

**FLEYDO ENGLISH SCHOOL**Story Material

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# The Suitcase in the Hallway

*An honest and moving story set in Dublin about a teenager navigating her parents' separation, learning to live between two homes, and discovering that families can change shape without losing love.*

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**Level:** B1**Skill:** Reading**Duration:** ~45 min**Age:** Teens (11-16)**Topic:** Family**Pages:** 14

## The Story

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### Chapter I— The Sunday Announcement

The suitcase appeared in the hallway on a Sunday evening in October. It was a large black suitcase — the one Dad used for work trips — standing upright beside the coat rack like an uninvited guest. Niamh O'Sullivan, fifteen years old, saw it the moment she came downstairs for dinner. She knew, with the immediate, certain knowledge that teenagers have about disaster, that something terrible was about to happen.

Dinner was shepherd's pie — Mam's best recipe, the one she made when she wanted everyone to feel comfortable. Niamh's brother Cillian, who was twelve, ate with the focused determination of a boy who had not yet noticed the atmosphere. Dad — Declan O'Sullivan, a tall, red-haired secondary school teacher who normally talked non-stop about Gaelic football and bad puns — was silent. Mam — Sinead, a nurse at St. James's Hospital, who normally laughed at Dad's bad puns even when they were terrible — was also silent. The kitchen clock ticked. Rain hit the window. Dublin carried on outside, unaware that the O'Sullivan family was about to change shape.

"We need to talk to you both about something," Mam said, putting down her fork. Her voice was calm, which made it worse. Calm meant rehearsed. Calm meant they had practised this. "Your father and I have decided to have a **separation**." The word landed on the table like a stone dropped into still water. Cillian stopped eating. Niamh stared at the shepherd's pie. "It is not because of anything you have done," Dad said quickly — the sentence all parents say, the sentence no child believes. "We love you both. That has not changed and will not change. But Mam and I have been struggling for a while, and we think it is better for everyone if we live apart."

Niamh looked at the suitcase in the hallway. Dad's suitcase. Dad was leaving. Not for a work trip. Not for a weekend. Leaving. She wanted to scream, to cry, to throw the shepherd's pie at the wall. Instead, she said: "Can I be excused?" and walked upstairs to her bedroom, closed the door, lay face down on her bed, and did not move for two hours. Below her, she could hear Cillian asking questions — "Where will you live? Will we still see you? Is this forever?" — and Dad's voice, patient and broken, trying to explain something that could not be explained. The rain kept falling. The suitcase stayed in the hallway. And nothing, Niamh knew, would ever be the same.

### Chapter II— Two Homes

Dad moved to a flat in Rathmines — a twenty-minute bus ride from the family house in Drumcondra. The **custody** arrangement was straightforward: Niamh and Cillian would live with Mam during the week and stay with Dad every Friday evening to Sunday evening. Their **belongings** were divided between two bedrooms — school uniform at Mam's, weekend clothes at Dad's, textbooks split between both, and the constant, exhausting question of where things were. "Have you seen my charger?" "It is at Dad's." "Where are my runners?" "You left them at Mam's."

The flat was small but Dad had tried hard: he painted Niamh's room her favourite shade of green and bought bookshelves for Cillian. There was a balcony overlooking a canal where ducks gathered in the morning. The kitchen was tiny — Dad, who had never been the family cook, attempted dinners that ranged from heroically ambitious to quietly disastrous. His first lasagne, Niamh admitted later, could have been used as building material. But he kept trying. Every Friday, he stood at the door of the flat with a smile that was ten percent too wide and said: "Welcome home." The word "home" hurt. Because home was supposed to be one place, not two.

The **adjustment** was harder than anyone had promised. Niamh felt like a parcel being posted between two addresses. She developed a **routine** — packing her bag every Friday, unpacking it every Sunday — that felt more like a job than a life. She forgot things constantly. She missed a homework deadline because her notes were at the wrong house. She arrived at hockey practice without her stick because it was "at Dad's."

But the worst part was not the logistics. It was the silence. At Mam's house, the evenings were quieter without Dad's running commentary on everything from the weather to the state of Irish rugby. The chair at the head of the kitchen table was empty. The house felt bigger, as if the rooms had expanded to fill the space where a person used to be. At Dad's flat, the evenings were too loud — Dad overcompensated, talking and joking and playing music as if silence were an enemy to be defeated. Niamh wanted to say: "Just be normal." But she did not know what normal meant any more. Normal had left with the suitcase.

## Chapter III— Dublin in Autumn

### Chapter IV— The Anger

Through everything, Dublin continued. Niamh walked to school through streets carpeted in chestnut leaves — the enormous horse chestnuts in Phoenix Park dropping conkers that Cillian still collected, despite claiming he was too old for it. The Liffey flowed through the city centre, grey-green and indifferent, reflecting cranes and church spires. Buskers played on Grafton Street — a violinist who sounded like an angel, a man with a guitar who definitely did not. Seagulls screamed over the Ha'penny Bridge. It rained. It always rained.

She ate lunch with her best friend, Aisling, at a cafe on Capel Street that served the best toasted sandwiches in Dublin — cheese and ham on sourdough, with a cup of Barry's tea that could wake the dead. Aisling's parents were also separated — had been since Aisling was ten. "The first year is the worst," Aisling said, dunking a chip in ketchup. "After that, you find a **routine**. Two Christmases. Two birthday cakes. Two sets of rules, which means you can play them off against each other." She grinned. "It is not all bad, Niamh. I promise." Niamh did not believe her. Not yet. But it helped to hear it from someone who understood.

Cillian dealt with the **separation** differently. He became angry — not at their parents, whom he treated with exaggerated politeness, but at everyone else. He got into a fight at school. He argued with his football coach. He slammed doors with a force that rattled the windows. At night, Niamh could hear him crying through the wall, and the sound was worse than anything else — worse than the suitcase, worse than the empty chair, worse than the

word "separation" itself.

Niamh's anger was quieter but no less real. She felt **resentment** — towards her parents for making this decision, towards the universe for letting it happen, towards herself for not being able to fix it. She stopped talking at dinner. She gave one-word answers to questions. She withdrew into her headphones and her homework, building walls of silence around herself. Mam noticed. "You can be angry with us," she said one evening, sitting on the edge of Niamh's bed. "You are allowed to feel whatever you feel. But please do not disappear. I cannot lose you too." Niamh did not respond. But she heard it. And something, very slightly, shifted.

## Chapter V— The Wednesday Rule

The school **counsellor**, Ms. Brennan, was the first adult who did not try to make it better. She sat with Niamh in her small office with the potted plant and the box of tissues and said: "I am not going to tell you this is fine. It is not fine. Your family is changing, and that is painful. What I can tell you is that your feelings — the anger, the sadness, the confusion — are completely normal. You are not broken. You are adjusting. And **adjustment** takes time."

Over several sessions, Ms. Brennan helped Niamh understand something important: she could not control what her parents did, but she could control how she responded. She could ask for what she needed. She could set boundaries. She could tell her parents when something was not working. "The opposite of silence is not shouting," Ms. Brennan said. "It is **communication**." Niamh went home and proposed what she called "The Wednesday Rule": every Wednesday evening, both parents and both children would have dinner together — not at Mam's house, not at Dad's flat, but at a neutral location. A restaurant, a cafe, a park with a picnic. One evening a week where the family existed in the same space, without the weight of whose home it was.

The first Wednesday dinner was awkward. They sat in a pizza restaurant in Temple Bar, avoiding eye contact, making small talk about school and weather. Cillian ordered an entire pizza and ate it in silence. Dad made a bad joke about the waiter. Nobody laughed. But they came back the next Wednesday. And the next. By the fourth week, something had loosened. Cillian started talking about football again. Mam told a story about a patient who had arrived at the hospital with a traffic cone on his head. Dad laughed — his real laugh, not the forced one. Niamh looked around the table and thought: this is still my family. It is a different shape now, but it is still here.

The **compromise** was not perfect. Some Wednesdays were tense. Some were cancelled because of work or homework or Dublin traffic. But the rule held. It became an anchor — a point in the week when all four of them were just the O'Sullivan's, eating together, arguing about whether pineapple belonged on pizza (it did not, Niamh maintained, and would die on this hill), and remembering that family was not a place you lived but a group of people who showed up.

## Chapter VI— Sarah

In February, Dad told them he was seeing someone. Her name was Sarah. She was a librarian at Trinity College. She had a ten-year-old son named Fionn. They had been dating for two months. "I want you to meet her," Dad said, with the careful tone of a man defusing a bomb. "But only when you are ready." Niamh was not ready. She was furious. The separation was supposed to be about Mam and Dad needing space. It was not supposed to include a replacement. She told Dad exactly that, using words she later regretted, and then locked herself in her room at the flat and refused to come out for dinner.

It took three weeks and two sessions with Ms. Brennan before Niamh agreed to meet Sarah. They met at a cafe — neutral ground, Niamh insisted. Sarah was quiet, thoughtful, and had the good sense not to try too hard. She asked Niamh about school, listened to the answers, and did not pretend to be anything other than what she was: a new person in a complicated situation. Fionn was shy, polite, and obsessed with Minecraft. He was not annoying. This annoyed Niamh, because she had been prepared to dislike him.

The **blended** family experience was messy, slow, and full of awkward moments. Cillian and Fionn bonded over video games within twenty minutes. Niamh took longer. She watched Sarah carefully, looking for reasons to object, and found — reluctantly — that Sarah was kind, funny, and genuinely cared about Dad. She did not try to replace Mam. She did not pretend the situation was simple. And once, when Niamh snapped at her over something trivial, Sarah said, calmly: "You are allowed to be angry with me. I know this is hard. But I am not going anywhere, and I would rather we were honest with each other."

It was, Niamh realised, **empathy**. Sarah understood because she had been through it herself — her own marriage had ended when Fionn was five. She knew what it felt like to be on the other side. That did not make everything easy. But it made it possible. Slowly, awkwardly, one honest conversation at a time, the new shape of the family began to form. Not replacing the old shape. Existing alongside it. Like a city building new streets without demolishing the old ones.

## Chapter VII— One Year Later

One year after the suitcase appeared in the hallway, Niamh sat at the Wednesday dinner table — this time in a Turkish restaurant in Phibsborough that had become their regular spot — and looked around. Mam was there, laughing at something Cillian had said. Dad was there, trying to convince everyone that his new beard looked good (it did not). Cillian was there, showing Mam a football video on his phone. The empty chair was gone. Not because someone had filled it, but because they had stopped setting a place for absence.

Things were not perfect. They would never be perfect. Niamh still felt a pang every time she packed her bag on Friday. She still sometimes lay in bed at Mam's house and missed the sound of Dad watching television downstairs. She still had moments of **anxiety** about the future — would Mam meet someone new? Would Dad and Sarah get married? Would the Wednesday Rule last? But she had learned something that Ms. Brennan had told her in their first session and that had taken a full year to believe: she was not broken. She was adjusting. And adjustment, it turned out, was just another word for growing up.

She wrote an essay for English class about the year. Not the facts — those were private — but the feelings. About how a suitcase in a hallway could contain the weight of a family's history. About how two homes could feel like neither and then, gradually, like both. About how anger could be a wall or a door, depending on whether you used it to shut people out or to demand to be heard. About how **resilience** was not the absence of pain but the decision to keep going through it. Her teacher, Mr. Kavanagh, read it, put it down, and said: "This is the most honest thing a student has ever handed me." He paused. "Thank you for trusting me with it."

On the bus home, Niamh looked out at Dublin — the Georgian terraces, the building cranes, the Liffey flowing towards the sea — and thought about **identity**. She was Niamh O'Sullivan. Daughter of Declan and Sinead. **Sibling** of Cillian. Resident of two addresses. Member of a family that had changed shape but not substance. She was not the girl she had been a year ago — that girl had dissolved in tears and silence and shepherd's pie. She was someone new. Someone who had learned that love could survive change, that families could stretch without breaking, and that the most important thing about a home was not the building but the people who kept showing up.

## Key Vocabulary

Term	Definition
<b>Separation</b>	When a married couple decides to live apart without officially divorcing
<b>Custody</b>	The legal right to take care of a child after parents separate
<b>Routine</b>	A regular way of doing things in a fixed order
<b>Adjustment</b>	The process of getting used to a new situation or change
<b>Sibling</b>	A brother or sister
<b>Mediator</b>	A person who helps two sides reach an agreement in a dispute
<b>Belongings</b>	Personal possessions; the things that a person owns
<b>Transition</b>	The process of changing from one situation to another
<b>Resentment</b>	A feeling of anger because you have been treated unfairly
<b>Counsellor</b>	A professional who gives advice and support with personal problems
<b>Empathy</b>	The ability to understand and share another person's feelings
<b>Compromise</b>	An agreement where each side gives up something to find a solution
<b>Stability</b>	The state of being steady, secure, and unlikely to change suddenly
<b>Anxiety</b>	A feeling of worry, nervousness, or unease about something
<b>Communication</b>	The exchange of information, thoughts, and feelings between people
<b>Blended</b>	A family formed when parents with children from previous relationships come together
<b>Conflict</b>	A serious disagreement or argument between people
<b>Perspective</b>	A particular way of thinking about or understanding something
<b>Resilience</b>	The ability to recover from difficult situations and adapt
<b>Identity</b>	The qualities, beliefs, and experiences that make a person who they are

## Comprehension Quiz

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### 1. How did Niamh first learn about her parents' separation?

- A) She overheard them arguing at night
- B) They told her together after Sunday dinner at the kitchen table
- C) Her school teacher informed her
- D) She read about it in a letter

### 2. What was the 'suitcase in the hallway'?

- A) A suitcase Niamh packed to run away
- B) Her father's packed bag, which became the symbol of the family's change
- C) A gift from her grandmother
- D) A school bag she forgot

### 3. Why was the custody arrangement difficult for Niamh?

- A) She did not like either parent
- B) Moving between two homes every week made her feel divided and unsettled
- C) The homes were in different countries
- D) She preferred to live alone

### 4. How did Niamh's brother Cillian react to the separation?

- A) He was happy about it
- B) He became quiet and withdrawn, expressing his feelings through anger at school
- C) He immediately accepted it
- D) He moved to live with relatives

### 5. What did the counsellor help Niamh understand?

- A) That her parents' separation was her fault
- B) That her feelings of anger and sadness were normal and valid
- C) That she should choose one parent over the other
- D) That she should pretend everything was fine

### 6. How did Niamh's relationship with her father change?

- A) They stopped talking completely
- B) They actually became closer because their time together became more intentional
- C) It became worse and never improved
- D) It stayed exactly the same

### 7. What was the 'Wednesday Rule'?

- A) A school policy about homework
- B) A family agreement that every Wednesday they would all have dinner together
- C) A rule about not talking about the separation
- D) A bedtime rule

### 8. How did Niamh feel about her father's new partner, Sarah?

- A) She immediately loved her
- B) She was initially resistant but gradually accepted her after seeing that Sarah respected her feelings
- C) She refused to ever meet her
- D) She did not care at all

**9. What did Niamh learn about family by the end of the story?**

- A) That only traditional families work
- B) That family is not a fixed structure but a set of relationships that can change shape and still hold love
- C) That children should not have opinions about family matters
- D) That separation always destroys families

**10. What is the main message of the story?**

- A) That parents should never separate
- B) That change is painful but survivable, and families can find new ways to love each other
- C) That children are not affected by family changes
- D) That moving between two homes is always easy

## Answer Key

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#	Ans	Question
1	B	How did Niamh first learn about her parents' separation?
2	B	What was the 'suitcase in the hallway'?
3	B	Why was the custody arrangement difficult for Niamh?
4	B	How did Niamh's brother Cillian react to the separation?
5	B	What did the counsellor help Niamh understand?
6	B	How did Niamh's relationship with her father change?
7	B	What was the 'Wednesday Rule'?
8	B	How did Niamh feel about her father's new partner, Sarah?
9	B	What did Niamh learn about family by the end of the story?
10	B	What is the main message of the story?

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