taking their tithe of the bargains,
And the whiskey and stout are being gulped down as though
they were free;
The singers, with ballad-sheets over their arms
Are singing of drink in the hope of some money for drink.*

SINGER

*The grape and the barley are grown for our pleasure,
They swell in the generous sun,
They're pressed and distilled to rejoice us and gladden,
They freshen the old and the young;
They warm the cold-hearted and cheer the down-hearted,
Raise love-thoughts in girl and in boy,
They rally the faint-hearted, quicken the great-hearted,
Barley and grape are our joy.*

*Then clink glasses, drain glasses, fill glasses, drink glasses,
Let's leave no gay song unsung.
While we've bottles and throttles, let's put in our noddles
The stuff that makes old fellows young, me boys,
The stuff that makes old fellows young.*

DONAGH MACDONAGH

*The sun on the cornfield, the sun on the vineyard
Are bottled against the cold days,
The frost cannot harm us as long as we arm us
With summer sun's medical rays;
An apple a day keeps the doctor away,
A bottle a day keeps him well,
So for medical reasons we swallow the seasons
When grape and John Barleycorn swell.*

*Then clink glasses, drain glasses,
Fill glasses, drink glasses,
Let's leave no gay song unsung;
While we've bottles and throttles
We'll put in our noddles
The stuff that makes old fellows young.*

HUGH

*I walked through it all being hungry and happy,
Forgiving and praying and laughing,
Hearing the bargaining men making little of cattle
Their hearts were desiring, seeing eyes
That had drowned too long in a kitchen come lively
With whiskey and singing and gossip;
And out on the road their voices were with me,
Though larks sang above me.*

(Birdsong, and then the creak of a cart).

*One cart was going my way, a red-painted cart
With Jack and Mary Quigley, young still with a big and young
family.*

JACK

*Whoa there. (The cart stops) Is it all alone you
are on the greatest of days?*

MARY

A great day indeed that you made your first holy communion.

THE HAPPY DAY

HUGH (c) (shyly)

I'm just going home to my breakfast.

MARY

And not a soul with you.

JACK

It's likely they've gone to the fair.

HUGH (c) (obviously lying)

*Yes, that would be it.
(hesitates) They must have all gone to the fair.*

JACK

*Hop up on the back so, and we'll take you a bit of your way.
(To the horse) Go on. (The cart starts).*

MARY

Going to the bog we are to foot the turf.

JACK

The children are there since the dawn.

HUGH (c)

I've never been there.

MARY

How so?

JACK

Ah sure he's only a city lad, not used to country ways.

MARY

Dublin. That must be a wonderful place entirely.

HUGH

*Dublin to me is pictures:
Big houses and wide streets, trams hissing on their trolleys,
Cabs and outside-cars and motor-cars with bright brass bonnets,
And the Liffey, with a smell like sulphur and a light
At evening like the bloom on a black grape,
And the newsboys at the Pillar shouting « Heggie Buff Mail »,
And the old ones shouting « Oranges two a penny »,
Wax men and women in the windows, and at night
Lights, lights, and BOVRIL spelling B.O.V.R.I.L. in College
Green,
And going out like a blind pulled down to darkness.
That was where I lived till something called Death
Roared out of the night with headlights like the sun.*

JACK

*'Tis a wonderful place indeed, with every day the
like of a fair day. I was there the once and I was
in mortal dread I'd slip on the pavement that was as hard
and shiny as ice.*

MARY

If they've all gone to the fair, who'll get your breakfast?

HUGH (c)

I'll be able to manage for myself.

MARY

*What you'd a right to do is come with us. There'll be
lashings and leavings of food for one and all.*

JACK

Sure nobody would know where he was gone.

HUGH (c)

I don't think they'd mind. I really don't think they'd mind.

MARY

Isn't that a queer thing now, with a young visitor from the city.

HUGH (c)

I'm not a visitor now.

MARY

That's right. You're here for good.

JACK

In an accident I hear your father and mother were killed?

HUGH (c)

Yes.

JACK

Two cars that crashed.

HUGH (c)

That's right.

MARY

*There now. I always said they were flying in God's
face those motor-cars.*

JACK

So you're one of us now!

HUGH (c)

I suppose so.

(Pause).

*To be one with this village, never aspiring,
Eyes turned in to its narrow street,
Living among its ruined fragments,
Learning soon to distrust and cheat.*

DONAGH MACDONAGH

*Reared in ignorance, never innocent,
Knowing too much and too little too soon,
Fearing knowledge, praising cunning,
All music set to a ballad tune.*

*To be one with these people, to grow beside them
Like branches bent by a constant gale,
To be buried successful, since the nameless thousands
Having never ventured can never fail.*

(A silence).

JACK

*A fine healthy life you'll have of it,
good stirabout and milk and butter to make you strong.
The world knows that it's out of your belly your back grows.*

MARY

Aye, and you should be good and hungry by now.

HUGH

*We passed the house and I never looked
To see it crushed down under the hill,
And I didn't tell them of the margarine,
The skim milk, and the belly that was seldom filled;
And maybe I didn't think of these things,
But only of a day that was clear as amethyst.*

*And the creaking cart was a covered wagon
On the Santa Fe Trail to the Rio Grande,
And I was Billy Cody or Wild Bill Hickock
Decimating an Indian band.*

(Gunfire and Indian whoops).

*And the chequered country became the prairie,
The cattle turned to lumbering bison,
The lawless, promising west was before us,
Empty out to the pale horizon*

THE HAPPY DAY

*Except for the whooping braves on their ponies,
The prairie schooners, the burning fort —
I shot from the hip and a red-skin fell,
Biting the dust at the gun's report.*

(A loud shot).

HUGH (c)

Bang!

MARY

Oh, You gave me a fright.

JACK

Is it Tans you're shooting, Hugh.

HUGH (c)

No.

JACK

A dirty pack of savages.

MARY

*Wasn't it foretold by Columbeille that the time would
come that the men of Ireland would be that few a girl
would run to her mother saying, «Oh, mother, I saw a
man on the bridge of Athlone». And maybe those times
are on us now with the Black and Tans.*

HUGH

*It was a time of trouble, ambushes and raids,
The Crossley-Tender purring through the streets,
Trench-coat, slouch-hat, the dum-dum bullet,
The bombed-out lorry and the burning town.
Spies were not safe in bed, nor innocent men,
Old women in their night-shifts nightly shot;
Anger and fear rode down the sky with death,
But here to the green horizon there was peace,*

DONAGH MACDONAGH

*The peace of the bog, almost the peace of death —
Or so it seemed at first, but life is here,
Everywhere, flying and burrowing, running and capering,*

(The song of the lark).

*Soaring and diving, and over all the lark
Sending this fretted music down to us,
A tiny crucifix of melody blessing the earth
With radiance of praise, as peacock coloured,
As rainbow-hued as light split by a prism.
Not far away there were children working,
Footing the treacle-coloured turf, their hands and faces
Burned to an Indian glow, and they too knew the joy.*

FIRST CHILD

Adrift on a sea of flowers,

SECOND CHILD

The white bog-cotton our waves,

FIRST CHILD

The powder-puff clouds for sails,

SECOND CHILD

The bee for a gale.

FIRST CHILD

Our sailors are barefoot boys

SECOND CHILD

*And girls who dance on a deck
All coloured with dandelions
As recklessly gold as the clock
Keeping time in the sky.*

FIRST CHILD

O, and this is our stained-glass day,

THE HAPPY DAY

SECOND CHILD

*With fuchsia and poppy as red
As Christ's heart, and the little daisies,
The same that were meek to His tread.*

FIRST CHILD

And the goldenrod is sweet

SECOND CHILD

*As the wild-rose,
And the woodbine makes incense
Where it grows.*

FIRST CHILD

*And the sun is a monstrance too
That blesses the fly,
The bee and the rabbit and hare
With its haloed eye,
And the finch in its chasuble
Of wings and of song,
And blesses the ox and the ass,
And blesses us all.*

HUGH

*And there we played while I made friends with them,
Taught them strange games from town, and learned their
secrets,
How calves were born, what signs predicted storm,
Of magpies, fairy rats, the banshee's cry.*

FIRST CHILD

*The badger in the wood will grip your leg
And never let go until he hears it snap.*

DONAGH MACDONAGH

SECOND CHILD

Carry a dry stick in your pocket and snap that.

FIRST

He'll think the leg is broken and let up.

SECOND

*If you get in a fairy ring you can wander blind
For days perhaps in a fog;*

FIRST

Reverse your coat and you'll see right again.

SECOND

*The Hungry Grass is where someone has died of hunger,
And if you step on that you'll starve to death
Unless you have have a crust of bread to gnaw.*

FIRST

Eat that and you'll be strong as Finn MacCool.

SECOND

*If you see a flurry of leaves along the road
That's the Good People going to their hosting.*

FIRST

Stand out of their way and lift your hat to them.

SECOND

*If you meet a black cat on the road turn back again,
You'll do no good at field or farm or fair.*

THE HAPPY DAY

FIRST

A red-haired woman is ten times worse again.

SECOND

If there's churning in a house take a hand with the dash

FIRST

Or they'll swear a hole in a pot you stole their cream.

HUGH (c)

*I know another game, it's Sticky Toffee.
I'll count you out: One potato, two potatoes,
Three potatoes, four, five potatoes, six potatoes,
Seven potatoes MORE. YOU have it.*

(Shrieks of children. Music, which fades to:)

SINGER

*As I rode out through the Cloonmore bog
On a day of sunny weather
Some miles from home I chanced to roam
Across the bonny blooming heather, down the moor.
As I rode along with my dog and gun
Through the bonny blooming heather
What should I see looking up at me
But a band of children playing together,
Down the moor and through the heather,
O'er the moor across the heather,
What should I see looking up at me
But a band of children playing together, down the moor.*

*They laughed and played so gaily there,
The longest day of all the summer,
They played till the rays of the late-setting sun
Came sparkling out among the heather, down the moor.*

*I rode away and I left them there,
Too young to know that youth is pleasure,*

DONAGH MACDONAGH

*But I pitied them all as I pitied myself
And sadly thought of squandered treasure,
Down the moor and through the heather,
O'er the moor across the heather,
I pitied them all as I pitied myself
And sadly thought of squandered treasure, down the moor.*

HUGH

*A man rode by on a horse and dimmed away in the distance,
The wild-flowers closed their eyes, the evening tired.
The sun was balanced now on the western hills
And the moon in the other scale as pale as a shell.
The day was gone over the hill and the evening,
A ghost at the foot of the stair waited only for darkness.
We emptied the teapot out and packed the plates,
Climbed up on the carts and started back on the road,
As quiet now and as sad as an old canal.
Too early yet for lights to signal each other
Across the miles of air, too early for stars,
But the evening was settling on us and night was waiting,
And the stories and fears of night, and night's alarms: —*

FIRST CHILD

A horse can see a ghost where you'd see air.

SECOND

His eyes will roll in his head, he'll rear and neigh

JACK

Put your jacket over his head and he'll pass by.

MARY

*The headless coachman drives four headless horses
Down the old road to town.*

THE HAPPY DAY

JACK

*You'll hear them pass at midnight, the old coach
Rattling and bumping by. Put your head under the
clothes. It's safest there.*

MARY

*My grandpa saw them once. His eyes turned pale as milk.
'Twas the last thing that he saw this side of heaven.*

JACK

*Ghosts are about us always, thick as grass,
But their day is the night. In the old graveyard
You'll hear them talking together of old times,
Back to the first man ever buried there,
Hundreds of years ago.*

MARY

Leave well enough alone. You'll frighten the children.

JACK

Who's talking! With her headless coachman!

HUGH

*But no one was frightened in the coming dusk.
Happy and drowsy we jogged back the road
The dusk clotting about us, the crows talking
In angry shouts, and sometimes a sleepy bird
Peeping good-night. Good-night. Good night. Good night.*

JACK

Good-night, Hugh.

CHILDREN

Good-night.

HUGH (c)

Good-night, and thanks.

MARY

Good-night, and safe home.

HUGH

*The smokey lamp was lit, and there at the door was Moll,
The angry woman, a woman of forty with whiskers,
Nose red, eyes angry-blue and lips as thin
As mountain-top wind, and as bitter.
Her face was scarlet, the pale blue eyes were staring.*

MOLL

*Where have you been all the day? The police dragging the
lake for you, men searching the hills for you, the
country in an uproar for you.*

HUGH (c)

I just went to the bog with the Quigleys.

MOLL

*He just went to the bog. He just went to the bog!
There's a devil as big as a house standing in that fellow,
and the day of his first communion too. O God give me
patience this blessed night that I don't open him where
he stands. Hand me that stick. (A blow and a cry).
Neither tale nor tiding of him since the day was born,
the place turned upside down. Take that. (A blow).
Get off those clothes so I can beat you proper.*

HUGH (c)

I'm sorry. I didn't know.

MOLL

*He didn't know. He didn't know! God pity me this night.
Presents from Dublin for him. I'll give him presents
from Dublin. It's burnt they'll be or smashed. (A crash
on a stone floor) There goes the watch they sent. That'll*

*never tick again. Into the fire with everything. Books,
books for the like of him. Into the fire with them.
Rubbish to fill his head. Hand me that train till I
stamp it flat. (A violent crash) That's taken care of that.*

ELLEN

What about the rabbit?

MOLL

Rabbit? What rabbit?

ELLEN

The one Mick Callaghan brought for him.

MOLL

*That's taken care of long ago. I got Joe to loose it.
Maybe he'll learn a lesson yet from that. Off with
those clothes.*

*(Sounds of violence, which fade. There is
a long silence).*

HUGH

*At last, crying with fear and pain I limped to bed,
Climbed between the damp blankets in my skin.
Through the narrow window I could see the moon, now bright
and high,
Remote from tears or anger, proud in the sky.
That's all, I thought. It's over, the happiest day.
But as I looked across the moon-drenched fields I saw the
chase,*

(The sound of dogs baying).

*The dozen mongrel dogs about the place
After a something small and grey that ran awry,
Something, a little rabbit, that could not see
The woods, the burrows where it could be free.
I put my head under the clothes. It was safest there.*

*(A long silence. Then Tom can be heard calling
in the distance:)*

DONAGH MACDONAGH

TOM

Daddy. Daddy.

ANNE

My goodness, that child isn't asleep yet.

HUGH (shouts)

What is it?

TOM

Daddy, I want to ask you something.

HUGH

Oh, all right.

(He ascend the stairs).

HUGH

Now old man, what is it? You should be asleep.

TOM

Daddy, can I have another first communion to-morrow?

HUGH

No, son. There's only one. (Very softly) Thank God.

TOM

But I'd like one every day.

HUGH

There are other firsts, you know. The first day at a new school, or at college. The first time you meet the girl who'll be your wife. Your first son. And, some day, his first communion. I hope it will be just like yours. I hope it will.