



## Four Years Ago:

### The Three Minutes

On her tenth birthday, Nessa overhears an argument in her parents' bedroom. She knows nothing about the Three Minutes yet. How could she? The whole of society is working to keep its children innocent. She plays with dolls. She believes the lies about her brother, and when her parents tuck her into bed at night—her grinning dad, her fussy mam—they show her only love. But now, with ten candles on a cake in the kitchen behind her, that's all supposed to change. Dad can't know his daughter is right outside the door, and yet he whispers. "We don't need to tell her," he says. "She... she isn't able to run anyway. She's a special case. We could give her a few more years to be our baby."

Baby! Our baby! Nessa bristles at the thought. She's struggling to stand still because with her twisted legs she makes quite a racket when she walks. However, once her mam, Agnes, starts sobbing, she decides she's had enough.

"Oh, for Crom's sake," she says, "I'm in the hall. I'm coming in and you'd better not be kissing!" She means that last part as a joke, but it falls flat.

"Come in then," Dad says. He still possesses enough greying hair to cover his scalp. Almost. He's even older than Mam, and on a bad day, Nessa wonders if that's why she was born weak enough to catch polio. Her cousin told her that once, and Nessa often thinks of it.

"I know about Santa Claus," she says, walking in. "If that what this is about. I've known for years already, but..." Agnes starts heaving like she's been punched in the stomach. She shakes hard enough to rattle the bed beneath her. Dad wraps her tight with his long, skinny arms, and for a moment it's like this hug is the only thing stopping bits of her from flying off. A chill steals up Nessa's spine. She can't know it, but this is the first hint of the fear that will never leave her again; that will ruin her life as it has ruined the life of everybody in the whole country.

Now Dad is crying too. His tears barely show a hint of moisture about the eyes, his sobs thick, as though squeezed through a wad of cloth.

Nessa takes a ragged breath. “Whatever it is...,” she says—and deep inside a part of her is begging her to shut up, to stop, to turn around! “Whatever it is, I want to know.”