



NEST OF SORROWS

RUTH HAMILTON

TRANSWORLD
BOOKS

About the Book

Kate Murray's father had never forgiven her for being born a girl. Her elder sister, Judith, he had accepted – after all, she was a pretty child and the next one would be a boy. But when Kate arrived, scrawny, red-haired, under-weight, he was told there would be no more children, no son and heir, and from that moment his hatred for his younger child was born.

Kate, growing up in a world of constant rejection, seeing the way her Lancashire ‘respectable poor’ family tried to hide the cracks of a bad and violent marriage, determined to find a life – a world – where she was loved, was successful – where people were proud of her.

It took several years, several astounding and unusual developments, and a great deal of courage before Kate became the woman she wanted to be – successful, warm, forgiving, and able to give the love she had so lacked in her own life.

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About the Author

Also by Ruth Hamilton

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Nest of Sorrows

Ruth Hamilton

For Meg Cairns, who listens

He that loves not his wife and children, feeds a lioness at home and broods a nest of sorrows.

BISHOP JEREMY TAYLOR 1613-1667

1

View Street, in the town of Bolton, Lancashire, sat like a monarch frowning down on those subjects who seemed to flee from her, four little streets set on impossible slopes that ran parallel with the main road, the latter being called Derby Street. These four cobbled ways were populated in the thirties by 'good little houses' containing 'good little bodies', for they were proud streets where there lived weavers and others with proper trades, such as high-earning coal-facers, ironworkers and skilled tanners.

Every step in the thoroughfares was cleaned and stoned daily, while windows and doors showed no signs of cracks or wear in paint. Pavements were swept clean, and the back alleys reflected a similar interest in cleanliness. This was the place to live if you were up-and-coming. Those who eventually arrived, usually through saving and a long history of self-denial, often moved on to View Street itself, or to the top of Deane Road where the houses had bathrooms and inside toilets.

Number 39 Maybank Street was as proud as the rest, though its inhabitants were young, just a pair of ordinary recently-wed workers who had set their caps at a decent house. From older and settled relatives, these two had taken rugs, a table and chairs, a flock bed and an old sofa that was worth re-covering, while from Rachel's dad, who lived at 33 View Street, they had gladly received some pots, a few pans and two good chests of drawers. The Murrys were set up; they had been set up for the past two years.

It had all begun in 1932 with a rush of great happiness and enthusiasm. Rachel O'Leary, anxious to escape from a

house still filled by half her motherless brothers and sisters, had flung herself headlong into love, while Peter Murray had known that he had got himself the best-looking girl for many a mile. That her price had been a wedding ring had neither surprised nor deterred him, for a decent girl would never settle for less than this full amount. So now here they were, settled for life, one baby in its cot upstairs, another about to emerge at any minute from his mother's womb.

The certainty that this second child would be a lad could not be questioned in Peter Murray's mind – he had never even considered that he might father a second girl. Judith was a smasher, she would turn heads in time, would his bonny little lass. Aye, girls were all right, girls were necessary. But to really make a place in life, a man needed three things. A good wife, a good job, and a son. The first two were lined up all right – Rachel was a tidy body, a good cook and a sight for sore eyes. His job at the ropewalk carried plenty of responsibility and a good wage. All he wanted now was his boy. He, above all men in this street, needed a son, because his life's ambition was to 'make somebody into somebody' and you couldn't do much with a girl, even in this day and age. Lasses just got wed at the finish and made more kids; there was no future in educating a girl. Of course, Peter would have got an education himself, given half a chance and a couple of better days in his impoverished past. It was just lately – since he'd turned about twenty-ish – that he'd come to realize, through library books and suchlike, how much he might do for a young Murray.

He glanced at his wife who lay groaning by the fireplace. He had brought the bed down as soon as her waters had gone at tea time. She looked pale and sweaty, but it would soon be over. All women went through this, didn't they? Mind, she hadn't been as bad this time last year when Judith was born. Happen this one wasn't going to come easy.

'I want the doctor!' This statement emerged from a mouth contorted with pain.

He gulped down the last of his hot brew of stewed tea. 'Nay.' His voice was as calm as he could make it. 'I've booked Bessie Hargreaves. Everybody has Bessie, she's reckoned to be the best. She'll be here once she's seen to her own, never fret.'

'Doctor!' She was panting now. 'Doctor! This minute!'

'We can't afford . . .'

'Get him!' Her eyes were wild and the red-gold-hair, usually light and fluffy, was plastered against her head like an auburn cap. 'Get me a doctor, or, God help me . . .'

She screwed up her face against the stabbing in her abdomen, then went on, '. . . I'll lose this one. I will! I watched me mam for days before she went, and I know . . .'

She screamed loudly, words he could not understand because they were not really words. When the paroxysm had passed, she glared at him steadily. 'Do as I say. Do it!'

He flew from the house, cap and scarf ready to be donned against a bitter November wind.

Rachel Murray lay still as a stone while poor little Judith cried out from upstairs. With excruciating slowness, the woman eventually managed to roll over and use a tin cup to hammer on the party wall until Eileen Foley put in an appearance. 'Take Judith,' commanded the voice from the bed. 'Take her. Keep her till this is all over.'

Eileen studied her next-door neighbour. The poor thing was only a lass herself, barely twenty-one, but with the face of a sixteen-year-old. Young for her age, was Rachel. But not healthy. Not at the moment, anyway. 'You're not doing so good, are you? Shall I get Bessie for you, luv?'

'She's . . . she's . . . coming. Oh, dear Lord! That one hurt.'

'And where's yon feller?'

'Doctor.'

'Oh. I see. Well, if there's nowt I can do for you . . .'

'Take . . . Judith.'

After Eileen had removed the howling child, Rachel mopped her fevered brow on the yellow woven quilt, then reached under the pillow for her beads. 'Holy Mary, Mother of God . . . Oh sweet Jesus, help me . . .! Pray for us sinners now and at the . . .' He wanted a boy. He has to have a boy. 'Oh God! And at the hour of our death. Amen.' And it is dead, I know it's dead. 'Glory be to the Father and to the Son . . .' It's a dead daughter. She hasn't moved for days. Days and days. 'And to the Holy Ghost . . .' The rosary slipped through slick fingers and clattered to the oilcloth. 'Mother!' she screamed now, and it was not Christ's mother she screamed for.

Isabel Street. She was suddenly back in Isabel Street with all the fleas and the ringworm and the flies. But she wasn't really there, was she? No, she couldn't be. She was in Maybank Street having a baby . . . But look! There was Jimmy, her favourite brother. His boots didn't match and he'd been to the clinic to get his head shaved. Yes! She could reach out and feel the stubble, she could see the circle of degradation on his scalp.

The stabbing pain was there again, but it was all tied up with something else, something she hadn't remembered for years. Jimmy and John were together in the street, heads bent to jacks and bobbars. Agnes and Frances had come back from the Theatre Royal where the management was holding a twins' week and twins could get in free. But because Agnes and Frances looked so unlike, they'd been refused free admission and had come home for birth certificates. Frances' face was down to her clogs. 'It's not worth it,' Rachel heard her say. 'Show'll be over by the time we get back.' Vera was being marched hurriedly up the street by Annie and Nellie. She'd been playing knock-a-door-and-run and was not favourite with the neighbours. Theresa was in the house, too young for street-playing. Mam was in the house too. With a new baby called Joe.

It was all so clear. Etched deep in her mind, it was, nearer than the pain. Other children were about too, playing with hoops and sticks, tops and whips, skim-stones and hopscotches. A few mashers were setting off for the town centre, lads with hair parted down the middle and plastered to their heads with grease. Some older girls came past; Rachel could hear the giggles, could smell the essence of violets with which they had covered the smell of their bug-spoiled clothes.

‘Oh, Mam!’ she screamed in both times, though no-one in Isabel Street heard her. Maybank Street listened and kept its counsel – women in labour often called for their mothers.

Locked inside the delirium, Rachel cursed her invisibility. Because in Isabel Street she could make herself neither seen nor heard. She ran from one to another, bare feet scarcely touching the burning flags. It had to be real – she could feel the heat. And if it were real, she could save Mam! To Frances and Jimmy she called, ‘Run! Run for the doctor! Mam’s dying!’ But they carried on with their stupid games.

Then it arrived in Isabel Street, that awful sound she could only liken to the scream of a mortally-wounded animal. And still everyone played. While Molly O’Leary howled her final torment, while her life-blood soaked the sheets, ropes turned and children sang their skipping songs. After all, the noise could have been anything, couldn’t it? Kiddies playing Indians often made a cry just like that.

Rachel echoed that sound all the way to the hospital. Neighbours stood aghast while she was carried out of the house for what looked like – certainly sounded like – the last time.

Throughout the days that followed, Rachel remained in that other time, sometimes managing to save her mother’s life, usually failing completely due to lack of cooperation on the part of others in her dream. When she finally regained her senses, she learned that her child had lived, that it was

another girl, and that she, Rachel Rose Murray, would never again be fruitful.

That such a minute scrap of humanity could have caused such agony was a source of great bemusement to her. Judith, at eight and a half pounds, had been easy to part with. But this poor little red-haired soul weighed no more than five pounds, was frail and ill. The tiny child had taken away much of Rachel's fight and strength, and had caused the destruction of her mother's reproductive system, not to mention her father's hopes.

So if Rachel Murray had ever been forced to answer a question which was seldom asked outside her immediate family, she would have pinpointed the start of her husband's downslide then, right after the birth of Katherine. He took no interest in the child, bought no gifts, stayed away from the hospital, was absent from the baptism of his daughter.

After this event, the O'Learys gathered at 33 View Street for what they called a family conflagration. Things were getting serious, out of hand, it all was. Joseph O'Leary Senior stroked his tobacco-streaked white moustache and thought about how serious it was. For a man to fail to attend the naming and blessing of his own baby, well, such things went beyond all understanding! Ten children he had reared single-handed since his own good wife's death, and although three of them had been of working age, the other seven had required constant attention. Especially Joe, who had been just ten days old when his mother passed away.

'He'll come round at the finish.' Joseph tapped his pipe against the chimney breast. 'There's no man on earth could turn his back on the little mite she is. Would you ever look at her now, Annie?' he asked his eldest daughter. 'Like a fairy queen, she is. Rachel, where is your man just now?'

Rachel shrugged listlessly. 'Drinking, roaming the streets with his mates, who's to know what he's up to? He wanted a lad. It's not his fault it wasn't a lad . . .'

‘And you can’t have no more?’ Theresa’s eyes were round with questions. As yet unwed, she knew little of the workings of the female body.

‘No more.’ Rachel’s voice was expressionless. ‘And that’s what’s upsetting him.’ She looked down at her sleeping daughter. ‘So unlike Judith, she is. Judith was a mass of black curls and big blue eyes. But this one, well, I don’t know who she looks like.’ Judith gurgled and stumbled about on the peg rug in front of a roaring fire, but still Rachel’s eyes remained fastened to the younger child. ‘It’s as if they ripped the heart out of me and placed it in my arms. It’s funny, the way I love her. As if she’s the last piece of me, I suppose.’

‘You must not prefer her over Judith.’ The old man’s tone was stern. ‘Ten I had, and never a pick or a choose did I make between them. Every one had his or her own needs. Back in Ireland, I was taught by me own mammy never to show a preference once my children were born.’

Rachel sighed loudly. ‘I’ve no preference. I’m just lucky to be alive, and so is Katherine.’

‘Aye.’ John’s serious face glowed in the firelight, making him look even more earnest and concerned than ever. ‘But what are you going to do about Peter? He can’t carry on this road. There’s been rumours of him messing about drunk all over town.’

‘Wetting the baby’s head, I don’t doubt.’ Vera sounded angry. ‘Wetting it all by himself, or with his daft friends. He should be here, Rachel. You should have made him come. Lad or no lad, he should have come to the church like everybody else. And where’s his family? His mam and their Harold and their Bert? I bet he never even invited them. Just because our Katherine’s a girl!’ On this, they physically closed ranks, standing in a semi-circle around Rachel and her two children.

Agnes was the first to speak. ‘If he gets awkward, Rachel, over money and such, you’ll have to tell me dad and we’ll

all muck in with a shilling a week. This little lass is too frail for anything but the best. So you just tell us if Peter keeps you short of owt.'

Jim almost growled, 'He'll not turn awkward, Agnes. Me and our John and our Joe will stop him turning awkward.'

'No fighting!' cried Rachel. 'And there's three of them, don't forget. Their Harry and Bert are both handy when it comes to punching. Anyway, Peter'll get over it. Just you wait and see.'

But Peter didn't get over it. As the months and years went by, he held his deep hurt to himself, nursing it like some unmendable wound that had been deliberately inflicted by life, by ill-luck and by his own wife. It was almost as if she had conspired with factors elemental to deprive him of that which he had most deserved, and he took it out on her by sulking. Time and again, she attempted to shake him out of it. Whenever there were a few coppers to spare, she bought herself a new blouse or a cheap skirt, tried to make herself presentable and clean when he came home from work. But he would have none of her.

Judith was fortunate; she remained acceptable in her father's eyes. But poor Katherine was ignored from birth, because he could not find it in his heart to forgive the one who had killed his unborn sons. Also, while the child was not exactly ugly, she was puny and pale in comparison to her more robust sister. It was not unusual, therefore, for him to take the four-year-old Judith out for a romp in Queens Park, though he never offered to take Katherine.

At last, after three years of stretched patience, Rachel snapped. To be around when Rachel Murray snapped was not a good idea. She had an Irish temper that had been carefully cultivated and handed down through generations of Dubliners, and while her level of control was usually good, a breaking point was inevitable.

She faced him across the table on a fine Sunday in June 1937. Judith was all done up in her royal-blue bonnet and

coat, while little Katherine, who had begun to take things in, stood to one side as if she knew her place already. 'Where do you think you're going?' began Rachel, her dark grey eyes flashing ominously.

'I'm taking her down to look at the crown green bowling.'

'Oh aye?' A foot tapped sharply against the flagged kitchen floor. 'And what about this one?' She waved a hand towards the younger child.

'Eh?' His mouth fell open as if she had asked a totally pointless question. 'What about her?'

'Why can't she go an' all? Come to that, why can't we all go?'

'She's nobbut three! She'll only get in everybody's road.'

'You took Judith when she was only three.'

'Aye, well.' He drew a hand across his upper lip. 'Judith's got sense – haven't you? She likes a bit of bowling, does my lass. And you don't enjoy it, Rachel, so don't carry on as if you're missing summat.'

'Missing summat? Missing summat?' Her voice rose in pitch as she bundled both children into the safety of the back yard. 'I'm missing a husband, that's what! And yon lass is missing a dad, a dad she has a right to.'

His mouth fell open. 'What the hell's got into you at all?'

Rachel studied the handsome man she had married. He was nearly six feet tall, dark-haired, blue-eyed, strong-limbed and muscular. Yet at this moment, he looked gormless, like a big soft lad with his jaw hanging loose in that silly way. She spoke quietly, her teeth gritted together as if avoiding the bad taste created by her words. 'Since I had that child, you've treated me like a dog. No, worse than a dog! A dog gets thrown the odd bone, eh? But not me, oh no. I'm nowt a pound, me. Just because I can't have any more kiddies, just because I'm wrong inside. And my little baby can't be blamed for that!'

'I never said anybody was to blame, did I?'

She shook her head vigorously. 'No. You've said nowt, because you're not man enough to speak your mind. But I could cut through your resentment with a blunt butter knife.'

'Not a man!' he screamed. 'It's you that's not all there. It's you has the bits missing. I can father a son . . .'

'Prove it! Go on, get out and prove it! Look at Jimmy Pickavance down Canon Street - nine girls he had. Nine! And a finer fellow you couldn't meet. But you . . . oh aye . . . it has to be my fault. How do you know you'd have had a boy, eh? Can you show it me in writing? Cos it's the men what gives a child its sex, our doctor told me that. A woman's eggs are neuter - they can be anything. You made the girls, not me!'

'And I've no chance for a son now, have I? Not since that one ruined you!' There, it was out. He stood panting, as if he had just accomplished a five-mile run, yet there was a kind of terror in his eyes, for he knew now that he had annoyed his wife beyond endurance. Only once had he seen her angry before, and that had been over a man too. Bessie Hargreaves' chap had, while in his cups, threatened to beat his wife to within the last inch, and Rachel had saved her. Aye, she'd taken a shovel to him, and the whole street had come out to watch the man run like the devil all the way up to View Street.

Rachel straightened her short spine. 'I've had enough,' she announced softly. 'More than enough. I shall take the pair of them back to my dad's house. At least at my dad's house, they'll both get treated as human. How do you think our Katherine feels, eh? What must she think when she stands by and watches you playing with her sister?'

'You'll take our Judith nowhere!' His bright blue eyes were shaded by fear and temper. 'That lass is definitely mine.'

'And the other one?'

'She looks nowt like me. She could be any bugger's!' He knew he had gone too far, yet still he stood his uncertain

ground. 'Thin and ugly, she is. Not a sign of Murray in her. She looks like nothing else on this earth.'

'What?' Her voice rose to a scream now. 'Are you accusing me of . . . of . . . ? Right. That's it, Peter Murray. You can keep your few bob a week, cos I'm off to my own folk. That child is the spitten image of my mother! Not that I should have to explain things like that. A proper man would know his own child, no matter what it looked like!'

'You'll not go! Except over my dead body!'

'Oh aye? And who's to keep me here? Will you stop off your work and watch me every minute? Will you lie awake all night to make sure I don't sneak out? Remember, my dad's is only a stride from here, I can be there in half a minute!' Even then, at the eleventh hour, she could probably have negotiated had he shown the slightest sign of remorse or shame. But he simply turned on his heel and left the house by the back door, collecting Judith on his way through the yard.

Rachel watched him disappearing through the gate, then she opened the door and brought in her younger daughter. 'Come on. I'll read to you.'

'Daddy gone.' The child's pale face was creased with sadness.

'That's right. Daddy gone. Get me your story book.'

'Judy gone too.'

'Yes.'

'Kaffrin still here.'

Rachel bowed her head. 'Yes. Katherine with Mammy and a nice story book.' She could not meet those sad green eyes; she could not force herself to look squarely into the face of a three-year-old. 'I'll read you that one about Little Red Riding Hood.'

'Big bad wolf.'

'Yes.'

Katherine fetched the book and reached up to be lifted to her mother's knee. Rachel clung to the infant, her own body

shaking with dry and silent sobs. 'Don't cry,' whispered the little one. 'Daddy come home. Daddy always come home.'

Little Katherine knew her place all right. She knew it, but did not truly accept it. When Peter came home with a dress for Judith, or a pair of ribbons with which to adorn the older girl's pretty hair, Katherine would stand to one side and watch while these gifts were passed over from father to daughter. Although she had achieved an adequate level of verbal expression, the younger child never said anything. She simply watched and envied her sister.

Rachel, ever vigilant, would scrimp and save to furnish Katherine with similar presents, but these always arrived later, always from Mam, never from Dad.

Katherine decided to do something about it. She was not loved, so she must make herself lovable. There were differences between herself and Judith, differences that must be remedied. Late one afternoon, she balanced herself precariously on a dining chair and studied her reflection in the fireplace mirror. The main thing, she concluded, was her hair. Judith's hair was black; her own was a strange colour that people called red, though it looked nothing like the red in her crayon tin.

It was a Saturday. Judith was out with Dad, while Mam had just nipped next door to help Mrs Foley turn mattresses. Katherine had been advised to sit and draw till Mam came back. She reached down and picked up a black crayon, peeling back the paper cover so that she would have enough wax to work with. Furiously, she rubbed the crayon against her hair. Nothing happened. She rubbed harder, but still her hair shone red-gold, bright and horrible as ever.

With a deep sigh of sadness, Katherine clambered down to terra firma. Something black. She had to get something black so that she would look like Judith. Quickly, she ran through the kitchen and up the stairs, throwing open the tallboy that contained Judith's folded clothes. After a

moment's deliberation, she chose a pretty pale blue dress with smocking on the bodice, all gathers and silky roses and pink threads. When she had donned the frock, it came down to her ankles, so she hitched it up unceremoniously before changing clogs for ankle-strap shoes.

But she still needed something black! Tripping and stumbling, she flew down the stairs, her face glowing as an idea took root in her three-year-old brain. There was plenty of black! Out in the back street, there was loads of black! And it had been a hot day, so it would be squidgy and soft like thick paint.

Slowly and silently, Katherine let herself out of the house, crept down the yard, opened the tall back gate and squatted down at the edge of the shallow pavement. Tar oozed out of cracks between cobblestones and kerb, and she scooped up the precious bounty, plastering it thickly on to her hated hair. She smiled to herself. Now she would look like Judith, now Dad would love her and buy her ribbons and frocks.

Picking up her voluminous skirt, Katherine skipped along to the end of the block. Dad and Judith would be home soon. It was nearly tea time. She knew it was tea time because the pie in the oven had smelt ready, while her stomach felt empty and hollow. Hopping happily from foot to foot, the child waited for her father and her sister.

A few passers-by stopped and stared. One old lady clad in long black skirt and shawl tutted loudly, 'It'll take more than a pound of butter to get that stuff off thy head, lass,' but Katherine wasn't bothered. She looked like Judith. Looking like Judith was the only important thing.

They came round the corner of Derby Street, father and daughter hand in hand as usual. Throwing caution to the winds, Katherine launched herself towards Dad. 'Look!' she screamed. 'Black hair like Judy! Dress like Judy!'

He stopped dead in his tracks. The vision before him was almost unholy, like something from an unclean world. A

white face stared out from between greasy locks that looked strangely green, while the dress, covered in fingerprints, was a tar-stained ruin.

‘Like Judy!’ repeated the child, but Peter was too shocked and angry to hear the words.

‘Get home!’ he spat sharply.

Katherine, feeling very puzzled, stood her ground. She had black hair; he had to love her.

With a howl of despair, Peter Murray abandoned Judith and picked up his younger daughter, gripping a handful of the spoiled dress and holding the child at arm’s length.

She struggled. ‘Put me down! Daddy put me down!’ But he marched up the back street till he reached the gate of number 39. With tremendous force, he hurled the little girl into the yard just as Rachel opened the door.

‘What the . . . ?’ began Rachel, her voice failing as she noticed the state of the child who lay in a crumpled heap at her feet.

‘Look at her!’ Peter forced his words through clenched teeth. ‘She’s ruined that frock – two quid it cost me. And her hair! What’s she done to her bloody hair?’

Rachel shivered as a sudden shaft of comprehension entered her consciousness. ‘She’s tried to dye it,’ she whispered. ‘She’s trying to look like her sister.’

‘What?’ he yelled. ‘That? That try to look like our Judith? No bloody chance.’ With the toe of his shoe, he turned Katherine over. ‘She doesn’t even look human,’ he sneered.

Rachel crouched down. ‘Her knees are bleeding,’ she said quietly. ‘And her elbow. You threw her, didn’t you? You threw her into the yard. You might have crippled the poor little thing.’

He laughed mirthlessly. ‘She’s not right in the head,’ he muttered. ‘Putting tar in her hair and stealing Judith’s frock. She’s bloody mental.’

‘She’s three years old,’ sobbed Rachel. ‘You’re a bully, Peter Murray. A great big stupid bully!’

Judith stepped between her father and her little sister. 'Don't hit Katie,' she said in a firm clear tone. 'Katie can have the frock. She's only little. She doesn't know what she's doing.'

Peter paused, glanced at the three distressed females, then stamped into the house.

By nightfall, Katherine's head had been practically shaved. So firmly had the tar stuck that there was no saving her hair. Rachel tucked her younger daughter into bed. The poor little soul would have to wear a bonnet, would have to go about looking like somebody with a bad case of nits. All for the love of Peter, all to gain his approval – or even his attention. 'Good night, love,' she murmured.

'No hair,' said a tiny voice. 'No hair like Judy's, no hair like Kaffrin's. No hair at all.'

'It'll grow,' said Rachel weakly. But would Peter grow, would he ever grow up?

As she straightened from the bed, a vivid picture entered her mind, the memory of his face distorted by hatred for this child. If Rachel and Judith had not been there, he might have kicked this little baby to death. It was time to teach him a lesson.

Rachel left Maybank Street with her two children at the end of June. It was a rainy day; she felt as if the sky were doing the crying for her, because there were no tears left in herself. Since the Saturday of the tar incident, Peter had spoken scarcely a word to anyone, and the atmosphere in the house had become yet more leaden than before. Even Judith had had very short shrift from her dad during these past weeks, so neither child was upset on being told that they would stay with Grandad for a while.

Grandad was universally loved. He had a happy face with lots of white hair on it, tickly hair that made children squeal during hugs and kisses. Grandad had a nice big house too, the sort of house where hide-and-seek was played, where

there was a proper bath with taps, and a Hoover that sucked dirt off the floor. There was a wash house at the end of the yard, while the view from the front street was awesome, all the way to town with the big clock stuck high in the sky right opposite Grandad's front door.

They were received with arms not exactly wide open, because Joseph O'Leary had the usual Catholic respect for marriage, yet he understood his daughter's dilemma well enough to offer shelter for the immediate future. 'This will show him his stupidity,' he announced. 'You can all sleep in the front bedroom. Theresa and Joe still need their privacy. God knows they waited long enough for it in a house so crowded. And with the two of them working, Rachel, you will take over the cooking for the while. It won't last. Believe me, the man will not carry on long without the three of you.'

Peter carried on without them just until he got home from work on that first day. On discovering an empty house and a cold grate, he set off immediately for 33 View Street, throwing the interior glazed door so wide on his arrival that this item almost parted company with its hinges. 'Where are they?' he demanded of his father-in-law. 'She's got no right ...'

'Hasn't she?' The older man lit his pipe and sat back in the horsehair rocker. 'The girl has taken enough of your nonsense. If you can be father to one child, yet no father to another, then she must keep both away from you.'

Peter Murray groped for words to say, but his temper was too high for any sense to come out of his mouth. 'She belongs down yonder,' he snapped at last. 'She's my bloody wife!'

'Do not curse in my house! Rachel may be wed to you, but she is still a free spirit. The Lord gave us intelligence, did He not? And my daughter's intelligence tells her that you are doing no good for Katherine. In fact, you are also harming Judith, for a favoured child is always spoiled. Now get yourself home until you come to your senses!'

‘I want to see her!’

‘Then you will be disappointed, because she is away at her sister’s house.’

‘Which one?’

‘That I will not tell you. And don’t be waiting in the street for her, because my son and my son-in-law will escort her home. I suggest you go and pray for some guidance, Peter. Unless you can treat my daughter and her children right, they will be staying here with me.’

‘You . . . you high-handed old bugger, you! I was never good enough for her, was I? Nobody’s ever been good enough for your precious lot! Well, I treated her right. She didn’t have to get wed, not like most of your other girls. I kept her clean right to the finish, I did . . .’

‘Then later you dirtied her because of her illness. I don’t need my daughter to tell me, Peter. I know you are no longer a husband to her. She cannot give you a son, so you leave her cold and alone in the night. You have two fine daughters, clever girls the both of them. Why can you not take pleasure from what you have? Why must you grieve over what cannot be?’

The visitor inclined his head slightly, the wind suddenly taken from his sails. ‘I don’t know. There’s no rhyme nor reason without a son. I had plans for a son. I thought if I saved up, I’d happen get him off to college, give him a real start, like a career. With girls, there’s nowt to aim for.’

‘Why not?’

‘Well, they just get wed, don’t they?’

Joseph nodded slowly. ‘They get wed, they have sons. Your grandchildren will perhaps fill this gap for you.’

‘No! They will not be Murrays!’

‘Ah. I see. So there’s the crux, is it? Family name? What did your family do to deserve such glories?’

‘Well . . . I . . .’

‘Well exactly. You are in danger of losing everything, Peter Murray. No matter what my children have done, I have

always stood by them. Girls, boys, it mattered not to me. Because they are people, people with souls. Where is your soul, man? Is it buried just because your wife cannot bear you a son?' He struggled to feet made uncertain by wounds received in combat during the Great War. 'Go from my house now. Do not return until you are a man.'

'I am a man! It's your daughter who's only half woman! She's the one who . . . who . . .'

'Who failed you? By getting sick?'

They stared at one another in silence for several seconds, then Peter Murray stormed out of the house slamming every door behind him.

Joseph O'Leary sat down again and stared into the fire. 'God help you, Rachel,' he said quietly. 'For I will not always be here to protect you.'

The years that followed were the happiest in young Katherine's life. Grandad was the most awful torment - Rachel herself described him on occasion as 'mortallious troublesome' - because he certainly knew how to excite her younger daughter to the point of desperation. Katherine would come downstairs on Sunday mornings, cheeks glowing from the bath, hat and coat clutched in her hands ready to be donned for church, hair tied back with a clean ribbon, shoes shining like black glass. And Grandad would approach her with the white rosary and the specially bought pearl-backed little girl's Missal. 'Oh dear me!' The white head would shake sadly. 'Here's you all done up for church on God's good day, and clogs still on your feet. However could you think of going to Holy Mass in clogs?'

'Grandad! These are my best ankle-straps.' She was beginning to learn that he was neither blind nor daft. 'You know these are my ankle-straps. I never go to church in clogs.'

'Ah, well. They look like clogs to me. Shouldn't you go and check with your mammy?'

‘No. Mam’s getting herself and our Judith ready. And you know she gets mad with you for toe-menting me. She says you’ve not to toe-ment me.’

‘Oh.’ A large hand would scratch his head thoughtfully. ‘If I were your mammy, I would not allow you to mass in the clogs . . .’ And so it went on.

Weekdays were the same. ‘Katherine, why are you wearing the good shoes and this a school day? If your mammy finds you ready for school with the ankle-straps all shining for Sunday, won’t you get a scalping?’

Katherine learned how to cope with him. It took time, but by her fourth birthday, she had him well in hand.

‘Will you sing for me, Katie?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Go on, child, sing for your poor old Grandaddy.’

‘Can I sing on the stairs so you can’t stare at me?’

‘Yes.’ A long pause while the child made no move. ‘Will you sing for me, Katie?’

‘Can I have an ice-cream cornet and one for our Judith if I sing on the stairs?’

‘You can.’ Still no move from Katherine. ‘Will you sing for me?’

‘With raspberry on?’

‘Yes. Will you sing for me now?’

‘Doubles? Can we have doubles off Manfredi’s cart?’

‘You can have doubles with raspberry on the both of them. So, will you sing for me?’

Solemn green eyes would gaze up at him. ‘No. I won’t sing for you.’

Then, crippled though he was, he would chase her round the table until she allowed him to catch her.

Judith took no part in these games. Judith, at five, was a studious child with a terrible need for books, and Grandad spent many an hour begging and borrowing from neighbours to keep the little girl’s appetite sated. And, of

course, Judith had her father. Every Tuesday evening, Peter would arrive to collect his elder daughter for an outing.

Rachel had tried on numerous occasions to make peace between her husband and Katherine, but nothing seemed to work. And Katherine, sensing that her mother wanted the rift mended, did her childish best in the first few months of the separation. She saved sweeties for her daddy, would sidle up to him and push barley sugars into his pocket, but he never smiled or thanked her. Once, she even pinched some marigolds from a neighbour's front garden, arranging them into a bouquet with a bit of ribbon, but Peter forgot the gift and it sat for days on the box-top of the Singer sewing machine, drooping, unwanted, forgotten.

So when, in a somewhat belated attempt at peacemaking, Peter offered to take both girls, Katherine disappeared in an awful tear down the back yard, locking herself into the wash house until her father had left. She had finally accepted that he did not love her, but with that acceptance came a level of fear and insecurity that bordered on neurosis.

Grandad talked to her seriously that night. 'The man is your daddy, Katherine. You should have gone down home with him.'

'This is home.'

Joseph inclined his head thoughtfully. 'This is where you are living for the while. Your home is where your father is.'

'He don't want me.'

'And why would you be saying that, now? Hasn't the man left you here with Mammy because he thought you were too young to be out at night?'

'He only wants Judy. He never plays with me, not like you do. He never says my name and asks me to sing. I am the bestest singer in all the nursery, but he never listens to me singing. I want to stay here with you and Mam and Auntie Theresa and Uncle Joe.'

'Not for ever?'

‘For ever and ever, Amen. That’s in a prayer at school. I don’t like my daddy. You can’t make me like him, Grandad.’

Joseph O’Leary looked at his small granddaughter and knew that he could make her do nothing. There was a streak in her, a touch of Rachel, he supposed. Rachel did not suffer fools and neither would this one. Dear Lord, what would become of them all? Now sixty, Joseph had retired early from the iron foundry, giving up his job as moulder because he simply wasn’t up to it any more. With one shoulder weakened by surgery after a fall from a horse, and one leg still filled with tiny bits of shrapnel, he was a man older than his years. Old, tired and ready for the long sleep.

‘I love you, Grandad.’

‘And I love you. Will you sing for me?’

‘Yes.’ And she sang, in her clear bell-like voice, songs from the old country, songs he had taught all his grandchildren from babyhood. He held her close and stared into the red depths of the fire. A war was coming. His war had not been the one to end all fighting. This next would change lives and perhaps he would not be here to watch such changes. A tear fell into the child’s thin red-gold hair. In his mind’s eye, he watched young men being mown down like a field of fragile corn, every face white in death, every blade of grass stained dark with immature blood. Why would they never learn? Why? A whole generation wiped out in one fell swoop, another raised now from its leavings. So they would take the sons, everybody’s sons, and make them sacrifices to the god of greed. There was no sense to any of it.

On a grim Monday in 1939, Peter Murray presented himself at number 33. His hair was cropped close and his face was ruddy from recent shaving. Joseph’s weary eyes began at the army boots, making their slow way over khaki socks into which were tucked trousers of the same colour, up and up over belt and tunic, finally coming to rest on the cap. ‘May God have mercy on you,’ the old man said quietly. ‘Come

away in. The children are at school and Rachel's taken a job in the mill canteen. You are going into it, then?'

'Tomorrow. I'm off for training. She'll have to keep the house on while I'm gone.'

'She will. I'll see to it that she does.'

'I . . . I want her home, Dad.'

Joseph swallowed hard. This was the first time Peter Murray had acknowledged their relationship by marriage. 'Tis a time of severe turmoil, Peter. She will feel safer here, but I'll try to get her to go back one or two nights a week.'

'Thanks. And it doesn't look all that safe here, does it? I mean, View Street's nearer the sky than anything else round here. There'll be bombs, you know. Has Ju . . . have the girls got their gas masks?'

'They have. We all have. Lancashire Fusiliers then, is it?'

'Aye.'

'Front lines, I shouldn't wonder?'

'Eeh, I don't know, do I? I mean - we'll be the last to know when and where. Same as you've said over the last lot - we're just the cattle, we go where we're put. Only I'm going to try and get on, pass some classes if there's chance.'

'You're looking for education? Out of a war? It might have been possible had you been a regular, but as a call-up . . .'

'I've not been called up. It's not my turn yet. But a few of us decided to go whether or not. I mean, it's our country, isn't it? He'll be wanting more than Poland, you know. Next news, he'll be prancing past the Eiffel Tower and that's only a cough and a spit from England. I just thought I might take advantage . . .'

'Of a war?'

'It's the only bloody chance I'll ever get. Mind, as a Fusilier, I might not go far. The other feller'll have a gun too, I suppose.'

'He will. He most certainly will. Don't think about it, Peter. I never thought about it. God alone knows how many lads I killed before they brought me down. It does not bear

imagining. When you go in there, when it comes your time, just keep the tin hat on and the gun blazing. Does Rachel know you've joined up?'

'No. She'll not be all that interested.'

'Ah, now, I wouldn't be saying that, man. This is your chance now, not just for an education, but to see things right between yourself and my daughter. Though the damage to Katherine is probably beyond repair . . .'

'Eh? What damage? Who's been hurting her?'

Joseph breathed a long drawn-out sigh. 'How will they educate you when you can't see past your own nose? The child is terrified of you, frightened to death. Where she expected love, she got coldness. Sure I've tried to be a father to her, but it's not the same. Unless you can get round Katherine, the child is a wedge between you and Rachel for evermore.'

Peter's lip curled slightly. 'She's only a kid! How can a kiddy come between man and wife, eh?'

'She resents you. For not loving her. Peter, she resents your resentment. Even at five years of age, she knows she was a disappointment to her father. Can you put that right?'

'I don't know.'

'Do you want to? Do you love the little girl?'

Peter hesitated. 'No,' he said eventually. 'I don't love her. I suppose this is the time for truth, what with the war and all. No point in lying over these things. No. At first, I thought she wasn't mine. I know she is mine - I do know that now. Only I can't get near her. It's not just me. I know there's something wrong with me if I can blame a baby for not being a boy and for its mother turning barren. But it's her too. There's summat about Katherine. It's a way she has of looking at me . . .'

'As if she knows everything?'

Peter shot a grateful glance in the old man's direction. 'That's it! As if she's got all the answers.'

‘Her mother was the same. Rachel bested me from infancy, she had me heart scalded every day of her young life. And my wife’s mother back in Dublin used to tell me that Katherine’s granny was the same as a child – all eyes and no comment. But if only you knew Katie, Peter! If only you knew your own daughter! She sings like an angel and her drawings are like the pictures of a child twice her age. Judith is a clever and industrious girl, but I’m convinced that Katherine has a brain that will shame us all. Ah well. Perhaps after the war . . .’

‘Aye. Happen when it’s all over there’ll be no problem. If Rachel’s a widow, then . . .’

‘Away with your bother, man! I wasn’t meaning that at all! A war changes everyone – even children. Perhaps it changes children most of all. When you come back at the end, you can have a fresh start – all of you.’

‘We’ll see.’ He rose to leave.

‘Will you be back to say farewell?’

‘I will. And I’ll get some leaves before . . . before whatever.’

Joseph O’Leary stood at his front door and watched his son-in-law marching away from him in the ill-fitting uniform. Poor Rachel! Poor Judith and poor Katherine! But most of all, his thoughts were with Peter Murray. He was the one going into the ‘whatever’. And only a man of Joseph’s experience could begin to know what that meant.

The war meant little to Judith. At worst, it was an inconvenience, because she liked her bed and did not enjoy the many nights spent in a communal shelter at the back of Grandad’s house. They lived in Maybank Street during the days now, full days at the weekends, and during the week coming home from school for tea, then sitting awhile to listen to the wireless when the battery was working. After dishes were washed, all three of them made their way to Grandad’s for the night, and Judith thought this was all very