

DERMOT BOLGER

Courtstown Days

I am too young to remember why people back then entertained a fetish for sharp angles – be it on the extraordinarily sharp spectacle frames which matronly women wore or on the back window of the numerous Ford Anglia's that patrolled the roads of Ireland during the summer of 1969.

But I have never seen a Ford Anglia since then without being transported back to Courtstown and recalling the sensation of being a ten-year-old again. Not that my family had a Ford Anglia or any other car. As a ship's cook, motorised transport wasn't much use to my father – though he did possess a fine bicycle until he unwisely loaded it to a cabin boy to attend mass when his ship was docked in Liverpool.

But two Ford Anglia's belonging to other guests stood proudly on the gravel outside Mrs Butler's Guesthouse a mile from Courtstown the final time my family stayed there in 1969.

We had other family holidays before but that one remains clear. I vividly recall the waxy smell of polished lino and the feel of fugitive grains of sand between my toes as I sat alone in the big room where my family slept at night. I recall warm air through the open window as I watched midges swarmed beneath trees outside while crickets chirped from a roadside bank.

Nights at home for a sailor were rare enough, so a week off seemed unprecedented. This made Courtstown special. It would be our last stay in Mrs Butler's and our last family holiday. By Christmas Eve a bereavement would mean that my childhood, as I knew it, was over.

Yet there is no hint of unhappiness in my memories of Mrs Butler's house which seemed huge. Music filled the night air then. At dusk in the swirling carnival lights, with the smell of salty chips and children's faces bearded by wisps of candyfloss, the tinny sound of The New Seekers blared from fairground loudspeakers: "*Say goodbye my own true lover, this will be our last farewell, for the carnival is over...*"

Each evening I moved among booths where sharpshooters took aim as goldfish trembled in plastic bags. Squads of pubescent girls whirled overhead, screaming and swinging out towards boys in flailing swingchairs.

I remember the front step of Mrs Butler's house framed by light as my mother called us in at dusk for meals, which were followed by tapioca, rice pudding and custard. Those unfamiliar lukewarm, curdled deserts looked like frogspawn from the nearby pond. I moved my dessert around the plate while the adults present talked about bands of Hells Angels tearing up Tramore. Off in the distance Courtstown throbbed, pulsating with sins I had yet to discover.

When I finally set a novel in Wexford, "*Temptation*" was based further down the coast at Rosslare in a thinly disguised hotel far different from that small Guesthouse. Maybe this is because I mistrust autobiography and wanted to set it away from my own childhood.

But the excitement the characters feel in their car on route to Rosslare is directly based on my memory of taking the train to Gorey as a child, knowing that every stop was drawing me nearer to Courtstown.

With such myriad images in my mind you would think that the route to that guesthouse would be engraved in my memory. Yet on the one occasion I returned there, early on in the writing of *Temptation*, I found myself utterly lost in a maze of lanes. I passed the house several times before realising I was back again as an adult outside Mrs Butler's Guesthouse.

I left the car and stood at a padlocked gate, having to ask a passer-by to confirm that this was indeed the house. It seemed tiny, closed off with Mrs Butler long dead. This couldn't be the front garden where Ford Anglias were once parked or the window behind which we ate our meals. I looked down the road, expecting to see Mary, the kindly old serving woman, putting down her buckets to greet my family as we left the house with towels for another day on Courtstown beach.

The road was so small that my car blocked it. I did not climb over the wall to peer in the windows. Instead I close my eyes to walk up those stairs again in my mind, with grains of sand between my toes and a week stretching ahead for the length of eternity.

I remembered how my family had gone downstairs and I am left alone, suddenly filled with a feeling I never knew before. Later I would recognise that feeling as the moment when thoughts in my mind begin to throb to be written down. But back then, aged ten, I was simply puzzled by an imperceptible yearning. All I knew was that I was trying to remember every experience: the summer air blowing through the open window, the drone of crickets, the sand clogging the lino.

Tired and happy, I stood up to press my forehead against the top pane of glass. How long I stayed there drinking in those sensations I don't know. Just that eventually my brother called me from the stairs, and I turned to race down and join them, laughing as I called to him, with no sense of any future that was to come.