RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

Rose Of Tralee

Katie Flynn

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About the Book

The year is 1925, and in Liverpool, Rose Ryder worships her father, a tram-driver. She nurses a secret dream of driving trams too, even though it’s not considered a job for women. Meanwhile, in Dublin, Colm O’Neill is happily settled – until his father gets a job working on the Liverpool-Birkenhead tunnel, and takes Colm across the water with him. When tragedy strikes and her beloved father is killed, Rose and her mother scrape a living by turning their home into a boarding house. And it is their boarding house which Colm and his father come to when they arrive in Liverpool . . .

About the Author

Katie Flynn has lived for many years in the North-west. A compulsive writer, she started with short stories and articles, many of which were broadcast on Radio Mersey. She decided to write her Liverpool series after hearing the reminiscences of family members about the life in the city in the early years of the century. She also writes as Judith Saxton.

Also by Katie Flynn

Liverpool Lass
The Girl from Penny Lane
Liverpool Taffy
The Mersey Girls
Strawberry Fields
Rainbow’s End
No Silver Spoon
Polly’s Angel
The Girl from Seaforth Sands

ROSE OF TRALEE

Katie Flynn

arrow books

For Vicki Turner, who patiently read reference books to me and cooked me wonderful meals whilst I wrote this book – thanks!

I am most grateful for the generous help given me by Jack Gahan and his colleagues in the Merseyside Tramway Preservation Society – Jack has done his best to stop me from making any really bad mistakes about the trams in the twenties and thirties, but because of a rush to get this book ready for the printers, he has not been able to check the MS – so any mistakes are mine, but the good research is his!

As usual, I've used many facts given me by the wonderful people who helped the Everton Library production of VILLAGE WITH A VIEW, and I'm particularly grateful to Mrs J. Spruce, whose delightful reminiscence of Everton in the thirties – and in particular her memories of her tram-driver father – inspired me to write this book.

I do apologise if I've left anyone out, but since the start of M.E., my memory has been totally unreliable.

Chapter One

1925 Dublin

It was August, and a hot and sunny day for once. Colm O'Neill, sitting on the canal bank holding in one hand a long willow wand from which dangled a length of line, with his eyes half closed against the noontide glare, was indulging in a beautiful daydream, which was rapidly becoming the next best thing to sleep. In his mind's eye he was seeing the straightness of his line suddenly jerked out, the rod itself bending from its natural shape into a perfect curve as the huge salmon that had taken his bait fought to get free. The salmon was a dream one, so it was, pinkish, with a great, ruby-red eye and a mouth which gaped wide as a railway tunnel. In his dream Colm played the giant up and down the bank, scattering the other kids who were fishing alongside of him, whilst bigger boys envied and smaller ones oohed and aahed.

The salmon, when he had got it ashore, would be for his mammy, of course. And wouldn't the mammy be pleased with him? His dream skipped a mile or so and there he was in their room, holding out the giant fish, whilst his mammy, with tears in her eyes, thanked him for providing her with enough food to last a week.

And then, all of a sudden, Colm was back on the canal bank and the giant salmon had somehow managed to get the line around his foot. It was heaving and pulling with painful force . . . Colm opened his eyes and got half way to his feet, all ready to hit the salmon over the head with anything handy ... and came back to earth with a bump. His

line hung slack, nothing was nibbling his bait, but his leg was still being half torn off him so it was, and even as he stared at the calm, unrippling water, he realised what was happening. Caitlin was on the move and the rope with which he had tethered her was heaving urgently at his ankle as she reached the end of it.

With a sigh, Colm bent down and untied the rope, shouting: ‘Caitlin, ye devil’s spawn! What on the good earth d’you t’ink you’re doin’? Haven’t I telled you, times wit’out number, not to stray when we’re by water? You’ll be drownded, so you will, and who’ll get the blame? Answer me that, you eejit!’

Caitlin took no notice but continued to heave at her rope, so Colm, well used to this, jerked and watched with some satisfaction as his young wan sat down on her bottom with a bump. Hastily propping his rod on a stone, he set off in pursuit, reaching her in a couple of strides and swinging her off her feet into his arms. She giggled and wriggled but made no protest and Colm, carrying her grimly back to his rod, reflected that divil though she was, she could have been worse. She was only five and the sit-down had been a hard one, but not a sound of protest had come from his little sister. She often yelled with temper or cried with rage, but apart from that she was of a sunny disposition – Mammy often said they saw more smiles than frowns from Caitlin and, though his friends always groaned when he appeared with his young wan in charge, they had to admit that even at her tender age she was game for most things.

Colm sat her down on the grass and took his place next to her.

Beside him, his friend Seamus rolled over onto his stomach and peered down into the depths of the canal, then sat up once more and addressed the child on the end of her rope. ‘Did you run off, you bad gorl?’ he enquired cheerfully. ‘What a good t’ing it is that you’ve a big brother

to look after you! Have you forgotten already bein' near on drownded in this very canal when you was a little mitchin' babby? And you've frighted all the fishes away, so you have – we might as well go home right away, wit' such a turble young wan to turn our hairs grey before time an' scare the fishes away.'

'She didn't go far, not wit' the rope round her middle,' Colm assured his friend. 'Phew, don't you go remindin' her of that other time, you great eejit, or she'll likely fancy another dip.'

'I dare say she don't need much remindin',' Seamus said lazily. 'I bet your ould wan gave you the rough side of her tongue that day.'

'She would have, if she'd knowed,' Colm acknowledged. 'Isn't that why I rope the kid whenever I'm near water? I'm just t'ankin' the Lord above that she didn't go straight down the bank just now, but only along it.' He turned to the child, sitting on the grass and picking daisies as though she had never done anything more adventurous in her life. 'Didn't I tell ye not to stray, now? Whyfor did you go off?'

Caitlin looked vaguely around her as though searching for the explanation, then turned a pair of large, dark-brown eyes reproachfully up at her brother. 'You'd goned asleep, an' I wanted the yellow duckies,' she said in her small, clear voice. She pointed a chubby finger further along the bank. 'See 'em, Colm?'

There were no ducks further along the bank, yellow or otherwise. Colm heaved a sigh and picked up his rod, pulling it carefully clear of the water and missing the reedy margin more by luck than judgement. 'You aren't supposed to go anywhere wit'out me, Cait,' he reminded the child, though without much hope. 'You promised Mammy, so you did. What'ud she say if I telled her you'd been strayin' off after yellow ducks ... or anyt'ing else, come to that?'

‘You won’t tell,’ Caitlin said tranquilly. ‘I never tells an’ you never tells, Colly. When will you catch the fish?’ she added hopefully.

‘Soon,’ Colm said. Truth to tell, he was beginning to get bored and was sure he would never catch anything worth taking home, anyway. Because it was a nice afternoon the bank was crowded with young fishermen, all using an amazing assortment of tackle. Bits of string, half a clothes pole, bent pins, a length of orange rope . . . and the bait was almost as varied. Colm had some precious pieces of bacon rind, Seamus was using earthworms, someone farther along was putting his faith in bread pellets ... spoiled for choice the bloomin’ fish should be, Colm thought crossly, but no one had had a bite so far as he knew. The denizens of the deep seemed indifferent to the fine feast being wafted before their goggly eyes.

‘It’s too hot and there’s too many chisellers, all wit’ the same t’ing in mind,’ Seamus said lazily. ‘Did you see that feller ground-baitin’ wit half a loaf? He’s spoiled the sport for the rest of us, feedin’ the buggers like that.’

Colm gave his friend a warning look; Caitlin loved new words. But since she was still gathering daisies and murmuring to herself as she cast them into the lap of her dirty cotton frock, there seemed little danger there. ‘You’re right about the fish,’ he said. ‘I’ll give it another ten minutes, so I will, then I’m off. The ould wan wants some spuds washed an’ over the fire by when she gets home. Wit’ the littl’un along it’ll take us half an hour to walk from here; might as well start sooner than later.’

Since neither boy possessed a watch the ten minutes passed by guess, but during that time no one caught a fish and it was with only the pretence of reluctance that Seamus, too, pulled his line out of the water and wrapped it around his hazel wand, whilst Colm quite happily made his

own preparations for the walk home. The canal had proved a disappointment so they might as well leave now as later.

If it hadn't been for Caitlin he and Seamus would probably have gone further afield – maybe down to the Liffey, where the fishing was better, or even to the big pond out at the Brickfields. But the ould wan was terrified of the child drowning and had made Colm swear that he would take her to nowhere dangerous. The fact that his mammy would consider the Grand Canal dangerous was a mere woman's whim, he and Seamus had decided. The water wasn't deep ... well, not very deep . . . and because of the tow-path there was no need to get too close to the edge. Some kids fished from the tow-path, of course, but he and Seamus were happy enough to sit on the long grass, well back from the water, and fish as best they could from there.

When the two of them were ready Colm wound in Caitlin's rope and lifted her to her feet. 'We're goin' home now, alanna,' he said cheerfully. 'If you get tired, I'll carry you. But you can walk for a whiles.'

Caitlin still had the daisies in her skirt but she trotted along beside him, the rope dipping between them. Colm did not intend to let her off it until they were in their own home since, with the best will in the world, he could not keep watching her every minute of the walk. Past experience told him that she would stop by every other grating to push a daisy or two through, or trace a picture in the dust with a grubby forefinger, or dart into the road in pursuit of a mangy dog, or a pigeon, rootling between the paving stones. On the rope, at least she would stay within a foot or two of him, so that he could curb her worst excesses.

As he had told Seamus, he had never forgotten the day he and his pals had gone to fish for crabs alongside the Liffey. They had begged or borrowed lengths of line from older brothers or fathers, and had baited them with scraps of long-dead and stinking fish, found down on the quays.

He’d had Caitlin with him, of course, because his ould wan was working as a cleaner in one of the smart houses in Ely Place and could not look after the child, but Caitlin had been a baby then, not even a year old. He had brought her along in a wooden fish box to which he had fixed small wheels, and had satisfied himself that she was sound asleep before sitting down on the quayside and dropping his line hopefully into the gentle brown water.

She hadn’t made a sound on waking, either. She had climbed out of the fish box and crawled to the edge of the quay . . . and before he had had the remotest idea what was happening he had seen a flash of white and there she was, bobbing in the water below, too startled even to shout as it closed over her head.

Colm had been eight then, not thirteen as he was now, and hadn’t been as strong a swimmer as he was now, either. He had screamed, though, and Seamus had echoed the scream, and then he had hurled himself off the quayside and into the water, which was a dozen feet below, for the tide had been out.

‘You might have killed your young wan be landin’ on her head, boy,’ the man who had rescued the pair of them told him as he hauled them to safety aboard his boat. ‘Never jump into water feet first until your swimmin’ is a deal better than it is now. But you won’t do it again and you’re safe, the pair of ye. Now tell me, how did she come to fall in?’

Colm had explained, tearfully, what had happened, and their rescuer had seen them both ashore and had bidden Colm to take the young wan home right now and put her into a warm bed. ‘She’ll be none the worse be tomorrow’s morn,’ he had declared cheerfully.

He had been right, too. And Colm’s ould wan had never realised that her precious baby had landed in Anna Liffey;

Colm managed to make it appear that she had got wet by somehow slipping into the fountain at St Stephen's Green whilst watching himself and other chisellers sailing boats made from matchboxes – and he had done it without telling any downright lies, either. But even so, it had taught him a lesson. A little sister was precious, so she was, and though he had felt ill-done-by, at first, when his mother had made him take the baby with him whilst she was working, he soon began to look on it as an honour rather than a penance. Other boys his age had sisters, it was true, and sisters automatically looked after younger brothers and sisters. But he and Caitlin were the only kids in their family, so they had to look out for each other; it stood to reason. So whilst his mother did her housework or marketing, or worked at her cleaning in the big houses around Ely Place and Merrion Square, he took his sister with him and put up with the sneers of other chisellers who were not so burdened.

That had been at first. Now it was generally accepted that going somewhere with Colm often meant taking Caitlin too and Seamus, who was the youngest member of a very large family, actually seemed to enjoy the child's company which, since he and Colm got along just great, was as well.

So now, making their way through the dreamy, dusty summer streets, the two boys talked over their plans for the morrow.

'We can't go swimmin', 'cos me mammy's workin', so we'll be takin' Caitlin wit' us. But the mammy'll give us some pennies . . . an' she'll give us bread an' cheese an' mebbe an apple so's we can spend the day in Phoenix Park. We might hear the lions ... if we only had some money we could show Caitlin the animals in the zoo!'

'We could fish in the pond,' Seamus said, grinning. 'There's some big 'uns in there!' He glanced down at Caitlin, trotting between the two of them, one hand

grasping the hem of her brother's shirt though the rope was still knotted firmly round her waist. 'Tired, alanna?' he asked. 'Will I be after carryin' you for a bit?'

Caitlin looked consideringly up at Seamus, then shook her curly head. Colm guessed that she, too, had napped now and then in the hot sunshine on the canal bank, with the bulk of Polikoff's clothing factory looming up behind them, and now had no objection to stretching her legs a little.

'S'awright, Shay,' he said, therefore. 'She'll be good an' tired be the time we get home, then she'll gobble her tay an' straight to bed wit' her. Less trouble for the mammy an' me.'

The three children continued to walk together until their ways parted at the junction of Kevin and Cuffe Streets, where Seamus turned left towards his home just off the Coombe and the O'Neill children turned right, towards Cloddagh Court which ran behind Grafton Street, quite near Switzer's. The O'Neills had not lived there long. Until five months ago, they had been almost next door to Seamus's large family on the Coombe, but Colm's mammy had been determined to get nearer her work and, as soon as she could afford it, she had rented the rooms in Cloddagh Court.

'It's handy for Merrion Street and next time Switzer's want a char, it's goin' to be meself, so it is,' she told her son as she washed the dishes and he wiped them and put them away. 'Can you imagine workin' there, me laddo? Eh, an' they pay better'n the big private houses I've heared tell.'

So now when Seamus turned left towards the Coombe, the O'Neills turned right and made for Grafton Street. Even late on a sunny summer's afternoon it would be crowded, but no one took any notice of a small grubby boy and

grubbier girl, making their way past the smart shops and imposing buildings.

Presently they turned left and found themselves suddenly transported. Gone were the wide pavements, smart people, brilliant shop windows. Here the narrow streets were dirty and crowded with noisy, ragged children kicking a ball, rolling marbles, playing tag, skipping rope. Colm and Caitlin made their way between them, exchanging greetings and insults.

‘Where’s ye been? Oh, you t’ink you’re a Mickie dazzler, goin’ off out wit’ the kid in tow ’stead o’ playin here wit’ your pals …’

‘Whyfor’s she on de rope? You skeered someone’ll kidnap her, an’ send yiz a ransom note an’ a lock o’ hair?’

‘Don’t I wish they would?’ Colm replied untruthfully. He would be doing Caitlin no favours by admitting he enjoyed the company of a five-year-old – and a girl at that. ‘Still an’ all, she’s not bad as young wans go.’

Caitlin, never slow to learn insults, simply said ‘Shut your bloody gob!’ to anyone who addressed her, which startled even the rudest of the surrounding kids and would have mortified her mother, had she heard.

Even Colm, who knew well how to swear when adults were out of the way, was taken aback and reproved his sister as soon as they entered the quieter area where they lived. ‘Cait, you mustn’t say that,’ he said earnestly. ‘You’ll be in big trouble, so you will, an’ you’ll mek our mammy cry first an’ beat your little bum next.’

‘You say it,’ Caitlin stated. She was kicking a nice piece of red tile ahead of her, head down, eyes on the ground, concentrating. ‘You said it to the chiseller who telled you to t’row in your line somewheres else. You said he was a greedy bugger.’

‘Ye-es, but I’m . . . I’m older’n you and I’m a feller. Fellers can say t’ings which gorls can’t,’ Colm said after the slightest of hesitations. ‘Swearin’s bad . . . have you ever heard Mammy say bad words?’

‘No-oo. But I’m a kid, she’s a mammy,’ Caitlin said complacently. ‘It’s different for kids. You telled me so.’

They reached their door and Colm pulled his sister to a halt with a tug on the rope, then bent to untie it from her small waist. ‘You’ll be a mammy one day,’ he said cunningly. ‘Just like our mammy. But only if you don’t say bad t’ings. You hear me?’

Caitlin manoeuvred her piece of red tile up to the bottom of the two scrubbed steps which led to their rooms and, after a moment’s frowning thought, nodded. ‘Awright. I won’t say bad t’ings no more. Well, not when our mammy’s listenin’,’ she added hastily. ‘But them boys was *rude*, Colm!’

‘You can be turble rude back wit’out swearin’,’ Colm said, lifting her over the steps and settling her on his hip as they approached the door. ‘Mammy’s out ... d’you want to pull the key up?’

The key was kept on a piece of string attached to the letter-box. You put your hand very carefully through the slit, found the piece of string and hauled the key through. It was odd, Colm thought as he stood his small sister down and watched her fumbling through the slit, that everyone he knew employed this device yet thieves did not take advantage of it. Mammy was always on about thieves, yet so far as he knew no one in the vast, sprawling area that was the Liberties had ever been robbed by someone hauling up their key.

‘Got it, Colly,’ Caitlin said breathlessly. ‘Me open?’

‘’Course,’ Colm said at once and lifted her to keyhole height. ‘Remember, turn gently and it’ll open sweetly. Turn jerky an’ it won’t open at all.’

The child clung grimly to the key for a moment with both hands, breath held, eyes almost shut, then she squeaked triumphantly, ‘It’s worked, Colm! You do the handle!’

Colm turned the handle, the door opened and the two of them entered.

The room was both their main living-room and kitchen, for the parlour next door was kept for special occasions only, so that this room was crowded with all the impedimenta of family living. There was an open fire, unlit on this warm day, the mantelpiece over it a refuge, at the moment, for all the ornaments and breakables which had once been scattered about the room, for well Mammy knew that if any of the china figurines or pretty crockery was within reach of Caitlin’s small, busy fingers it was unlikely to last an hour out, so she had put her treasures out of reach as soon as the child began to toddle. ‘As I did when yourself was at that age,’ she had reminded Colm. ‘Caitlin’s no better an’ no worse than any other child – she likes to touch. And look how careful of me nice t’ings you are, now you’re a big feller! There’s no one I’d trust sooner than you, Colm, an’ that’s gospel trut’, so it is, and one day Caitlin will grow more careful, just like me boy has.’

Apart from the mantelpiece, all the other surfaces held more utilitarian objects, save for the stoup of holy water by the door and the pictures, mostly representations of the Virgin, which crowded the walls. The large scrubbed wooden table had a box of cheap cutlery at one end and four tin plates and mugs at the other. In the centre was a tottering pile of dry linen, awaiting the iron, while under the table lurked a large basket full of what looked like folded – and ironed – sheets, pillowslips and tablecloths.

There was a rug by the fire, made of pieces of brightly coloured rag, the back of it sacking, the edges neatened with a border of raffia, and on the topmost sheet was an apple and a sheet of paper.

Caitlin dived for the apple with a squeak of joy but Colm grabbed her before she could snatch it up. ‘There’s a note from Mammy on the paper, Cait,’ he said rather breathlessly. ‘Let me read it forst, then we’ll have halves, eh?’

‘Sure,’ Caitlin said cheerfully. She stood back, staring up at him as he perused the lines. ‘What’s it say, Colm?’

‘It says to scrub the spuds an’ then to tek the basket of linen round to the back door of the Merrill place in St Stephen’s Green Street South and knock the door. The housekeeper’ll give us one an’ ninepence for the washin’.’ He stopped reading and heaved a sigh. ‘There! Mammy’s not supposed to do that old crow’s washin’, she’s got enough on her plate, so she has, but at least she’ll be paid for it this time.’

‘What’s one an’ ninepence?’ Caitlin said as her brother went over to the washstand and poured water from a bucket which lurked beneath it into the round blue basin that stood on the top. ‘Is it money, Colm?’

‘That’s it,’ Colm said. He crossed the room to where a box full of potatoes stood against the wall, neatly hidden from view by a clean but ragged piece of cloth. ‘How hungry are ye, Caitlin? One spud or two?’

‘T’ree,’ Caitlin said promptly. Ever since her third birthday she had understood three and had used it whenever she could do so. ‘Can I pick ’em out, Colm?’

‘No, ’cos they’re covered wit’ earth, so they are, an’ you’ll get your little pawses all filt’y,’ Colm told her. ‘Besides, they’re huge ole spuds, alanna. I doubt you’ll ate two of ’em, let alone t’ree.’ He saw his small sister’s lower

lip begin to wobble ominously and said hastily: ‘You can fetch me the piece o’ salt, though, from the cupboard. Or will it be too heavy for you? ’Tis on the bottom shelf, in a brown paper.’

Whilst Caitlin stood on tiptoe to open the cupboard door Colm hastily chose three enormous potatoes and stuck them in the water, forgetting to knock the worst of the earth off them first so that the water quickly began to resemble a swamp. Sighing, he did as good a cleaning job on them as he could under the circumstances, then put them into the large blackened pan which stood between the buckets beneath the washstand. One bucket was for slops, the other for fresh water, and he saw with dismay that by the time he’d covered the potatoes with water he would have to go down to the ground floor to replenish the bucket, as well as taking the other one to empty the mixture of water and mud which his carelessness had brought about. It was a nuisance, because he had planned to put the potatoes to one side of the fire, then take the empty bucket in one hand and carry the basket of clean linen in the other, but now he would have to make a double journey.

‘Here’s the salt, Colm,’ a small voice said breathlessly at about pocket level. Colm grinned at his little sister and took the big chunk of salt, the size – and weight – of a housebrick, from her. He stood it on the dry piece of the washstand and chipped a piece about the size of a walnut off it with the old kitchen knife which Mammy kept especially for the purpose, then handed the salt back to Caitlin, who received it in both arms and staggered proudly back to the cupboard with her burden. ‘Is there anythin’ else I can fetch for you, Colm?’ she asked, slamming the salt down on the lowest shelf with an audible crash. ‘Are you goin’ to light the fire? I’ll bring the matches if you like.’

Colm knew very well that Mammy always kept the matches on the topmost shelf, and knew, too, that Caitlin could never reach them in a million years. ‘It’s all right, alanna,’ he said, however. ‘We’ll not be after lightin’ the fire until we’ve delivered the linen.’ He bent and picked up the bucket of water, pouring it over the potatoes, then stood the bucket down again and tossed in the salt. ‘And anyway, you know you aren’t allowed to touch matches, they’re . . .’ he turned as he spoke and what he saw made his eyes bulge. Caitlin was calmly struggling from shelf to shelf like a goat up a mountainside, heading straight for the topmost one. ‘Why, you wicked little …’

He leaped towards her on the words, just in time to see her clutch at what she clearly thought was a shelf edge … and topple backwards, holding his mammy’s wooden chopping board in her hands for one brief second before releasing it to clutch at the air as she crashed floorwards. A number of objects came off the shelves with her, landing on or around the child, and Colm, his heart beating so loudly that it almost deafened him, pushed everything wildly aside and looked down into her white face. ‘Caitlin! Are you all right?’ he gasped. ‘What devil possessed you to go climbin’ like a mountain goat on Mammy’s cupboard shelves? Oh, if you’ve been an’ gone an’ kilt yourself then it’s my fault, for not rememberin’ as how you’re always game for anyt’ing, any’ting at all!’

He pulled Caitlin into a sitting position and realised that a good deal of her pallor was due to the bag of flour, which had tipped most of its contents over her as she fell, and indeed, a second later she sneezed several times, very loudly, before pulling herself out of his arms and getting waveringly to her feet. ‘I went crash-bang-wallop,’ she said breezily. ‘The shelf breaked in me hands, so it did. Will – will Mammy be cross?’

‘She will so,’ Colm said thoughtlessly, then saw Caitlin’s mouth begin to turn down at the corners and repented of his cruelty. ‘Ah, it’s all right, alanna, for I’ll not breathe a word to the mammy; you were doin’ your best to help,’ he said reassuringly. ‘Now just you sit in the chair be the fireside whiles I clear this mess away, then we’ll go off to deliver the washin’ an’ no one the wiser.’

He shovelled the flour back into its sack, hoping that the next time his mother came to need some she would not notice what a deal of dust had somehow got mixed with the topmost couple of inches, then began to tidy the other things. What a blessing she’d not actually broken anything, he thought, returning things to their proper places and giving a quick look back over his shoulder to see what the spalpeen was doing now. With Caitlin you could never be sure. But she was kneeling on the floor and dusting flour off the lower shelf with an old rag, clearly intent on making amends for her accident. As it was, Mammy would not scold for a mishap – and besides, with luck she need never find out.

‘All done,’ Colm said presently, returning to the washstand to heave the slop bucket up in one hand and the empty one with the other. ‘Come on, Caitlin, we’ll deal wit’ the water first.’

Caitlin got to her feet and as she stood up Colm noticed the state of her for the first time. Oh Mary, Mother of Jesus, the kid was covered in flour; it mingled with the dirt of a day’s play and gave her a terrifying appearance! Sighing, he stood his buckets down and reached for the floor brush, then led Caitlin back into the pantry cupboard. He might as well brush her down where all the worst mess had been, then brush all the mess between the boards.

Twenty minutes later he and Caitlin set off at last, Caitlin looking suspiciously pale still, though Colm comforted himself with the thought that she looked pale

because he was not used to seeing her so clean. He had brushed her hair, retied the piece of orange string which kept it out of her eyes, washed her face, hands and all the leg you could see under her skirt, then got rid of the evidence to the best of his ability. So now he took her hand, picked up the buckets and set off down the stairs.

The tap was inside the house, towards the back – a huge luxury in a city where a great many houses had no piped water indoors at all – and the slops were emptied down a rainwater grid. Colm performed both his tasks with Caitlin trotting beside him, then headed for the stairs once more, the buckets full. They would need the water later for making the tea, washing up the crocks and for their own ablutions at bedtime. Mammy liked to have her buckets full and provided he gave the slop bucket a good swill she would not object to it being filled instead of the big blue-and-white enamel one with the fitting lid, which he did not feel capable of carrying down as well as the other two.

Carefully, Colm carried out his tasks, then trudged up the stairs again, deposited the full buckets and picked up the basket of linen. 'One more trip, Cait,' he said happily. 'Then we'll come home an' light the fire an' get the spuds on before Mammy gets home.'

'An' . . . an' you won't tell the mammy about her cupboard, will you, Colm?' Caitlin said in her most wheedling and soulful tone. ''Cos I does hate it when the mammy's cross, so I does.'

Colm laughed and rumpled her dark curls. 'I'll not say a word,' he promised cheerfully. 'And now let's put our best foot forward so's we're home the sooner.'

All the way to St Stephen's Green Street South Colm thought about his mother and how hard she worked to keep the family. He admitted, grudgingly, that he supposed his father worked hard too – but he was so far away. Diggin'

ditches in England, Colm thought sourly. Drinkin' ale, fightin', havin' a fine old time. He sent money home, Colm knew that, but it wasn't the same. Mammy slaved at her cleanin' jobs, so she did, and brought home washin' and cooked them good meals, took them out for days, gave him money for the penny rush at the picture house on Saturday mornings and for a tram ride from time to time, or a new second-hand pair of trousers from the market, so's he was as smart as his pals. And in his turn, Colm did his best for the mammy. He did girls' work around the house, he looked after his little sister, he ran messages and when he earned money, he handed it to his mammy without a second thought. She loved him and he loved her, he reasoned, and since she was good to him, he must be good, in his turn, to her. But for some reason best known to herself she still got very excited when their daddy came home, which was usually only once or twice a year. And after she'd put out the best food for their daddy she changed into her smartest clothes and the pair of 'em went off out together, and there had been times when his daddy came home the worse for drink, singin' an' shoutin' an' fallin' about. Doing the things, in fact, which his mammy thought dreadful in other women's husbands but apparently accepted in her own – 'Because,' she explained, 'your daddy's far from home so much. When he's back wit' us sure an' hasn't he the reason for gettin' a bit over-excited?'

But Colm didn't excuse him, not in his heart. Sean O'Neill was over six foot tall and strong with it, and sometimes Colm thought that his daddy didn't understand why he did so much around the house for his mammy, why he took Caitlin with him whenever he went out. Sean thought he had fathered a milksop and sometimes he showed it in a sneering sort of way, which made Colm long to rush at him and batter him. Only Sean was hugely strong

– if any battering were done, it would be done by his father, Colm realised regretfully.

Not that Sean had shown the slightest sign of attacking his son. It was just the look in his eye sometimes, particularly when Mammy got up to clear away the tea-things or the dinner-plates and Colm jumped up too, and wiped whilst she washed, or poured the tea from the tin teapot into the cream-and-blue pottery cups which the mammy had saved up to buy from the market stall in Francis Street. Then Sean would lean back in his chair and whistle a tune, or pick Caitlin up and put her on his knee and tell her stories of life in England. Colm tried not to listen, but sometimes he couldn't help it, and it was from these stories that he'd got the impression that his father had a high old time when he crossed the water.

And his mammy was so wonderful! She was no taller than Colm himself, and thin as the long pole which lifted their washing line up high in the courtyard at the back of the house, yet she was strong enough to scrub all the floors in the Merrill House and the O'Grady house and the Thompson house, then bring a mound of washing home and iron it with the flat-irons which he or she heated by the fire until they reached a sufficient temperature to press without burning. And she almost never got cross, no matter what went wrong. Colm knew that other fellers had mammies who roared with rage, used a stick on their kids, wept and bellowed when something happened to vex them, but his mammy said the best thing was to 'count to ten', and she did just that. When the milk burned, when the spuds went to mush, when Caitlin dropped her cup and it smashed into a thousand pieces, when Colm played late and forgot a message, it was always the same. Mammy would sigh, smile, count to ten and then say lovingly that sure an' wasn't it just the sort of t'ing which had happened to her

once, long ago? ‘No one’s to blame,’ she would say comfortably. ‘We’ll put it down to experience, so we shall.’

Sean O’Neill wasn’t home long enough to get aggravated with his son and daughter, Colm told himself, but once or twice his daddy had slapped him across the legs and wagged a reproving finger at Caitlin, which just showed, Colm thought, that given a bit more time his daddy would be like most of the daddies he knew – he’d beat his kids and his wife, and make their lives a misery, given the time to do it in.

But Mammy couldn’t – or wouldn’t – see it. When they’d been out for the afternoon, perhaps, and had a fish and chip supper, she would squeeze onto the same chair as Sean’s and he would put an arm round her and pull her close. And Colm would have to go to bed in the next room while they were like that – he hated doing it, hated leaving them, but he didn’t have a choice. Mammy would smile and say, ‘Bedtime, Colm me boy’ and he would be on his feet and half way out of the door before he’d thought of one little excuse.

Colm slept in a cupboard of a room next to the living kitchen. It was a snug, windowless little place, with his bed, a chair, a holy picture and a row of hooks to hang his clothes on. He loved having his own little space, except when his daddy was home. Then he envied Caitlin, who had a cot next to mammy’s big bed, and could keep an eye on their parents all night if she wanted. Only she would be sound asleep really, Colm knew that, and come to think of it, judging by the way his mammy snuggled up to his daddy in the fireside chair, perhaps he did not much want to share their room, either. You’d have thought they were like the young lovers who hid in the doorways on Grafton Street to carry on when respectable people had gone to bed and not two old people, long married.

‘Are we nearly there, Colm?’ Caitlin said, bringing Colm back to earth once more. ‘Will we go in, eh? Will the lady gi’s a piece of soda bread or some liquorice sticks?’

You had to admit that for a young ’un, Caitlin had a way with her, Colm told himself as they rounded the corner into St Stephen’s Green. Only twice could he remember being given anything by the important people his mammy worked for and each time it had been because of Caitlin’s undoubted charm. But it didn’t do to get hopeful; better to expect nothing and be pleased if you got something, he thought, and answered accordingly, ‘I don’t know, alanna, but when we got the bread and the liquorice we went into the house to fetch Mammy out, didn’t we? This time we’re only deliverin’, which isn’t the same.’

‘You get a halfpenny or an apple or somethin’ good for goin’ messages,’ Caitlin pointed out. ‘That’s why you do it; you telled me so last time. Isn’t that why you’re after goin’ round to Mrs Gillis to see if she wants messages runnin’?’

‘It’s because she’s old and can’t go for herself . . . but you’re right, I’d not be so prompt if she didn’t give me somethin’ for me trouble,’ Colm admitted. ‘I’d still go, though, even wit’out the pennies. Mrs Gillis is nice.’

‘Yes, I love her, so I do,’ Caitlin said cheerfully. ‘Is that the house?’

‘You’ve got a memory like a bloody elephant,’ Colm said, then clapped a hand to his mouth. He was forgetting his own vow not to say anything in front of Caitlin that one did not want repeated. ‘Sorry, Cait, that was a bad word. You didn’t hear it; right?’

‘Sure I didn’t. Which house is it, Colly? If it’s a house wit’ kids in they might be makin’ treacle toffee!’

The incident of the treacle toffee had happened a year previously, but like most nice events it had clearly stayed in Caitlin’s memory. Possibly she had not included it in the

recollections of things given at big houses because the giver had been a child, but although Colm had not forgotten it, he knew they were not revisiting that house today. ‘The toffee was give by the kids of the woman on Lower Bagot,’ he said regretfully. ‘I dunno if they’s kids here. Come on, it’s this house, but we go round the back, same’s Mammy does.’

There was a narrow passageway down the side of the house and they turned into this, crossed the courtyard where the dustbins were kept and knocked loudly on the back door, which was half open because, Colm assumed, of the heat of the day. Through it they could see a very large and splendid room with red tiles on the floor and a big wooden table almost the length of the whole room. There was a huge oven, an open fire, shelves and shelves filled with exciting-looking kitchen equipment – Colm knew it was kitchen equipment because Mammy had told him so – and a very large fat woman hovering over the long table, which was laid with a great many dishes and pans and trays of food. The woman had her hair wrapped in a white cloth and a white apron covered her person ... and her face was scarlet from the heat and from bending, so that two trickles of sweat ran down her cheeks and joined into a little stream under the fat pile of her chins. She heard their knock and glanced up, then straightened and shouted to someone out of sight: ‘Door, Biddy! Delivery, be the looks of it.’

There was a rustling sound and a girl not a lot older than Colm appeared in the doorway. She, too, wore a white apron, but it was speckled and stained with dirt, and the hair which straggled out from under her white cap was greasy and unkempt. She had a thin face, reddened now by the heat, and she held a bowl in the curve of her arm and a big wooden spoon in her hand, but she smiled pleasantly enough at the two children hovering on the doorstep. ‘Yes?’

she asked, half turning away from them to stand the bowl down on the edge of the table.

‘Laundry, Miss,’ Colm said promptly. ‘Me Mammy’s Mrs O’Neill, she said to bring it over for her.’

‘Oh …’ The girl turned and said to the fat woman, ‘It’s the washin’, cook. You know, the staff tablecloths an’ sheets that O’Neill took a couple o’ days gone.’

‘Right. Tek it in, then,’ the cook said abstractedly. She sighed. ‘Sure and isn’t it just my luck that everyone’s comin’ to the door an’ me wit’ a dinner party for two dozen to get ready?’

‘Thanks,’ the girl said to Colm, holding out a hand.

But Colm had delivered too many parcels to great houses to allow her so much as to touch it until he’d had his mammy’s money. ‘There’s money to be paid, Miss,’ he said politely, therefore. ‘Me mammy said there was money owin’ and I was to fetch it.’

‘Bloomin’ blood out of a stone some of ’em would ask for,’ the cook said in a goaded voice. ‘We’ll pay your mammy tomorrer, sonny, or the day after that. Tek it in, Bid, and get on wit’ beatin’ that batter.’

Biddy looked hunted and Colm hung onto his parcel harder than ever. He knew the quality, so he did! They would mean to pay, his mother had explained many times, but you could fall between two stools, with the mistress thinking the maid had paid and the maid assuming that the mistress had done so. Accordingly he stood his ground. One and ninepence was nothing to these people, but it was a great deal to the O’Neills, and a poor sort of son he’d be if he meekly handed his mammy’s work over without first getting his money!

‘There’s one and ninepence owed,’ he said in a singsong voice, hoping that the cook and this Biddy would think him a bit stupid … anything, rather than leave here and be the