

RTE Living Word 1997 (one of five)

THE YOUNG LAD

It would be around half past four in the afternoon. I'd be working away on the computer and through the window, I'd watch the school bus pull up at the end of the breen, my son getting off, all self-conscious with the eyes of the other teenagers on his back.

It had become a ritual, this afternoon break in his day and mine. He'd come in the back door, I'd hear his footsteps shuffling in the kitchen, bag thrown in corner, silent feet sneaking up the stairs. I'd keep my eyes on the screen, my back to the door as he approaches, pretending not to know he's there, waiting ... Or I'd suddenly lie dead on the floor, before he'd come in, or hold the letter opener to my neck as if I'd just been stabbed.

But why this inclination to shock, I wondered, sometimes.

School was not always an easy time for me. Maybe our ritual was an excuse to deviate from my asking about his day, knowing he wouldn't tell me anyway, in words. "How was school?" "Okay," is all you'd get. Maybe for him the tomfoolery helped him cope.

One day he was showing me one of those sadistic schoolboy grips, and as he clutched my fingers, waiting for the pain to register, locking me in an otherwise rare eye contact, I asked him, thinking of my own youth: "Why do boys always do things like this to each other?" "Because," he says, "we can't do it to the headmaster."