

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



What's It All About?
Cilla Black

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About the Book

Cilla is without doubt one of Britain's best-loved personalities. Over the years, she has had hit records, presented iconic TV shows while also bringing up three children with her husband, Bobby. But how much do we really know about 'the girl with the bright red hair and the jet black voice?'

Caught up in the incredible youth explosion of the Sixties, Cilla found herself managed by Brian Epstein, friends with the Beatles and selling a hundred thousand records a day. During forty extraordinary years in the public eye, Cilla has suffered as many setbacks and personal tragedies as she has had huge successes. Now, for the first time, she vividly tells the story of her life, through good times and bad, in her inspiring best-selling autobiography, *What's It All About?*

About the Author

Born Priscilla Maria Veronica White in Liverpool's heavily bombed, down trodden Scotland Road in 1943, Cilla grew up as a rough and tumble tomboy in a staunchly catholic household. By the time she was twenty - caught up in the incredible youth explosion of the Sixties - she was a key player on the up and coming Mersey scene, managed by Brian Epstein, friends with the Beatles, and having hit after smash hit as Cilla Black, selling a hundred thousand records a day.

cillabblack

What's It All About?



EBURY
PRESS

For Bobby

part one

1

Left Footer

THEY BRANDED US 'Left Footers'; we called them 'Proddy Dogs'. All us Irish Catholics lived on Scottie (that would be Scotland Road to anyone from out of Liverpool), and all the Protestants lived on Netherfield Road across to the east, with Great Homer Street running parallel down the middle. Inevitably there were street gangs, and it could get pretty rough. There was always a lot of posturing and name-calling and, if you were really unlucky, it could end in push-shoves, digs in the ribs and fisticuffs. The divisions between Catholic and Protestant were as strong as in Northern Ireland - the Protestants against the Catholics and *vice versa*. But on Saturdays everyone, whatever their religion, went to do their shopping at the butchers (we always went to Wood's), the grocers, the greengrocers and bakers on Great Homer Street, buying family favourites like boiled ham and pigs' feet - so once a week the two sides would come face to face. We kept a respectful distance from each other, but of course on significant dates, such as St Patrick's Day on 17 March and the Orange Parade on 12 July, which I loved watching, there was more friction than normal.

Fortunately I was a very sporty child, and I always thought if a gang did pick on me, I could easily outrun them. Once, though, on 12 July, after watching the Lodge parade down London Road, I had just left a busy main

street and entered a quiet, deserted side road, when a gang of five eleven-year-old girls - the same age as me - fell in step behind me. I didn't need to look twice to realise they meant trouble.

'What d'you think?' the leader was saying as they came into earshot. '*Is she? Is she one of them? I bet she's one of them!*'

She was a big, brawny red-head, and the other four girls, all mousey-haired, were not exactly tiddlers. Sure I was in for a hiding, I glanced up and down the street, desperate for an adult - anyone who might intervene and say, 'Oi, you lot, get home - yer mam's got cake!' but there was nobody.

I decided this was a case of flight rather than fight, and made a run for it. But they'd got too close, and this time I knew my skinny long legs weren't going to save me.

'She *is* one of them!' the leader roared, egging the others on.

The chase ended moments later. Having wrenched me to a standstill by one of my sleeves, the gang circled me. I swivelled this way and that, giving one last desperate look up and down the street, then, seeing nobody, I clenched my fists into tight, defensive balls.

Their mutterings, 'Yeah - she's one of them!', were louder now.

They grabbed me, poked me in the ribs, shoved me backwards and pinned me against the wall. I had tried to stand up to them, but my fists felt like cotton wool.

'You *are* one of them, aren't you?' their leader kept taunting me, her hot breath drizzling on my cheeks. 'You *are* a Proddy Dog.'

But I wasn't - I was a Left Footer. Her question had implied that she was a Catholic, too - so what should I say? Maybe it was just a trick and I'd get a beating anyway. I decided to tell the truth, take the punishment, and try to give as good as I got. Better that, I reasoned, than tell a lie

and be chastised and called a coward by our priest in confession the next day.

'I'm a *Catholic*,' I cried out, the bold note I had injected into my voice camouflaging my fear and trembling.

The finger-jabbing stopped. Suddenly. Just like that. They exchanged frowns with each other, then the uncertain grimaces on their faces underwent a dramatic change.

'Jesus, Mary and sweet Joseph!' one of them whispered. 'Let her go, Bernadette. She's one of us. Leave her alone.'

They unpinned me and I stood breathless and wobbling as they drifted off laughing, their arms flung around each other's shoulders. My heart was in my mouth. Slowly it began relocating to my chest. One of the gang - the smallest of the ruffians, the girl with the most freckles - had the cheek to turn and give me a friendly farewell wave. I was tempted to run after her and give her a right thump, but even then, as a skinny eleven-year-old, I knew when to get out. So instead I hurried onwards down the still-deserted street towards the safety of my home in Scottie Road.

~

Scotland Road, the main road out to East Lancs, was about a mile long. With its huge Irish-Catholic population and a pub on every street corner, it had a bad reputation as the roughest residential part of town, but I felt totally safe playing in the streets there as a child, and later as a teenage girl walking home on my own after dark. The Church and Family were the foundation of our life, and we all grew up aware of what it meant to be good neighbours, good Samaritans, and a help to other people. Family priests had a great influence on adults' as well as children's behaviour. We all went to confession, said our rosary as a penance for venial sins, and lived in fear of committing a mortal sin and being damned or excommunicated. People in

our area either went off the rails in a major way or stuck to them.

Thousands of Liverpool children were evacuated to the countryside during the Second World War, but many families, including ours, decided to stay together in the city. Fortunately, by the time I was born on Thursday, 27 May 1943, the worst of Liverpool's bombing was over. I was too young to be aware of D Day in 1944, or VE (Victory in Europe) Day in 1945, but, like most kids born during the war, I was very aware of rationing and ration books. The coupons we got only allowed us two ounces of sweets and were gone in a flash, usually at Saturday morning pictures. In between I used to eat the squares of gelatine that our mams used for making jellies. I loved stretching them until they became about a foot long.

Home was our flat at 380 Scottie Road, above George Murray's barber's shop, behind a branch of Midland Bank and next door to Mrs Lee's Chinese laundry. The bank was the landlord, and we rented the flat from Mr Murray. Despite the semi-derelict state of some of the bomb-damaged buildings around us, the flat was not short of space. I lived there with me mam, dad and two older brothers, George and John. When I was born, George was seven and John was three. When I was about five, little Allan joined us - he was actually a cousin, my Auntie Ann's baby, and me mam and dad adopted him at nine months old. Allan was an angel baby with perfect blond curls; he got a lot of attention, and I was definitely put out at losing my cherished 'baby of the family' position. Auntie Ann always came round at ours at weekends (she used to do my nails for me) and although it was meant to be a secret that she was Allan's mam, I found out quite early on.

Our kitchen-cum-living room was on the first floor, and the bedrooms were above that, along with another very large room which we used as a living room. This room, the best, was actually as large as the lounge of the house I live

in now. It was certainly big enough for the piano that my father bought from the North End Music Store (NEMS), the Epstein family's furniture store in Everton, and spacious enough for all our family, friends and neighbours to get together on special occasions and Saturday nights. Making your own music was the norm in the fifties for people like us who couldn't afford television sets.

Not only were the rooms of our flat really large - but on the upper floor there were other rooms that we didn't even occupy. These were always left empty, though, because we were not allowed to rent them out. I loved singing up there, because there was an echo that amplified my voice!

Our home was full of music when I was a kid. We listened to records, and always had the radio on - I remember listening to Victor Sylvester on Monday mornings if I was ill and kept at home from school. Me mam, bless her, was named Priscilla, but she was known as 'big Cilla' after I was born, and I was dubbed 'little Cilla'. She was always singing, especially on Monday mornings, which was washday in our home; and me dad, whose name was John, was forever playing his mouth organ when he wasn't tending his budgerigars. Me mam had an amazingly high voice and she loved opera, especially 'One Fine Day' from *Madama Butterfly*. Arias from that, and her renderings of 'Chirri Chirri Bee', were second to none.

Irish, with thick jet-black hair on which he used Brylcreem, me dad had a strong, guttural Liverpool accent. Handsome and a bit of a stoic, he was nine years older than me mam, and before becoming a docker he'd worked in construction for eight years in London and helped to build the Dorchester Hotel in Park Lane. Even though he was a docker, he was a very dapper man who loved his waistcoats, and he never missed going to London for the Derby every year. Down at the docks, his workmates called him 'Shiner', because his boots were always so beautifully polished you could see your face in them.

He was a very quiet, shy man until he was in the company of men. He was very old-fashioned in that respect, but, like many Scousers, he could be a bit of a lad at his favourite pub, Fitzie's, on Bostock Street. Women never went to the pubs with the fellers in those days. It was very much a man's thing. Once inside, Dad and his mates would buy a round, then it was time for blokeish digs in the ribs, leg-pulls, and risqué jokes, most of which were considered too filthy, unfit for women's ears!

After the men had all had a few jars on a Saturday night, it was often back to our place for a 'jars out and a singsong' when the pubs turned out. They'd bring home shandy for me mam and Guinness for themselves. They'd also bring in pigs' feet and fish 'n' chips. Dad would then play his mouth organ and everybody would do a turn. My mam was very into Country and Western as well as opera, and her party piece was 'T For Texas And T For Tennessee'.

I was always in bed when they came home, but I used to get up and sit on the back stairs while all the furniture, including the kitchen table, was being moved to make space for the Irish jigs, knees-up and group renderings of 'Danny Boy' and 'When Irish Eyes Are Smiling'. I loved crouching there, watching and listening and, from the age of three onwards, I could not wait to do my turn. Then, when I was five (it may have been around the time that Allan joined our family), on one magical night that I've never forgotten, everything changed. Instead of the usual: 'Get back to bed, girl', and being tucked back into bed with 'Off to sleep - church in the morning', somebody took me downstairs, stood me on the kitchen table, and said, 'All right, Queen, *you* do something.'

Standing on that table, in my creased winceyette nightie, looking down instead of up for once at the expectant faces of all those grown-ups, was the most marvellous feeling in the whole world. I was in my element. Then, after I'd done my turn - an Al Jolson number because

our Georgie loved Al Jolson and Frank Sinatra - I basked in the adulation and applause. From then on, I never looked back. I'd be up there on every occasion singing songs such as 'My Old Man Said "Follow The Van" ' and loving every moment of it. I'd also do anything I could to make them laugh.

From then onwards that table was my stage, and the grown-ups squashed up together on the settee and armchairs, sipping their shandies and Guinness, were my audience. Even now, forty years on, I relive those moments.

~

The first present little girls were given in those days was a doll, followed by a doll's pram. The madonna or 'mother' thing was instilled in us almost as soon as we could toddle, so I was always walking aimlessly up and down Scottie Road with my dolly in her pram. One Saturday, when I was about six or seven, I was bored with all this and took myself off for a much longer walk. I must have got at least a mile, a long way at that age, before a neighbour spotted me.

'What are *you* doing here, little Cilla?' she said. 'Where's your mam?'

'I'm taking my dolly for a walk,' I muttered innocently.

She took me home.

I will never forget the look of relief on me mam's face when she saw us coming. She'd obviously been frantic and thought she'd lost me for ever.

None of us kids had gardens to play in, but we didn't feel deprived because we didn't know any different. The streets were our playground and, apart from the occasional fret when one of us - usually me! - wandered off and got lost, nobody seemed to worry about us being abducted. On sunny days babies were parked outside their houses in prams and, as the real thing was so much more interesting than any doll, I was forever kidnapping baby and pram and

taking them for a walk. Today, if a mother found a baby missing from its pram, she would go into instant panic mode and ring the police, but not then. The mothers just used to say, 'Who's taken the baby for a walk?' and invariably it was me.

~

My school, which my brothers also attended, was St Anthony's, a Roman Catholic school run by nuns in Newsham Street, just off Scottie Road. I remember my first day at school very clearly. I hated it. As the only girl in a family full of boys I was a spoiled and rather clingy child, and I couldn't understand why my mother was abandoning me in this strange building. A pint-sized drama-queen, I kept clinging to me mam's skirts and crying pitifully, 'Please don't leave me. I don't want to go!' Then, when Mam did manage to wrestle free and disappear, worse was to follow. One of my plaits came undone and I burst into tears all over again because I was too frightened to ask the teacher to re-plait it for me. I couldn't wait to get out of there and get back to messing about on the streets.

Mam's best friend was a lady called Vera Davis, and her son Billy was my best friend in those days. Billy was fair-haired and a great looker. He was always very close to his mother and never minded holding her hand out in the street. Whenever we played our favourite dressing-up games he insisted on being the bride, and always wanted me to be the bridesmaid! I didn't think this was strange. I thought he was terrific. If anybody had ever tried to hint that his behaviour was odd for a boy - then or later - I would not have had any of it. I didn't know anything about what it meant to be 'a bit of a soft quilt', and I totally loved him for how he was and cherished him as my best friend.

'Let's play brides and bridesmaids,' he'd say. 'Oh, yes,' I'd always reply, nipping indoors for pieces of old curtain

for his dress and mine, and old beads, and some discarded netting for his veil. 'You look *luvvvvely*, Billy,' I'd coo when he was all dressed up and staggering around in a pair of me mam's old high-heeled shoes.

'Just like the brides we see at the church?' he'd ask anxiously.

'Just like them,' I'd reassure him, lovingly straightening his veil.

~

St Anthony's was a very working-class school, with only one teacher and a music tutor for forty-eight pupils, and our parents had to give donations for the privilege of sending us there. They also had to pay for our books and pencils, but there was no school uniform. The only stipulation was that we had to wear navy-blue knickers for PE, which had a pocket in them for your handkerchief, and elasticated legs that came down to our knees. I hated them! We also wore liberty bodices that buttoned all the way down the front and then looped on to our skirts to prevent them riding up.

Although Sister Marie Julie, our headmistress and teacher, was a tiny woman who looked like a baby penguin in spectacles, she terrorised us into behaving ourselves. Girls and boys were taught together until the age of eleven, and then they were separated and even had different playgrounds.

Once I'd settled in, I adored school, especially the music class. I was popular with the other kids because I was a natural show-off who was always playing the fool, thinking up practical jokes and making them laugh.

A Protestant school in nearby Penrhyn Street used to run a play centre after school, which Catholic children were encouraged to attend, and I loved going there while our tea was being made because they had talent competitions - singing contests - every week, at which the

prize was sixpence. I could hardly reach the microphone, one of those big, heavy jobs, but I used to get up there and say, 'My name's Priscilla Maria Veronica White and I'm going to sing ...'

When I was about seven all the other kids were still warbling 'On the Good Ship Lollipop', but not me. I was doing Dean Martin songs which I had learned from the wireless. I particularly remember (although this must have been later, when I was about ten) singing 'When the moon hits your eye like a big piece of pie ...' This was from the Dean Martin hit, 'That's *Amore*' - the real words were 'pizza pie', but I thought they were 'piece of pie' because we never had pizzas in Scottie Road and hadn't a clue what they were!

I won the sixpence prize-money so often at these singing contests that the headmaster, obviously thinking that all my friends were voting for me, decided to change the rules. He put the kids who were performing in his office out of sight, and rigged up the microphone in there. From then on, we were no longer allowed to say our names, which was a blessing in disguise for me. In the area I grew up, having a posh name like Priscilla was always an embarrassment! After the change of rules, we had to remain anonymous and say, 'I'm number six and I'm going to sing ...' It didn't make any difference, though. I still won the competition and the sixpence every week!

My family never pushed me to enter anything, but I was always the first in the queue to get up on the stage. Eager for any opportunity to be in the spotlight and be the star of the evening, I also sang at the Dockers' Christmas Party shows, where kids were allowed to do a turn. But after I won three times in a row, I was banned so as to give someone else a chance. For me it was one of those rare occasions when it didn't pay to be first, and I was mortified.

When I was about twelve, my only thought when I was coming home from school was the echo in our new

bathroom! This new echo was sheer joy for me, because when my father first rented our flat, it didn't have a bathroom. The only washing facility for bath nights, always a very steamy Friday-night event, was a tin bath in front of the kitchen fire which me mam filled with buckets of hot water heated on the stove. When my brothers and I were about seven or eight, we went once a week to the 'wash-all-overs', the public baths in Burroughs Gardens. That was bliss - and there was an echo there too! You could lock the door on your own bathroom, stretch out full length, bask in the steaming hot water, and linger for hours. I loved singing in there, with the echo amplifying my voice.

Then came the wonderful and unforgettable day when our flat was upgraded and we became the proud possessors of *our own bathroom*. It took me all of twenty seconds to discover that the echo in there worked wonders on my voice. From then on, I lived for the moments when I could belt out my favourite numbers in there.

Once inside our flat, I'd drop my things and head for the mirror placed over the hand-basin. Picking up my toothbrush as a pretend mike, I'd throw my head back and sing at the top of my voice. Renderings of 'Why Do Fools Fall In Love' would be followed the next instant by 'I'm Not A Juvenile Delinquent'. My poor dad, who worked mostly nights as a docker and was just waking up, would call down to my mother, 'For God's sake, Cilla, can't you keep that child *quiet?*'

'Cilla, keep it down, luv,' me mam would say, coming upstairs and putting her head around the door. 'Leave it off until your da's on days again.'

By this time, I was already convinced I had a talent that one day would be recognised. Neither me mam nor me dad ever pooh-poohed me when I announced 'I'm going to be a star.' It was more a matter of waiting patiently than of wishing and hoping. It may have been naive for me to think like that, but that's just how I was. I didn't confide in my

brothers, though. George wouldn't have mocked, but John would have been more difficult. I cramped his style, and he might have taken the mickey if I'd given him the chance.

But it was very small wonder that I wanted to be a singer from such an early age. Although nobody in our family was a professional musician, my father played the mouth organ, John could read music and played the saxophone and clarinet, Allan played the guitar a bit, George provided all the records, and my mother was always singing in her fab soprano voice.

I was very close to my brother Georgie, but not quite so close to John and Allan. There was only three years between John and me, but that's a lot when you're a child. John was always being told to look after me, which he hated because I cramped his style. He didn't want me hanging around him, and when we did go out together, he was forever saying, 'Get home, your mam wants you.' I'd trot all the way back to the flat and say, 'What do you want me for, Mam?'

'I don't want you,' she'd say. 'Go out and play.'

I soon twigged that John was just saying that to get rid of me, but it was no big deal. Unlike some of my girlfriends, I was never bullied or punched by any of my brothers. Mind you, woe betide them if they had tried. I'd have told me dad and, as I was very much 'Daddy's girl', he'd have soon sorted them out.

Looking back, I can see I was a lucky little girl who had a very happy childhood. We never had much money left over from essentials, and we didn't have one of the highly prized two-up, two-down terraced houses. Me mam would have killed to have one of those, because living in the flat meant that we didn't have our own front door. We either had to come in through the barber's shop, which me mam hated doing, or when the shop was closed we came in through the back entry on William Moulton Street. One day

when I came home from school, I'd found her crouched on the stairs crying with frustration.

'What's the matter, Mam?' I asked, alarmed, as I squeezed in beside her and wrapped my arms around her neck.

'A man from the council has just called round and said our flat is going to be upgraded - *done up*,' she replied, disgusted.

I thought that was good news and, for a moment, I was puzzled by her tears.

'Don't you see?' she added, blowing her nose. 'That lick of paint means we're not going to get a council house.'

I had understood then that this was the end of me mam's dream to have her own front door. And although the 'doing up' meant us getting our new bathroom, which was wonderful and unforgettable for me, it was small consolation for her.

Mam's crying incident aside, what I remember most about her was her laughter, even on Monday mornings when she was doing the washing for the six of us in the big sink in the passageway that was our kitchen. She used to do all the sheets by hand and put them through the mangle, but she'd still be chuckling and singing away in her incredible soprano voice. She was a very glamorous, strikingly attractive woman, and a very strong character. I remember seeing a photograph of her and her sister Mary when she was only sixteen. Her hair was cut in the then-fashionable Eton-crop style, and she looked absolutely stunning. She was a very demonstrative, warm, touchy-feely person, so none of us ever lacked for hugs and cuddles. Our family has always been like that - and I can't get my head around people who are not.

In her own way me mam was a women's libber, and a great admirer of the suffragettes who'd won women the right to vote. She ran her own business selling second-hand clothes in St Martin's Market and was very good at doing

deals. When I was fifteen, I remember her taking me to Nanette's, the posh clothes shop on London Road, to get my first grown-up coat. It was royal blue and very adult, and I thought, 'Gosh, this is great.' But when Mam said to the assistant, 'What's the lowest price you'll take for this?' I nearly died of shame and wanted to run away! But Mam was never embarrassed by doing that sort of thing. She was an incredible businesswoman who always wanted her business to be the best. She was one of the very special breed of market people who are strong, funny, quick-witted and fazed by nothing. She had great charm and was brilliant at the banter needed to encourage people who are slow to buy or a bit too pushy when rummaging through the goods. The market was really her stage. I loved helping her after school and during the holidays. For me it was another classroom where I learned the art of riposte.

Mam used to buy the clothes she sold from private houses and I used to go collecting with her. Whenever I catch the scent of roses now, it takes me back to those days when we'd go over the ferry to New Brighton and visit posh places in Waterloo and Birkenhead. I loved walking down those roads with their lovely semi-detached and detached houses, with their lush front gardens full of red, pink and yellow ramblers and standard roses.

'Smell *this* one, Mam,' I'd say, nicking a red rose here or a yellow one there.

'Behave yourself,' she'd tell me, pocketing the trophy and smelling its crushed petals later.

Me mam had her regular clients back at her stall, and later, in the sixties, when thirties gear became the rage, she decided to specialise in these clothes which ranged from the romantic-looking, high-fashion cocktail dresses to the practical styles of padded, broad-shoulder jackets that made waistlines look much smaller, trousers that were suitable for bike rides and tailored suits and hats that were strongly influenced by military uniforms. She was very

successful at this, and became known locally as a vintage clothes dealer.

No matter how busy she was, though, Mam was always there for the four of us. My brothers and I were never 'latchkey' kids, left to fend for ourselves when we came home from school. I was pretty spoilt, being the only girl, an absolute cow if I didn't get my own way, and always an attention-seeker, but she never tired of my carryings-on, never told me to shut up. And when I said, 'I'm going to be a star', she never put me down. 'I know you are,' she'd say, making me feel I could do anything.

I was lucky with me dad, too. He never had a lot to say for himself at home and had his own set ways of doing things, but when he did speak ('Bed - *now*,' 'Do what your Mam says', 'Put that away') or discipline us with a sudden frown or leap from his armchair, we listened and did what we were told. He never raised his voice, and never smacked us even when we were pushing the limits and asking for trouble. My brothers and I always knew when he was really upset, though, and we used to nudge each other, saying, 'Watch it - Dad's got a cob on.'

Thanks to me dad, I learned that you can win the day with quiet determination rather than making a scene.

I wasn't all that close to Dad's mother, Dorothy, or to Dad's brothers and sisters, perhaps because I was so close to me mam's mother Ellen and all her sisters. We did visit Grandma Dorothy occasionally, though, in her house on Stanley Road. She was a fabulous baker and confectioner, and after she turned her front room into a shop, all the factory workers at British American Tobacco used to go to her for their pies, cakes and pastries. I never knew Dad's father, because he died before I was born.

My mother had one brother and six sisters: my Uncle Tom and (starting with the eldest) Auntie Mary, Auntie Nellie, Auntie Lottie (Charlotte), Auntie Jean (Georgina), Auntie Ann (Allan's mother) and Auntie Vera (my

godmother). There was also Auntie Marina, who was strangely much younger than all the others and who I called Marie. I always thought she was another of Mam's sisters, but eventually we found out she wasn't. She was Auntie Nellie's daughter, born 'out of wedlock' as they used to say. What a horrible expression! Marina wasn't told until much later in her life that Auntie Nellie was her mother and not her sister.

Every Sunday we went round to me mam's parents' house in Bond Street, off Limekiln Lane, and, because my mother had so many sisters, there were always loads of grandchildren there. It was the same routine every week. I'd skip into the room, where there was always a wonderful comforting smell of a stockpot on the fire and delicious home-made bread, and me granddad, who seemed to sit permanently by the black-leaded fireplace smoking his pipe, would tease me by saying, 'Which one are you?'

'I'm little Cilla, big Cilla's girl,' I'd reply, and he'd give me a whiskery kiss.

Me nan was a very placid woman, an absolute saint who lived for her family. When I was going through a phase of wanting to do people's hair, she'd always sit there and let me make a mess of hers. 'Oh, that looks lovely; Queen,' she'd say when I was done, looking in a hand mirror at hair that now resembled a Maori's hut.

Kids were always very careful about how they talked or behaved when their parents or elders were around. Even when my brothers were grown men and George was doing his National Service, if they went into a pub and saw me dad in there they'd walk straight out; and once when I went to the pictures with me mam and she saw *her* parents there, she immediately stubbed out her cigarette.

Religion always dominated the weekly routine in our school and house. Me dad was an Irish Catholic and me mam was half-Welsh, with a Protestant father and an Irish-Catholic mother. Dad was a good Catholic, but he never went to Mass other than at Christmas and to do his Easter duty, which requires you to go to confession once a year and then Holy Communion. Mam was very religious. They used to say, 'she eats at the altar rail', because she was always in church taking communion. She was the treasurer of the Mothers' Union and eventually, because of her business acumen, its president.

I realise now that perhaps my dad was protesting at all this zeal of hers, and that maybe he was a wee bit jealous of how much time Mam spent in the church. If so, he never let these feelings filter down to us, but I suspect that he only did his Easter duty because he feared going to Hell. I know it sounds extraordinary today, but you were automatically excommunicated in those days if you didn't do this.

As cradle-born Catholics, my brothers and I were raised to believe in the Church's teaching and to apply its values to our daily life. We always went to Mass on Sunday mornings, and we totally accepted that it was a mortal sin to eat meat on Fridays, the day that Christ was crucified. I used to love cutting an orange in half and rubbing an Oxo cube over the two sections. It created a fabulous sweet and salty taste. Once I was halfway through eating this delicious treat when I suddenly realised what day it was.

'Oh, my God!' I exclaimed, silently. 'It's *Friday* ...'

I should have thrown the remaining bits away, but temptation got the better of me. After I'd finished licking my lips, I was so overcome by guilt I grabbed my coat and went straight to confession.

'Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned,' I said to Father Biery. 'I was eating this orange with some Oxo rubbed on it when I remembered today was Friday.'

'What did you do when you realised that?' he asked.

I cast a desperate glance at his shadowy head-and-shoulder outline on the other side of the wrought iron grille, but I was too terrified to tell the truth.

'I ... I stopped,' I lied.

Back outside the church, I stood rooted to the spot, mortified by what I had done.

'Oh, my God,' I thought, petrified; 'I've lied in confession. I've now committed two sins instead of one. What if I die tonight? I'll go to Hell for sure.'

Somehow I found the inner resources to go back in and this time, having burst into tears as I got back on to my knees, I told Father Biery the truth.

The penance - ten Hail Marys - was sweet that night. It saved my soul.

~

Much of the earliest pop and jazz music I heard at home came out of a great big radiogram, which was more the centrepiece of the living room than a mere record player. Throughout the early fifties, before I was a teenager, me mam and dad and my brothers George and Allan remained ever-loyal to crooners such as Al Jolson, Nat King Cole, Dean Martin and Frank Sinatra, and to Country and Western; while John was very into traditional and modern jazz. The radiogram took ten records at a time, ten-inch or twelve-inch 78s or 33s which it slapped down on to a turntable one by one. A heavy pick-up arm would swing across in a slow-motion, hit-or-miss fashion, then drop on to a groove, often missing the opening bars. In the groove it definitely was not!

In 1953 we got our first TV set - but before that, Lil who lived just across the road, used to let me watch hers in return for scrubbing her lobby and steps. Our set arrived just in time for us to watch Elizabeth II's coronation, which

totally captivated me. Our family were ardent royalists and we were always thrilled when the Queen visited Liverpool. On one occasion, her limousine came down Scottie Road. The pavement was knee-deep in people, waving flags and bunting, and I'd never seen it so colourful and busy.

'She looked at me, Mam,' I gasped. 'Right *at* me!'

I wasn't lying. The Queen had looked directly at me - and smiled and waved!

~

Music and singing aside, I was a tomboy who really wanted to be one of the boys, but apart from my Billy they wouldn't have anything to do with me. Because we lived on a main road, I had a choice of side streets to play in. If I came out of the barber's shop, for instance, and turned left there was Bostock Street, where lots of my mates lived. Around the corner from Bostock Street was William Moulton Street, where there were quite a few factories, and heavily loaded lorries often came past on their way to or from Greenberg's Glass, the paperworks, or one of the others. (Also in William Moulton Street was the rag and bone yard, where me mam bought me my first bike.) One of my favourite pursuits was to lie in wait for the lorries as they slowed down, then jump on to their back steps or bumpers to steal a freebie ride.

I came a cropper one day, though, when one particular driver, who obviously thought he was Stirling Moss, gave me the fright of my life. His vehicle, a big 'un, which had been going comparatively slowly when I managed to board it, suddenly gathered speed at a terrifying pace. I realised I was in serious trouble. I knew the driver would have to stop at the junction at the bottom of the hill, and that his tail lights would warn me when this was about to happen, but I hadn't got a secure enough hold travelling at that speed

and I knew I couldn't keep my grip for much longer. I panicked, and decided to leap off before I was bounced off.

Having succeeded in hitting the road without slipping sideways and going under the lorry's huge wheels, I rolled over and over down the street. By the time I finished rolling and came to a stop in a crumpled heap, there was no breath left in my body, my hands and knees were lacerated and the rest of me was black and blue.

Stunned, I checked to make sure there was no other vehicle about to run me over and finish the job, then struggled into a sitting position. As I did so, I noticed to my horror that the lorry had pulled over to the side of the road and the driver was jumping down from his cab. Convinced he was going to come after me and give me a wallop, I somehow managed to get to my feet. Ignoring the blood dripping from the cuts on my hands and knees, I ran for my life, home to me mam.

'Jesus, Mary and sweet Joseph, what have you done to yourself?' she yelled as I crashed in.

Almost blind from shock and pain and hardly able to breathe from my sprint, I couldn't get any words out. Instead I just stood there panting, praying that Mam would never find out how I'd managed to get into such a state.

'Have you been fighting?' she rapped as she grabbed a tea towel and started to dab at the messiest gash on my knee - the one that was forming a bloody puddle.

Sobs - not difficult in the circumstances - were my best bet. If she learned the truth before I had time to manufacture a suitable explanation, it might well be a case of one injury deserves another. Just as my pathetic snuffles seemed to have gained some sympathy, there was a loud, urgent knocking at the door.

'Oh, God!' I thought. 'It's the driver. He's followed me.'

'Don't open it, Mam,' I pleaded. 'Don't open it - he'll go away.'

Silly me! The note of desperation in my voice had only aroused Mam's suspicion. Her expression changed - sympathy dissolved into a glower.

'Stay there, you,' she instructed. 'Don't you dare move.'

Those were words I always dreaded. They meant trouble and I was in enough of that already, trying to cope with the pain of my bruised limbs and aching bones. If Mam didn't give me a pasting, the driver surely would!

'Is she all right, Missus?' I could hear the feller saying.

Mam must have nodded and added something I couldn't hear, because the next moment the tone of his voice changed.

'I didn't even know she was on the back of me lorry until she fell off.'

'She's all right,' Mam was apologising. 'You've had a bit of a shock, lad. D'you wanna cup of tea?'

'Oh, no,' I groaned, sucking blood from my right hand. 'Don't ask him in!'

'No - I'm OK,' he was now muttering. 'I'd better get back to me load.'

I thanked God silently.

'She'll have a few bruises and a shiner,' were his parting words.

'Not one shiner - *two* if I have anything to do with it,' was Mam's reply as she closed the door.

Back with me, Mam was in no mood to sympathise with my tears.

'What were you doing to make a show of me like that?' she said, locating an unbruised, unbloodied section of my left leg and giving me the slap I deserved.

Was that the last time I stole a freebie ride on the back of a lorry? I cannot lie. The answer's No. And not long afterwards I actually nicked a lorry for a short ride, again in William Moulton Street. The driver must have left it unattended for just a few minutes, and I jumped in, somehow got the brake off and put it into gear. The engine

didn't start, but the lorry rolled down the hill, quickly gathering speed. I thought it was fantastic, but had no idea how to stop. The problem was solved when we smashed into a lamppost and came to a halt. I jumped down and legged it, and no one ever found out what I'd done. Luckily for me my guardian angel, which all Catholics believe in, was in its traditional resting place on my shoulder.

~

My other childhood speciality was breaking and entering. Behind our back wall there was a factory that supplied bathroom equipment and I used to belly-wriggle myself over the wall and then over the sills of broken windows. Don't get the wrong idea though: I never stole anything. It was the echo I was after! I always did this when I was on my own and it never once occurred to me that I could cut myself and lie there bleeding to death on the broken glass.

I had several near misses with nasty accidents. We used to make steering carts from wooden boxes and old pram wheels, so that we could lie on our tummies and steer with our feet, or sit back and steer them with a piece of old rope tied on the front. We'd set off from a slope on William Moulton Street and career away at a breathtaking speed. I can't tell you how many times we crash-landed.

On another occasion, when I was about eleven and on roller skates, I launched myself off on the usual slope. As I whizzed out of control along Great Homer Street, I shot past the back of the Homer cinema. It had some iron girders around it, and I grabbed one to slow myself down, but I was going too fast. I swung around the girder, lost my balance and came crashing down and smashed my elbow. It's still out of shape today. I ran home to Mam, knowing that I would get a good hiding and that she would say, as all mothers do, 'How many times have I told you ...' Once indoors, I collapsed on to the sofa. The pain in my elbow