
Opening Extract from...

The Four Streets

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Chapter One

Let me take you by the hand and lead you up from the Mersey River – to the four streets, and the houses stained black from soot and a pea-soup smog, which, when winter beckons, rubs itself up against the doors and windows, slips in through the cracks and into the lungs of gurgling babies and toothless grannies.

In May 1941, Hitler bombed Liverpool for seven consecutive nights.

All four streets survived, which was nothing short of a miracle.

Home to an Irish-Catholic immigrant community, they lay in close proximity to where the homes of families far less fortunate had once stood. Life on the streets around the docks was about hard work and survival.

Children ran free, unchecked from dawn until dusk, whilst mothers, wearing long, wraparound aprons and hair curlers, nattered on front steps and cast a distracted eye on little ones charging up and around, swallowing down the Mersey mist.

They galloped with wooden floor mops between legs, transformed into imaginary warhorses. Dustbin lids became shields and metal colanders, helmets, as they clattered and

charged along back alleyways in full knowledge that, at the end of the day, they would be beaten with the smelly mop end.

The women gossiped over backyard walls, especially on wash day, whilst they fed wet clothes through a mangle and then hung them on the line to dry.

In winter, the clothes would be brought in, frozen and as stiff as boards, to defrost and dry overnight on a wooden clothes maiden placed in front of the dying embers of the fire.

Such was the order of life on the four streets. All day long housewives complained about their lot but they got on with it. Through a depression, war, illness and poverty they had never missed a beat. No one ever thought it would alter. Their way of life was constant and familiar, as it had been as long as anyone could remember. When little boys grew up, they replaced their warhorses for cranes and, just like their da, became dockers. Little girls grew up and married them, replacing toy dolls with real babies. Neighbours in Liverpool had taken the place of family in Ireland and the community was emotionally self-supporting.

But this was the fifties. The country had picked itself up from the ravages of war and had completed the process of dusting itself down. Every single day something new and never before seen arrived in the shops, from Mars bars to Hoovers. No one knew what exciting product would appear next. Liverpool was steaming towards the sixties and the Mersey beat. Times were about to change and the future hung heavy in the air.

It smelt of concrete new towns and Giro cheques.

The economic ebb and flow of daily life on the streets was dominated by the sound of cargo ships blowing their

horns as they came into the docks angrily demanding to be unloaded. A call for the tugs meant money in the bread bin, which was where every family kept their money. An empty bread bin meant a hungry home.

The main source of income for each household came from the labour of the men who lived on the four streets. Liverpool stevedores were hard men, but the bosses who ran the Mersey Dock Company were harder. Wages were suppressed at a level that kept families hungry and men keen for work. It was a tough life for all. Childhood was short as everyone pulled their weight to live hand to mouth, day to day.

Each house in the four streets was identical to the next: two up, two down, with an outhouse toilet in the small square backyard. Upstairs at the top of the landing, a new enamel bath, courtesy of the Liverpool Corporation, stood exposed under the eaves. The water to the bath was supplied via rudimentary plumbing in the form of two pipes that passed through the landing roof into the loft and attached straight to the water tanks.

Although some homes had discarded kitchen ranges for electric cookers, and back boilers for the new immersion heaters, those on the four streets enjoyed no such new-fangled innovations. The open range remained, doubling as a back boiler and a cooker.

Running past the back gate to each house was a cobbled alleyway known as ‘the entry’, which was odd as it was in fact ‘the exit’. People only very occasionally entered by the front door, and they always left by the back, although nobody remembered how the habit had begun. No one ever locked their doors; they didn’t need to.

The entry was a playground to the street children as well as the large brown river rats that grew fat on the spewing contents of the metal bins overturned by hungry dogs and cats.

At the top of the four streets lay a grassed-over square of common land known as the green, which in school holidays hosted the longest ever football matches, sometimes lasting for days on end. Rival teams were formed from each of the four streets and were in perpetual competition. Matches would begin with a nominated goal counter, who at the end of each day would collapse in his bed, exhausted and mucky, with the score scrawled on a precious scrap of paper tucked under his pillow, ready to resume playing the following day.

St Mary's church, which stood at the end of Nelson Street, was visited at least once a day by every woman on the four streets. No one missed mass. The priests were hugely influential amongst the community and combined the role of law keepers, teachers and saviours of souls.

No two front doors in close proximity were painted the same colour. Black followed blue, followed brown followed green. On almost every window in every house hung a set of net curtains, each with a lace pattern different from any other window in the street. Even in homes that could boast nothing in terms of material wealth, individuality fought to be expressed and admired.

Aside from the practical function of the nets, their existence played a significant role within the community. The degree of their whiteness and cleanliness invited verbal judgment to be passed upon the woman responsible. They had to. Women needed a yardstick by which to measure one another's competence as wives and mothers. Men didn't

wash nets. That was women's work. Men were judged only on the number of sons they spawned. For women, it was the nets. A barometer and a source of gossip, which was essential. Gossip was the light relief between household chores. Football for men. Gossip for women. Religion for all.

Maura and Tommy Doherty lived in Nelson Street. Although they had a brood of children, they continued to breed, and were passionate, loving and caring neighbours to everyone in the streets. Tommy was short and muscular. If he hadn't been a docker, putting in ten hours a day of hard manual labour, he would have been short and fat. He was bald on top and sported a Friar Tuck band of hair around the back and over his ears. As a result, he was very attached to his cap, which he wore indoors and out, rain or shine. Not one of his children had ever seen him without it, except when he slept. If Maura hadn't insisted he remove his cap before he got into bed, often flicking it off herself, he would have worn it there too. Tommy had vivid, twinkling blue eyes, the kind that can only come from Irish roots, and his eyes reflected his personality, mischievous and kind. He was a proud and devoted husband and father, and was possibly one of the few da's on the streets never to lay a finger on any of his children, a fact that bore testament to his temperament. All he desired in life was peace and quiet.

Tommy had grown up in Cork and had travelled to England to work on the roads. On his first night in Liverpool, he was waylaid by a prostitute at the Pier Head. On his second, he met Maura. Penniless by the third, he got taken on at the docks and, to his great sadness, had never been home since.

Maura was thin, taller than Tommy by a good two inches and, as Tommy often joked, her almost-black hair and eyes were proof that her granny had lain with a tinker: a joke that often resulted in Tommy being chased around the kitchen with a wet dishcloth.

Maura liked to travel, sometimes managing the whole mile and a half into Liverpool city centre, known to everyone as 'town'. She had been born and raised in Killhooney Bay on the west coast of Ireland and, until the day she left home to work as a housemaid in Liverpool, had never ventured any further than Bellingar, on the back of a mule and cart.

'Sure, why would ye need to go into town?' Tommy could often be heard exclaiming in surprise when Maura told him she would be spending extra on shopping that week and would be taking the tram. 'Everything a man could want can be got on his feet around here.'

Without fail, an almighty row would ensue and Tommy could often be spotted running out of the backyard gate as though the devil himself were after him, when it was in fact Maura, brandishing a rolled-up copy of the *Liverpool Echo* to beat him around the head with, the children scattering before them like cockroaches in daylight, in case they got in the way and copped it instead. He regularly sought refuge in the outhouse, one of the few places where no one troubled him, and took his newspaper for company. Tommy may have craved peace but, with seven kids and a wife as opinionated and as popular as Maura, it was just a dream.

He didn't much care for the news, although he read what he could understand. His relief from hard labour was to check out the horses running at Aintree and to study their form. Tommy had spent his entire childhood helping his

father, a groom for a breeding stud. He knew something about horses, did Tommy. Or so he thought. It was his link with home, his specialist subject, which made him feel valued when others sought him out for his opinion or a tip. He was right more often than he was wrong. In his heart, he knew it was the luck of the Irish, combined with Maura's devotion to regular prayer to the Holy Father, far more than his dubious unique knowledge, which sustained his reputation. He still lost as much money at the bookies as every other man on the streets.

If there was anyone in the backyard as Tommy left the outhouse, whether anyone looked at his *Liverpool Echo* or not, or was even paying him a second's attention, as he walked to the back kitchen door he would nod to the newspaper in his hand and loudly pronounce, 'Shite in, shite out.' Social skills were strangers.

Life was lived close to the cobbles.

Maura was, without doubt, the holiest mother in the street. She attended mass twice a day when everything was going well, and more often when the ships were slow to come in and work was scarce.

She was the person everyone went to for help and advice, and her home was where the women often gathered to discuss the latest gossip. On the day one of the O'Prey boys from number twenty-four was sent to prison, the mothers ran to gather around Maura's door, each carrying a cup of tea and a chair out onto the street to sit and gossip, watching the children play.

'I'm not surprised he's gone down,' Maura pronounced to the women sitting around, whilst standing on her doorstep, arms folded across her chest, supporting an ample

bosom. Hair curlers bobbed with indignation inside a pink hairnet whilst, in order to dramatize her point, two straight and rigid fingers waved a Woodbine cigarette in the general direction of the O'Prey house. 'Look at her nets, they're filthy, so they are.' In Maura's eyes, there was a direct connection between the whiteness of the net curtains and the moral values within. No one ever challenged her assertion.

The women turned their heads and looked at the windows as though they had never noticed them before.

'Aye, they are that too,' came a murmur of acknowledgment, led by Peggy, Maura's next-door neighbour. They all nodded as they flicked their cigarette ash onto the pavement and took another long self-righteous puff.

The mother of the son who had provided a poor household with stolen food was damned by dust. But Maura's condemnation wouldn't stop her sending over a warm batch of floury potato bread, known as Boxty, as an act of commiseration when she made her own the following morning, using flour that was itself stolen from a bag that had fallen off the back of a ship in the dock. Maura was as kind and good as she was opinionated and hypocritical.

Chapter Two

Jerry and bernadette deane lived across the road from Maura and Tommy in number forty-two. Like many of the men on the four streets, Jerry had arrived in Liverpool from Mayo, hungry for prosperity and advancement that weren't to be found in rural Ireland, where levels of relative poverty remained almost unchanged since the sixteen hundreds, and where, right into the winters of the nineteen-sixties, children still walked to school barefoot through icy fields. It was as though the land of his birth were caught in a time warp. The outside privies on the four streets were a luxury compared to the low stone-and-sod houses of Mayo, where an indoor toilet of any description was mostly unheard of in many of the villages.

Jerry and Bernadette had met on the ferry across from Dublin to Liverpool on a gloriously sunny but cold and very windy day. Jerry spotted Bernadette almost as soon as he boarded the ferry, her long, untameable red hair catching his attention. Jerry was mesmerized as, from a slight distance, he watched Bernadette do battle with her hair, which the wind had mischievously taken hold of and, lock by lock, teased out from under her black knitted beret. She struggled hard to force it back under the hat.

Jerry had been on his way to the ship's bar when he caught sight of her, her beauty stopping him in his tracks.

'Jaysus,' he would often say to anyone who was listening, 'she took the eyes right out of me head, so she did.'

Instead of moving into the bar for a pint of Guinness to settle his stomach, he sat down on a painted wooden bench, bolted to the wooden deck, to watch the young woman standing at the ship's rail and wondered to himself why she didn't step indoors and into the warm. Surely, it would be much easier than taking on the sea wind and trying to tame a wild mane of hair outdoors?

Her already pale complexion turned a ghostly ashen as she gave up on her hair, staggered forward a few steps and grabbed the rail with both hands, looking more than a little queasy.

Aha, Jerry thought, seeing an opportunity in the girl's problem, thank ye Lord, a hundred thousand times, for here's me chance. He embodied everything everyone knows to be true of an Irishman. He was as bold as brass, full of the blarney and didn't know the meaning of the word shy. That was until he met Bernadette.

Taking the initiative, Jerry nipped into the café, bought an earthenware mug of steaming-hot sweet tea and took it over to the strange but beautiful girl. In his grinning, cheeky Irish way, he tried to introduce himself, but he was so struck by the size and the blueness of her eyes that, for the first time in his life, he could say nothing.

Bernadette didn't notice Jerry as he approached her, so focused was she on holding onto the rail of the ship and on keeping in her stomach the fried eggs and bacon she had enjoyed that morning. She was sure she might faint, and was

wondering how she would cope all alone if she did, when she saw Jerry's tall, broad form standing next to her. It was hard to look up as it meant breaking her concentration, but she managed for a few seconds even though she felt like throwing herself overboard. A slow watery death was surely more pleasurable than feeling as she did right now.

She was distracted by his large black eyes that made her forget her sickness for all of thirty seconds. 'I felt as though they were burning into me very soul,' was how Bernadette described her first meeting with Jerry, wistfully and often, her eyes welling up at the mere memory of the day.

It was obvious to everyone who knew their story that Jerry and Bernadette had benefited from that all too rare but wonderful thing, love at first sight.

He realized as he walked over to her that there was no reason on God's earth why he, a complete and total stranger, should be taking a mug of sweet tea to a woman he had never met in his life before and might never meet again. Jerry introduced himself, as best he could, but it came out as a prolonged and indistinguishable jabbering.

Holy Mary, he thought to himself, where the feck has me sensibility gone and why is me hand shaking like a virgin on her wedding night, spillin' the bleedin' tea everywhere?

Although Jerry was talking gibberish, Bernadette could tell he was offering her the tea. So desperate was she to feel better that she accepted it, assuming that he could see how ill she felt.

'Thank ye,' she whispered, as she took the mug out of his hand, managing a very thin and feeble smile that she didn't for one second feel herself. 'I'm so glad there is someone who knows the cure for how bad I feel.' She tried to improve the

smile and look grateful, whilst her stomach did an Irish jig in her belly.

Jerry's stomach also began a jig, but it had nothing to do with feeling seasick. He smiled to himself at how it seemed to have gone into free fall, something he had never experienced before.

Bernadette was doubly grateful for the tea as she had only half a crown in her purse and hadn't wanted to waste a penny. She wasn't sure if drinking tea with milk was the right thing to do in the circumstances, but she trusted him. He looked trustworthy – and gorgeous; even through her sickness she could see that. And why shouldn't she drink the tea in any case? In Ireland, strong, sweet tea was the cure for everything from scurvy to colic.

As she drank slowly and tentatively, Jerry studied every detail of her profile, her neck and her hair, which kept blowing across her face, covering it like a lace veil. Finding his sea legs at the same time as his courage, Jerry played the fool with his best show-off jokes and Bernadette tried her best to laugh at his audacity. After all, he was outrageously flirting with a sick woman. Suddenly, without warning, they both saw the tea again, all over the deck and Jerry's shoes.

Jerry sprang into action. The wind had met its match. He gathered Bernadette's flyaway hair together and spun it into a knot, before tucking it back under her cap as tightly as he could, for fear she would vomit straight onto it. Bernadette was beyond caring that a stranger was stroking the back of her neck and whispering soothing, comforting noises into her ear. Her eyes had filled with tears of shame and she looked as though her knees were about to buckle at any moment.

Jerry kept hold of Bernadette, and her hat, keeping her hair away from her face for almost the entire crossing. The seasickness claimed her as she vomited over the rail all the way to Liverpool during the notoriously choppy journey across the Irish Sea.

As deathly as the seasickness made her feel, Bernadette had noticed Jerry's black wavy hair and, for an Irishman, his unusually broad shoulders. He wore a typically oversized cap, which, although pulled down low over his forehead against the wind, blew off to the other side of the deck so that Jerry, thrown from side to side by the rocking of the boat, had to run like a madman to rescue it. Despite how ill she felt, she laughed. It was impossible not to laugh at this cheeky Irishman.

They didn't leave each other's side for the entire crossing. If they had, Bernadette might have fallen over. By the time they docked at Liverpool, she felt she had known him all her life. To be fair, she had: not necessarily Jerry, but many young men from home just like him. However, it was the fact that there was something very chippy and confident about Jerry that made him different and extremely attractive, despite her self-imposed intention to meet a rich American traveller who would sweep her off her feet and carry her off, away across the Atlantic, to the country where so many of her Irish ancestors had emigrated to live.

'Never worry, Mammy,' she had said to her mother, who was upset at the thought that soon all her children would have left her to work abroad. 'I'll send ye me pay and when I'm in America, oh sure, won't ye be the grandest woman in all of Killhooney Bay, I'll be able to send ye so much.'

Bernadette was confident that she would be massively successful in the land of milk and honey, and her generosity

was such that she was determined everyone she knew would benefit too.

She already had a job waiting for her as a chambermaid in Liverpool's Grand hotel, with staff accommodation provided in the maids' dorm under the roof, boiling in summer and freezing in winter. Bernadette did not care. This lowly position did not deter her from her grand ambitions. She would have work. That was something many in rural Ireland did not. It hadn't stopped raining in Mayo for weeks before she left, and although she loved her home, she was looking for adventure and a way to earn a living, not to grow a set of gills.

But she hadn't reckoned on meeting Jerry and she also hadn't expected to fall in love within minutes of her feet leaving the Irish shore. It wasn't the most romantic or conventional beginning to what became the deepest and truest love affair, but it forged an immediate deep bond.

Jerry told Bernadette he was off to stay with a widowed aunt who lived on the four streets. Although he didn't have a job already lined up, he knew there was plenty of work in Liverpool for strong Irish navvies. Work on the docks, the roads or building the new houses was not too difficult to come by and a slice of a pay packet earned in England could transform the life of a family back home.

As soon as they docked and Bernadette set foot on dry land, she started to feel better. On board the ship, she had felt as close to death as it was possible to be, having vomited what felt like the entire lining of her stomach. Never had she experienced anything as unbearable. She knew if it hadn't been for Jerry's company and the fact that he had looked after her, it would have been a million times worse.

Jerry turned to look at her and laughed. In the five minutes since they had docked, the colour had risen in her cheeks. Her eyes had begun to take on a sparkle and her smile was less forced. Jerry didn't want to part from her. He needed to know the Bernadette who wasn't distracted whilst vomiting over the deck.

'Let's go in here,' said Jerry, pointing to a rough-and-ready portside café. 'Ye need to get a lining on your stomach before ye set off to your hotel, and I sure need to eat before I set off to look for work. Let's grab a bite together, eh? It'll set us both up for what lies ahead for the rest of the day.'

Bernadette willingly agreed. She had no idea when she would get the chance to eat again, and she also wanted to spend some time with this handsome young man when she wasn't embarrassing herself and could act in a more dignified and ladylike manner.

The café smelt of damp wool, stale bodies, fried steam and blue cigarette smoke. They walked across its floorboards to a newly vacated table with a red gingham tablecloth, next to the open fire. The waitress came and removed the overflowing ashtray, replacing it with a clean one as she took their order. Jerry offered Bernadette a cigarette, a Capstan Full Strength, which made her choke, and both of them laughed a great deal as they began to talk.

Very shortly a large brown earthenware pot of tea was placed on the table with a plate of thickly sliced white bread and butter, followed by two plates piled up with chips and two fried eggs on top. Bernadette hadn't realized how hungry she was until they both devoured the food.

Finally, Jerry plucked up the courage and, cheekily,

reached out and took one of Bernadette's hands in his own. She didn't pull away.

'Does ye not know any modesty at all?' she chided playfully, hitting the top of his hand with her free one as though to knock it away, something she had no intention of doing.

Bernadette might have been play-objecting to Jerry's romantic advances but really she was giggly and delighted. They talked about their homes and family, the places they both knew and the people they had in common.

'Do ye know the O'Shaughnessys from Mayo?' asked Jerry.

'Ah, sure I do, from Bellingar, I know the mammy and daddy and their daughter Theresa,' replied Bernadette. This was Ireland. In the rest of the world they say you are only ever six people away from someone you know, but in Ireland it has to be two.

Jerry was nervous, turning his teaspoon over and over between his fingers, making a constant tinkling sound as it tapped the cup. On a normal day, he found it hard to remain serious for more than a few minutes and here he was, for the last hour, pouring out his life plan to a woman who had thrown up over his feet. He had never before had a conversation in which he talked out loud about the things that made him hungry for the future. Jerry was stupidly happy. They both were. Emotions were gripping them both so fast they had no idea what was happening but neither resisted.

By the time Jerry delivered Bernadette to the tram stop for the hotel, he had decided she was very definitely the woman he was going to marry. There was no doubt. She was the one. It was just a matter of time until she realized it too.

As they said their goodbyes, neither could believe what

had happened. A few hours ago they had boarded a boat to take them to Liverpool and a new life, and here they were, both without a shred of doubt that, just those few hours later, they were in love; their new life had arrived. It had jumped up and whacked them both in the face with no notice whatsoever. Things were about to change, forever.

Jerry promised to call at the staff entrance of the hotel and find her at the weekend. They walked away from each other, waved, then both looked back and laughed. Jerry ran back.

'This is ridiculous,' laughed Bernadette. 'I don't even know ye.'

Parting was physically painful. Both were secretly worried they might never see the other again, that the magic bubble might burst. As Bernadette turned to walk away for the second time, Jerry reached out and grabbed her by the wrist, and that was when Jerry, in broad daylight, with people walking past and with the Mersey River watching and a thousand seagulls soaring, kissed his Bernadette for the first time.

It was a kiss that was so daring, Bernadette often recounted it to her friends.

'Sure, he was so bold I had no idea what was coming and when he kissed me, I lost me breath and almost fainted, so I did.'

It was very different from what Jerry told his friends. 'She was so keen, she couldn't keep her hands off me and begged me for another, in front of everyone and in broad daylight too. I thought we was going to be arrested right there.'

If Bernadette heard him, it would be followed by squeals and play fighting. No one ever knew which version was true

and no one cared. Their storytelling infused everyone with warmth and laughter.

When they finally parted, Jerry went straight to his aunt's house, deposited his bag and, after a quick greeting, took himself straight down the steps at the end of the street to the docks. Dock work was casual. He would walk the entire length of the waterfront and visit every dock if he needed to in order to be taken on. He now had a new imperative, a spring in his step. A reason to find work and good, well-paid work.

As he ran down the steps whistling, he couldn't get Bernadette out of his mind. For what felt like every moment until the weekend, he relived each second of their conversation. In bed, in the minutes before sleep, he relived their kiss as his stomach churned at the excitement and expectation of another. Might there be more? Could this be possible? Could life really be that good? Could Jerry, a farmer's son from Mayo, really be this lucky?

He was. They met almost every night until the day they married, even if it meant Jerry had to walk to the hotel when Bernadette had only her break time free. He would stand at the staff entrance until she could slip out, just for a snatched kiss, to reassure himself she was happy. On her day off she would run down to the docks and spend it at his auntie's house on the street, enjoying the comfort of having a place where she could spend her time and wait for Jerry to finish work. On Sundays they would attend mass at St Mary's church together and walk along the shore as far as Waterloo.

They were blissfully in love and, after nearly a year of steady work, Jerry asked Bernadette to marry him. He

popped the question in the café at the Pier Head where they had their first proper date. Bernadette could not have been happier. He even got down on one knee as the customers and staff cheered and clapped. They both cried a little as an elderly man from Eire came up to them on his way out of the café and pressed a brown ten-shilling note into Jerry's palm as he left.

'For the babby when it comes,' he said, and winked as he left.

They both thought they would burst with joy. But this did not distract them from the plans they had. Jerry and Bernadette spent a great deal of time mapping out their future. When Jerry's aunt suddenly died, it was a shock to everyone, but luckily, shortly after Jerry had moved in with his aunt, she had put his name on the rent book, which meant that he could remain in the house without question. The houses on the streets had transferred from one generation to the next in this manner ever since the first wave of immigrants had flooded through the gates of Clarence dock during the potato famine.

However, the pressure was too great for Jerry and Bernadette to put off the wedding until after the full twelve-month mourning period. Bernadette was helping Jerry to cook and clean and look after the house, and not being able to run up the stairs was driving them both mad with desire. But Bernadette was a good Catholic girl and she was taking no chances with sex before marriage. No shotgun wedding for her. Suddenly, being alone in each other's company in the close proximity of a bedroom was becoming an almost unbearable temptation. Bernadette would never stay overnight and the pressure built to an almost unbearable pitch.

'Just stay tonight,' Jerry begged, one Sunday night as Bernadette was leaving. 'Please,' he murmured into her ear in the midst of a very passionate kiss. 'I promise I will be good and ye will still be a virgin in the morning.'

'Not at all!' replied Bernadette forcefully. 'Are ye crazy? Can ye imagine what they will be saying here in the streets tomorrow when they see me leaving in the morning?'

Her resolve did indeed drive Jerry crazy. He wanted to put his fist through the wall, but he also knew she was right. They were married within three months.

During those three months Bernadette got to know everyone on the four streets as well as she did her neighbours back home. Bernadette and Maura came from the same village, Killhooney, and had known each other since Bernadette was a baby. You didn't need to travel far in Liverpool before you met someone from back home. The two women became special friends, which extended to Tommy and Maura's children, especially their eldest daughter, Kitty, who spent as much time with Jerry and Bernadette as she did in her own house.

Although Maura was older, she and Bernadette had attended the same school, knew the same families and had a shared history. Their deep yearning for home had drawn them together from the first day Bernadette had arrived in the street. Maura was daily homesick. Both their families came from the sod houses, close to the coast. Every day they talked about how there was no better view of the Atlantic than that from the cliffs overlooking Blacksod Bay. No better dancing at a ceilidh than that to be had at the inn. No better fish to be tasted than salmon poached from the Morhaun River or fish from the Carrowbay Loch. They had

so much to talk about and their conversations about home acted as a salve to Maura's always aching heart.

Neither mentioned the poverty, the lack of shoes, the rain, the hunger or the wet ceilings. The sun always shone on Mayo when it came to the reminiscing.

Bernadette spent hours talking about her work to Maura, who loved to hear the chambermaids' tales about the guests staying in the hotel. Stuck in a life that would never alter, Maura found every detail fascinating, from what the ladies wore to the staff-room gossip, especially about the head housekeeper, Alice Tanner, who had worked at the hotel since she was fifteen and who was legendary for never having taken a day off or having had a visitor since Bernadette arrived.

'Sure, that Alice is a mean one altogether!' Bernadette would exclaim, at least once a week, as she flounced into Maura's kitchen. 'I cannot wait until Jerry and I are married and I can give in me notice. She would drive a saint to drink. I have never given out like some of the others, Maura, but God help me, I will one day soon.'

Maura was all ears.

'She knew Jerry was coming to the staff entrance for me last night and she deliberately sent me off on a wild-goose chase across the hotel to make me late for him. Out of my half-hour break I got ten minutes with him. Jeez, that Alice Tanner is a spiteful bitch. She never sets foot outside of the hotel, and no one ever comes to see her. She's just wicked jealous, so she is, and here's me, always protecting her from the others. So help me God, I cannot any more, the witch.'

Maura loved these days. She would make Bernadette a cup of tea, sit at the kitchen table and listen to her talk for

hours on end. The most interesting conversation Maura ever had with the other women on the four streets was how to keep your milk from drying up when you had half a dozen kids to run after, with not enough food to go round for everyone, and how many black eyes there were in English potatoes. Bernadette's chatter was a ray of sunshine.

Just talking to Maura would calm Bernadette down and they would move onto the more interesting gossip, such as the wedding that took place at the hotel on the Saturday. Maura could not believe the things they did with a salmon at the Grand and who knew people ate lobsters?

Everyone on the four streets looked forward to Jerry and Bernadette's wedding with huge excitement. There was something special about them both. They were always laughing and making everyone else laugh either with them or at them.

There was no salmon or lobster to be had at the Irish centre, but the Guinness flowed as fast as the laughter was loud.

The wedding reception had been in full swing for just a few hours when Jerry dragged Bernadette away to carry her over the threshold. The gentle ribbing from their family and friends carried them down the street as they ran giggling to number forty-two.

'What in God's name will they all think?' protested Bernadette, tripping on her new heels. 'Running away to me marriage bed and not staying until the end.'

Jerry's response was to scoop her up and sprint with her across his arms the rest of the way. A Lord Lochinvar stealing away his princess.

The river was black and still. Watching and listening.

Holding onto what it knew … and their shrieks and squeals of laughter echoed out across the water and were surely absorbed into eternity. They were, after all, the happiest couple to have ever run along the river's bank.

The wedding reception carried on way into the early hours, long after their marriage had been consummated a number of times.

In the early hours of the morning, spent and exhausted, Jerry and Bernadette made plans for the future yet again. They knew they were special. They knew they were different. They knew that the brightest future awaited them.

They also knew they were lucky to have a house of their own, even one owned by the Liverpool Corporation. It was the norm for young couples to begin their married life by moving in with their parents. Bernadette and Jerry were a novelty. Jerry's aunt had been barren, and had lavished her attention on her immaculate home, on the rugs she had been able to buy at the docks and the nice chest of drawers from Blackler's department store. Although slightly fancy and dated for Bernadette, with far too many fringes around cushions, lampshades and curtains, it was still the best-furnished and decorated house on the street.

Bernadette strove to be different. From the day they married, she learnt how to sew and cook, acquiring any little skill she could master to keep them one step ahead. Life had yet to wear Bernadette down, to disillusion her, to possess her womb. She embodied the arrogance of youth, combined with a hungry, impatient aspiration for a better life away from the four streets, although she and Jerry were yet to work out how it would be achieved. Even when there were only two of them, a docker's wage merely covered the

bills and provided food, with just a little left over. Most couples in the streets had at least six children, which made life much harder than it should have been.

The neighbours nicknamed her 'Silver Heels', so grand were her dreams. Bernadette was aware that she had almost set herself apart from the community by talking about the future she wanted. If she hadn't been so popular, she might easily have succeeded in this. But how could anyone dislike Bernadette and Jerry? They were so in love, so idealistic, so happy.

A natural good neighbour, she always helped her friends. Whether it was to take a crying baby into her house to give a mother in the street some time off, or buying a few sweets for the children on the green. She attended mass every day and never gossiped – her heart was pure.

'Bernadette, ye are too good for this world, so ye is, sure ye must be an angel come to spy on us,' said Maura, who said she sinned so often she needed to go to mass twice a day. 'Feck knows, if ye are, I'll never get through them pearly gates now, no matter how many times I go to confession. I don't confess everything, ye know!' Maura would exclaim in mock indignation every time Bernadette refused to join in the gossip or say anything unkind about another woman in the streets.

Bernadette was godmother to the Doherty twins, which made her broody for her own, but with an iron will she maintained her plan to have everything in her house perfect and some money saved before a baby arrived. And besides, she and Jerry loved their Saturday nights out, and their short trips back to Ireland to visit their families and to take home presents. The young married couple with no babies and a bit

of money were accorded a similar status as the film stars of the day. They knew that once babies arrived, all that would stop.

Jerry was so content that he could find nothing to complain about, no matter how hard he tried. Whereas many men feared going home on a Friday night after they had drunk half of their pay packet, Jerry ran home to his wife. He took a great deal of ribbing from the other dockers, but they all wanted to be him. Why wouldn't they? He never stopped grinning. He and Bernadette were the only couple on the streets never to be heard having a row.

The fact that they didn't have a baby straight away was the subject of daily gossip amongst the women.

'He must be jumping off at Edge Hill,' was a theory thrown over garden walls by women with a dozen children each.

Edge Hill was a train station just a few minutes outside Lime Street station in Liverpool city centre, and 'jumping off at Edge Hill' was the colloquialism used for the withdrawal method of contraception favoured by the Pope. Not that the Pope ever had to use it, despite being such an expert. It was highly unreliable; even more so when practised by dockers who selfishly, after a few rum toddies, forgot to jump off and went all the way to Lime Street.

Jerry never forgot. Life to him and Bernadette was about careful planning and being responsible. They were going to get on in life and nothing, but nothing, was going to be left to chance.

When Bernadette finally became pregnant, there was no one on the four streets who was not caught up in the joy of the news. Babies were not an uncommon occurrence on the

streets, but the arrival of Bernadette and Jerry's first baby had everyone excited.

'That child will be surely blessed when it comes,' said Maura. 'Was there ever a child more wanted or which could bring more joy?' No one could answer that question. It was as though Bernadette was the only woman ever to have been pregnant.

Bernadette had broken the news to Jerry whilst they were in Ireland visiting her family. They were standing on the cliff at Killhooney, overlooking the inky depths of Blacksod Bay. Jerry had almost fainted and had to sit down.

'Oh my God, Bernadette, are we to be a mammy and a daddy?' He took off his cap and rubbed his hair before putting it back on. Bernadette tucked her calf-length skirt in behind her knees as she sank to the ground to sit next to him.

'We are that,' she replied, looking shocked, and then they both began to laugh and cry at the same time. They kissed and hugged each other as the sea roared with laughter all around them. That night, the villagers attended the ceilidh in the pub arranged with an hour's notice and, pregnant or not, Bernadette danced into the small hours.

When the time came for the baby to be born, news had spread fast that Bernadette was in labour and that she and Jerry were at the hospital. Already the women were falling over themselves to help. They let themselves into the house by the back door, cleaned it from top to bottom despite the fact that it was unnecessary, stocked up the fire ready for a match to be thrown on and left a stew on the side of the range. Bernadette was one of their own, a young woman

from the bogs in search of a better life. Disappointment would certainly be just round the corner but, until it came, she had friends and the four streets to count on. Whilst the women were being good neighbours and dusting down her new cot, Nellie Deane made her entrance into the world.

Jerry had been absolutely convinced that Bernadette had been carrying a boy, and the fact that it turned out to be a girl threw him, but only for the few seconds it took him to fall madly in love with his new baby daughter.

For hours, he had nervously paced up and down, waiting. There were no mobile phones then and although there was a public payphone in the hospital entrance, no one they knew could afford a telephone. All communication was by word of mouth or letter. Everyone knew it would be over a week before their relatives in Ireland received the news announcing that Nellie had arrived.

Jerry was beside himself with excitement. Their new baby's birth was the manifestation of his and Bernadette's life plan. He had the perfect wife in Bernadette, and at last he would have the perfect baby. For months he had told everyone he was going to have a boy. That was all forgotten now.

'Jeez, I knew from the day she told me she was pregnant it would be a baby girl,' said Jerry in a very matter-of-fact way to the midwife. 'I have always wanted a beautiful daughter.'

'Oh my,' laughed Bernadette, 'have ye indeed, is that why ye have been saying for seven months ye can't wait to get him to the football, was that our little girl ye was talking about then?'

Moments after she had given birth, they were both

laughing together. He and his Bernadette, with her long red hair and bright blue Irish eyes, had spoken in detail about this day ever since they had first known she was pregnant. Not a drink had passed Jerry's lips from that time, as they had saved every penny to buy a cot and turn the second bedroom into a nursery fit for their child. They had managed to completely refurnish and decorate their home. Each time a room was finished, almost forty couples traipsed through the rooms to ooh and aah. Bernadette was meticulous. She fought the dock dust and smog hand to hand; the windows shone, the nets gleamed and pride reflected from her white windowsills.

Once Bernadette had been cleaned up, Jerry was allowed into the labour ward. He had paced the corridors the entire length of the hospital during the birth, desperate for it to be over so that he could be allowed back at Bernadette's side. No father was allowed in a delivery room in the nineteen- fifties. The baby business was women's work. He held his precious bundle in his huge muscular arms, more used to lifting cargo than babies, and could barely see her little face through his tears. Being careful to protect their tiny, fragile scrap, he turned towards his wife and their eyes met.

'She looks like ye,' whispered Jerry. His voice was thick with emotion as the tears trickled down his cheeks. 'She is the most beautiful baby in the whole world.'

Before Bernadette could protest, she gave in and didn't argue. Was there ever a man who could love his new daughter more? Let him think what he wants, she thought.

'Ye will have your lad next,' she said with a smile and such confidence, he believed her without question.

She smiled up at him tenderly, her love for this man who was different from all others pouring out despite her exhaustion. He leant over and kissed her dry lips, thinking that he had never seen his wife as lovely as she looked right now, after twenty-four hours of hard labour and no sleep. His tears wet her face and as she laid a hand on the side of his cheek, she kissed them away and tasted the salt on her lips. Between kisses, they were quietly sobbing and laughing at the same time, flooded with the love their new baby had brought to them as her gift. Jerry hitched the newborn up so that she was wedged between them both and they each gave a nervous laugh as they leant down and kissed her too. The three of them, wrapped in one warm embrace, filled with the smell of the newborn. They were both high on the miracle of life.

'I feel so scared,' confided Bernadette to Jerry, looking up at him. 'We have this little life to look after, she needs us for everything, Jer, we can't fail her.' Bernadette spoke with a degree of urgency, referring to the conversation they had had many times into the small hours of the night.

'Shh, I know, my love, and we won't,' said Jerry. 'She will be a princess, she will have everything she needs. I will never be out of work or let her down.'

Bernadette smiled up at him again. She felt safe and secure. She had no idea how happy one could possibly be, but she couldn't help worrying about money.

Worry was in her Irish DNA. Famines had left an invisible footprint. Jerry and Bernadette had plans for their baby daughter. For months they had talked and plotted about how their children would be schooled. Regardless of what the priest said, they would have just the two, so they weren't

reduced to total poverty. They wanted their children to live a better life than their own had been and that of others on the streets. Bernadette was surely right: a son would be next. Jerry did not want his son to have aching bones every day from a lifetime of hard toil, or to be injured in one of the accidents that happened all too often on the docks, or to develop premature arthritis due to the excessive wear and tear on his joints from manual labour. He wanted his daughter to be more than a shop assistant or a cleaner. He wanted her to be a lady, a beautiful, kind lady who possessed all her mother's gentleness, but who could grasp life's opportunities and make something of herself.

Leaving them to have a few private minutes alone, the midwife went to fetch them both a cup of tea and some hot buttered toast. This baby had been a tricksy delivery and at one point she thought she was going to have to call for the doctor to assist. But just at the last minute, with the help of a pair of forceps, the baby shifted position and made its entrance into the world. The midwife had been touched by the obvious love and affection Nellie's parents had for each other; knowing that the special first hour with a first-born came only once in a lifetime, she made herself scarce as quickly as she could.

Even though he had been up all night, Jerry would save the bus fare and walk back home. He could not remember ever having been as hungry as he was right now. After he had eaten breakfast he would change into his work clothes and be in time to clock on at the docks for the first shift. This was no time to miss a day's pay.

Exhausted from her long ordeal, Bernadette lay back on the hospital pillows, feeling drowsy. She turned her head to

one side and smiled at her husband, the man she loved more than life itself. Jerry had moved and was sitting on a chair next to the hospital bed, cuddling their baby, still unable to stop looking at her tiny face. Bernadette's eyes were still full of tears as she gazed upon the manifestation of all their hopes and aspirations for the future, the baby, who was falling asleep on his chest, flooding his thoughts, absorbing every ounce of his new love and devotion. Watching them together increased her happiness, if that was at all possible.

As sleep fought to claim her, she tried to say his name and to reach out and gently stroke his hand. She looked down at her arm in confusion. Her hand was like a lead weight and, no matter how hard she tried, it wouldn't respond. Unnoticed by Jerry, who at that very moment had eyes only for his new baby, panic slipped past him into the room and settled itself down upon Bernadette.

She tried to open her mouth, but it wouldn't work, and despite her best efforts, her arm would not move.

Jerry's name urgently beat against the sides of her brain but could get no further, as she managed to part her lips and move her tongue, which felt twice its normal size. But no sound escaped. A black haze had begun to blur the edges of her vision. She struggled to maintain her focus on the adoring father and their baby lying in the cradle of his arms, trapped in their bubble of wonderment. She lay, silently imploring, desperately willing Jerry to move his gaze away from their baby girl and to turn round. Her mind screamed: Look. Look. Look. At. Me. He didn't hear it as he kissed the downy hair on his baby's crown.

Bernadette's head became lighter and the sounds around her more acute. She could hear people outside in the

corridor, giggling and talking as though they were standing right next to her bed, laughing at her.

And then, suddenly, she sank. The screaming in her head ceased. She felt as though life itself were draining out of her very soul as a chill sped upwards from her toes and fanned across her body like an icy glaze. She could no longer move her tongue and her eyelids felt leaden; there was no energy left to fight, no will to prise them open as she wearily succumbed to the dark cloak that enveloped her which was so heavy, so oppressive, that, try as she might, she just couldn't lift it off.

'She hasn't even murmured a sound yet, she just has these great big eyes lookin' at me now, just like her mammy,' said Jerry, as he turned himself and the baby towards Bernadette.

The last thing Bernadette saw, as her eyes slowly closed, was the smile evaporate from Jerry's face and transform into a look of horror as he suddenly looked down at the floor and saw a steady stream of blood, dripping from the corner of the bed sheet onto the floor, as though it were running from an open tap on a slow flow, creating a puddle of blood that had reached his own boots.