

Kitty and Her Sisters

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Extract

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Chapter I
BOOTLE, LIVERPOOL
1950

‘I wonder why people still sing war songs?’ I mused. ‘“Roll Out the Barrel”, “When the Lights Go On Again”, that sort of thing. I’d’ve thought they’d want to forget the war, not be reminded of it, particularly at a wedding.’

My friend, Marge, just grunted. We were sitting by a window watching our Norah have her photo taken with her new husband, Roy Hall. Norah’s going-away outfit was a pale-pink costume with a white hat, gloves, bag and shoes. Like me and my other sisters, Norah was neither tall nor short and had the same dark red hair, blue eyes and wide mouth. None of the four McCarthy girls were exactly pretty, but we were often described as striking.

It was my opinion that Norah was wasted on Roy Hall, a most unattractive individual with heavily Brylcreemed hair and the sort of moustache sported by the late Adolf Hitler. He worked as a clerk with Bootle Corporation.

The wedding reception had reached the stage that I always thought of as ‘half-time’. Any minute now, Norah and Roy would leave for their honeymoon. Most of the food had been eaten, and what remained was spread on a table by the door for people to help themselves. Some of the older guests had already gone home, the smaller children had fallen asleep on their

weary mothers' laps, while the older ones lounged around, looking bored out of their skulls while they waited for the activities to recommence.

'It stinks in here,' Marge said, holding her nose.

'I'm not surprised.' Layers of smoke floated beneath the ceiling, and the room smelled of stale cigarettes, beer and sweaty bodies. I saw my brother, Jamie, who was seventeen and should have known better, sneakily burst a balloon, making everyone jump. The pianist had disappeared, leaving an empty tankard in the hope it would be refilled, and an unnatural hush had fallen on the scout hut where the sound of us enjoying ourselves had only recently threatened to bring down the walls and lift the roof. The double doors were wide open to the late-afternoon sunshine. It was June and had been a perfect day for a wedding.

'Your Norah should have worn a pink hat,' Marge remarked. 'I read in a magazine that you should never have more than three accessories the same colour.' Marge wore a smart tan linen suit with dark-brown shoes. Her hat, a tan beret, had been deposited in the cloakroom. The trouble with Marge was she always bought clothes a size too small so that the jacket was buttoned tight across her breasts and the skirt wrinkled on her thighs. As usual, her pretty face was plastered with make-up and her long brown hair had been permed to a frizz. I wished someone would tell her she looked like a tart – *I* didn't have the courage.

'It's a bit late now to inform Norah she bought the wrong colour hat,' I said. 'In a while, I'm going home to change out of me bridesmaid's dress. Things will liven up later and it might get ripped or someone will spill beer on it. Anyroad, I loathe the damn thing.' The dress was lilac slipper satin with puffed sleeves, a full gathered skirt

ending in a double frill, and a sash that tied in a huge bow at the back. I'd got rid of the lilac picture hat, but still felt like a doll perched on top of a Christmas tree.

'You'll feel more comfortable in something of your own,' Marge said idly.

'I hope you're not saying that because I look desperately beautiful and you're madly jealous.' I grinned.

Marge contrived to look hurt. 'As if I would! Your Claire's already changed, but Aileen's still wearing hers.'

'Poor Claire. She didn't know she'd be expecting when Norah ordered the bridesmaids' outfits. The dressmaker had to let it out to accommodate the bulge.' The minute the photos were taken, Claire had swapped it for a maternity frock. 'And Aileen's only waiting for Norah to leave to change into something else.'

Marge gave me a nudge. 'Have you noticed Ada Tutty keeps staring at your Danny as if she'd like to eat him?' she said in a low voice. 'She's hardly taken her eyes off him all afternoon.'

I transferred my gaze to a rather mournful young woman clad in a frock more suitable for someone three times her age, who was watching my other brother with a look of longing on her plain face. Ada was the daughter of our next-door neighbour in Amethyst Street. I always felt dead sorry for her. 'She's mad on our Danny,' I said. 'Sundays, she waits by the parlour window until he leaves for Mass, then follows and kneels as close to him as she can. No matter what Mass he goes to, the very first or the very last, she's always there. It drives him doolally.'

'I quite fancy your Danny meself,' Marge confessed. My brother was currently flirting outrageously with a friend of Norah's. He was twenty-two and I could see nothing remarkable about him, but he must have had sex

appeal because girls were attracted to him like flies to jam.

‘Would you like me to tell him?’ I offered.

‘Jaysus, Mary and Joseph, don’t you dare do such a thing!’ Marge gasped.

‘It’d be nice to have you for a sister-in-law, Marge.’ We were both nineteen and had been friends since we started school together at five.

‘It’d be the gear,’ Marge agreed, ‘but if you breathe a word to your Danny I’ll never speak to you again.’

We moved our chairs to allow my ten-year-old niece, Patsy, who was wearing one of the bridesmaids’ hats, to gather the confetti that had collected underneath.

‘What are you going to do with that?’ I asked.

‘I’m keeping it for when *I* get married,’ Patsy announced. ‘I only want the silver bits, I like them best.’

‘Why do little girls always assume they’ll get married?’ I wondered aloud when Patsy had gone.

Marge shrugged. ‘Because it’s what little girls do when they grow up.’

‘Not all of them,’ I argued.

‘Only if a man doesn’t ask them and they end up sad old maids.’

‘What if a women *chooses* not to get married no matter how many men ask?’ I felt rather put out by the idea that a woman without a man would automatically be sad.

‘Then she’d be crazy,’ Marge said flatly. ‘No one in their right mind would be an old maid when they could have a husband. I want kids and you have to be married for that.’

‘Does that mean you’d marry any old man just to get a ring on your finger?’

‘As long as he didn’t have a face like a horse and had a decent job.’ She looked at me defiantly. ‘Wouldn’t you?’

‘Not on your nelly, no.’ I’d been out with plenty of chaps in my time, but there hadn’t been one I’d wanted to spend a whole day with, let alone the rest of my life.

‘Now you’re talking like a soft girl, Kitty McCarthy.’

I couldn’t be bothered arguing any more. ‘Oh, look! Norah and Roy are coming in to say tara. Don’t you think he’s a drip?’ Perhaps Marge was right in a way, because I was convinced our Norah had only married Roy because she was twenty-four and worried she might be left on the shelf when Peter Murphy jilted her after they’d been courting for three whole years. ‘Me, I’d sooner be an old maid any day than marry a drip like Roy Hall,’ I said defiantly.

After the newly married couple had made their goodbyes, Norah tossed her bouquet – Marge caught it, much to her delight – then departed in Roy’s brother’s van for the honeymoon in Cornwall.

Aileen came up. ‘I can’t wait to get out of this horrible frock, sis. I didn’t like to before in case I hurt our Norah’s feelings, but now I’m going to Amethyst Street to get changed. Mam and Dad went back a couple of minutes ago.’

‘Did Mam seem all right?’ I asked, alarmed.

‘Fine,’ Aileen said reassuringly. ‘She said she just felt like a decent cup of tea and a little lie-down.’

‘That’s all right, then. Hang on a mo while I find me bag; I’ll come with you.’

‘It looks the gear on you – the dress, that is,’ Aileen remarked as we strolled along Marsh Lane towards the house where we were born. Four years ago, Aileen had married Michael Gilbert and now lived in Maghull. She had a good job as an overseer in Wexford’s Biscuit Factory on the Dock Road where Michael was head of

Accounts. The first McCarthy to live in a bought house, she considered herself a cut above the rest of us.

‘It looks nice on you, too,’ I said loyally. ‘And it would have looked nice on Claire if she hadn’t been in the club. As it was, she looked like a badly wrapped parcel.’

‘I wouldn’t mind looking like a badly wrapped parcel if it meant I was pregnant,’ Aileen said wistfully. She was desperate for a baby.

‘Never mind, sis, it’ll happen one day,’ I promised recklessly. ‘Have you noticed everyone’s staring at us?’ I was glad the shops had closed so there weren’t as many people about as usual.

‘I’m not surprised. I feel like a dog’s dinner in this outfit. I was hoping Norah would pick silk or crêpe de Chine and a less sickly colour. Then we could’ve taken them up and worn them again. Now I don’t know what to do with the stupid thing,’ she finished in disgust. ‘I can’t think of a single thing I can make from it.’

‘Pin cushions?’

Aileen rolled her eyes. ‘Sometimes,’ she said when we turned into Amethyst Street, ‘I wander around my three-bedroom semi and wonder how ten of us managed to squeeze into one of these little terraced houses. In those days, the lavatory was at the bottom of the yard and we got bathed in a tin tub in front of the fire.’

‘Yes, but things have improved since then.’ Dad had fitted a bath and lavatory in the washhouse with the help of Danny who was a plumber. A door had been installed leading to the kitchen. The old lavatory had been removed and we now used the place to keep coal.

‘Not before time,’ Aileen sniffed.

‘I’m dead sorry our Norah’s gone,’ I tried hard to

sound sincere, 'but it means I'll have a double bed to meself for the first time in my life.'

'In other words, you're not sorry at all.' Aileen paused opposite a lamp-post over which a rope had been thrown; a little boy was swinging round and round, his eyes blissfully closed. 'I used to have some fun on that,' she said nostalgically. 'When we were little, me and our Claire had some terrible fights over who had first go on the swing.'

'Who usually won?' I hadn't been born until Claire was twelve and Aileen ten.

'Me. I was the smallest, but I had the strongest punch.'

All these years later, it was impossible to imagine my sisters, elegant Aileen and motherly Claire, involved in a fistfight.

We arrived at number twenty-two. Aileen put her hand through the letterbox and pulled out the key attached to a string. She unlocked the door and stepped inside, then turned to me, whispering, 'Mam's crying. It sounds like she's upstairs. Dad's with her.'

I made a face. 'I thought she was better. I haven't heard her cry for months.' We crept down the hall and sat at the bottom of the stairs to listen, our dresses floating around us with a breathy sound before settling in folds at our feet.

'I'm sorry, Bob,' Mam wept. 'I'm sorry if I'm spoiling the day for you, but ever since I woke up this morning I haven't been able to get our Jeff and Will out of me mind. They should have been at Norah's wedding and I kept seeing them among the guests. Like ghosts, they were, smiles on their dear faces, but whenever I looked again they'd disappeared. I managed to hold meself together for Norah's sake, but as soon as she left all I wanted to do was come home and have a good cry.'

‘Cry as much as you want, Bernie, luv,’ Dad said gently.

‘I kept thinking, Jeff would be thirty if he were still alive and married to Theresa – those children of hers would have belonged to him. And Will would be twenty-seven. Oh, Bob!’ she cried, ‘I’ll never get over losing me lads, not if I live to be a hundred.’ The sobs tore at her frail body and her breathing was hoarse and wretched.

I felt an ache come to my throat. Tears were trickling down Aileen’s cheeks. Then my sister held out her arms and we clung together at the bottom of the stairs as we listened to our mother weep her heart out.

When the war had begun eleven years ago in 1939, there’d been eight McCarthy children – four boys and four girls – but by the time it ended six years later, only two of the boys were left. The first to go was Jeff, only twenty-four when he was hit in the chest by a sniper’s bullet as the Allies fought their way across Occupied France. We were still in a state of shock when Will, three years younger, had gone down with his ship in the icy waters of the Baring Sea when it was ripped apart by a torpedo, a present from the German U-boat lurking underneath.

Losing Jeff had been bad enough, but for Mam Will’s death had been the last straw. She’d removed the crucifix that used to stand on the sideboard and every single holy picture and statue from the house, as if she’d given up all faith in God, although she still went to Mass and Benediction on Sundays. As the years passed, she hardly ate, and became thinner and thinner, weaker and weaker. Sometimes, I wondered if she was doing it deliberately, willing herself to die so she could join her

sons, entirely forgetting she had a husband and six children who still needed her.

Lately, though, it seemed she was coming to terms with the loss of her two strapping lads. Perhaps it was the preparations for Norah's wedding that had taken her mind off it a little. But now Norah was married, did it mean it was all going to start again and we would have to continue watching our mother fade to nothing in front of our eyes?

'What exactly happened when they died, Bob?' Mam was saying in a thin, shaky voice. 'Did the bullet that struck our Jeff in the chest kill him instantly? Or did he lie there in agony before he passed away? And was it the torpedo that did for Will or did he drown when the ship sank? It gnaws away at me all day long. I've lived through their dying moments a million times.'

'There, there, sweetheart.' Dad's voice held a note of desperation. Perhaps he had no words of comfort left. He'd had no opportunity to mourn his sons, no one to make a fuss of him as he'd done of Mam. His remaining children had tried, but it wasn't enough. Only another parent could properly understand how he felt inside. I wouldn't have dreamed of saying it aloud, but I often wondered if Mam was wrong to unload all her misery on to our father when he already had enough of his own. Tragedies should be shared, not borne by a single pair of shoulders, however strong they might appear to be.

'I left my clothes in the front bedroom,' Aileen whispered, 'but I can't very well disturb them. I'll go back to the reception and get changed later.'

'So will I.' My clothes were in the bedroom I'd shared with Norah, but I thought it best not to venture upstairs just now.

★

When we got back to the scout hut, the atmosphere had livened up. Fresh sarnies had appeared, the pianist had returned – his tankard had been refilled – and he was playing a lively march for the children, who were involved in a game of musical chairs.

‘It’s like the war all over again,’ Claire said disgustedly when we joined her. She looked dead tired. I wondered guiltily if it was her who’d had to make the sarnies. ‘The bigger kids are throwing the little ones all over the place in order to reach a chair. My three are already out and they’re not very pleased about it. Patsy’s lost all her confetti, Colette’s limping, and I’m sure our Mark didn’t have a black eye when we left the house this morning.’

‘You’d better keep out of the road in your condition,’ I advised when my pregnant – and favourite – sister looked in danger of being mown down by a decreasing circle of frantic children waiting for the music to stop so they could fight their way to the chairs.

Claire backed away. ‘I thought you both went home to get rid of them ghastly outfits?’

‘We did, but Mam was crying upstairs and we thought we’d leave it till later,’ Aileen said. ‘Poor Dad, he sounds at the end of his tether.’

‘Mam said she kept seeing Jeff and Will at the wedding like ghosts. Perhaps we should have guessed today would upset her,’ I added.

‘I don’t want to know about it, not right now,’ Claire said harshly. ‘Me kids are all hurt in one way or another, me husband’s disappeared and the baby’s kicking the hell out of me. I’ve got enough to worry about. In fact, I wouldn’t mind going home.’ She looked close to tears. ‘Oh, and you might like to know our Jamie’s as drunk as a lord.’ The youngest McCarthy was always getting into mischief of some sort. Claire turned away, muttering,

‘Mam’s not the only one who saw ghosts at the wedding.’

I had also thought about my brothers throughout the day, but didn’t say so. Instead, I changed the subject. ‘Have we got a prize for whoever wins at musical chairs?’ I asked. The game was nearly over, there was only one chair left and a muscular-looking girl of about ten from the bridegroom’s side of the family was competing with a weedy lad of indeterminable age whom I’d never seen before. He was exceptionally fast on his feet.

‘If the girl wins,’ Claire said threateningly, ‘her prize will be a smack on the gob. She’s the one who tripped up Colette and made her limp.’

Fortunately for the girl, the boy won, and he didn’t seem to expect a prize – the applause and feeling of achievement were clearly enough.

I went to look for Marge and found her talking to Ada Tutty – she must have taken pity on the girl. ‘Did you know Ada’s going to night school to learn to speak French and Spanish?’ she asked.

‘Really?’ I didn’t know much about Ada other than she had a crush on Danny and had been in the year behind me and Marge at school. She was clever and had passed the scholarship, but her mother refused to let her go to secondary school, saying she couldn’t afford the uniform. Ada was very small with a little pale face and thin pale hair – the sort of girl who was never looked at twice.

‘I want to be an interpreter,’ she whispered.

‘Is there much of a call for interpreters in Bootle?’ Marge asked. She winked at me from behind Ada’s back, but I ignored it.

‘No, but there is in London and abroad.’

‘Are you thinking of going to work abroad, Ada?’ I was impressed.

‘I might.’ Ada blushed, and her eyes flickered towards Danny. He was now flirting with a different girl, who was fluttering her eyelashes at him coyly.

‘That’s a marvellous idea.’ I genuinely meant it, though got the distinct impression Ada wouldn’t dream of going abroad if she could get her hands on our Danny. ‘I wouldn’t mind doing it meself. I wouldn’t mind going to night school, either. I’d take English. At school, my spelling was hopeless and my grammar even worse. I’m not even sure where to put a comma.’

‘What point would there be in that?’ Marge demanded.

‘Knowing where to put commas?’

‘No, learning English, soft girl.’

‘Well, I could write a decent letter for one thing,’ I said stoutly.

‘How many times a year do you write a letter, Kitty?’

‘Two or three, and I’m reaching for the dictionary every other minute.’

Marge sniffed. ‘You’d be better off taking cookery. At least it’d be useful. You’re a hopeless cook.’

‘Oh, no!’ Ada’s little plain face was suddenly transformed and she looked quite animated. ‘There’s plenty of time for Kitty to learn to cook, but writing letters – writing anything – is terribly important. You have to know how to express yourself and what words to use. I write poetry,’ she added shyly.

‘See!’ I gave my friend a challenging look. ‘I’ve never written a poem in me life.’

‘And a fat lot of good it’d do you if you did.’

I would have liked to continue the discussion, but the

pianist struck up the Gay Gordons and Liam, Claire's husband, asked me to dance.

'I hope you don't mind, but Claire's not up to it and I need the exercise,' he said, stamping his huge feet like a member of the Gestapo. I liked Liam Quinn, a big, noisy man with brown curly hair, laughing brown eyes and an extrovert personality. He played football for Bootle Rangers, an amateur team, and he and Claire were extremely happy with each other.

'Claire said you'd disappeared,' I said accusingly.

'Just went round to a mate's house to listen to the cricket results on the wireless and have a quiet brew. By the way, 'case you're interested, North Korea has invaded South Korea. It said so on the news.'

'What does that mean?'

'Another war,' Liam said laconically. He twisted me round and we marched back the way we'd come.

'But it's only five years since the last one ended!'

'Don't I know it, Kitty. I was in the Lancashire Fusiliers, remember?'

'Will you be called up again? Will our Danny have to go? And what about Jamie? He'll be eighteen in December. Oh, this'll kill Mam,' I wailed.

'I dunno what's going to happen.' He shrugged. 'North Korea has the Soviet Union behind it, and America backs the South. This could be the start of the Third World War and we'll end up atom-bombing each other to bits. We'll just have to see. Come on, Kitty,' he urged as he tried to twirl my limp body around, 'it's like dancing with a sack of sawdust. I'd've been better off with Claire and she's six months pregnant.'

'I'm sorry, Liam, but I don't feel like dancing any more.' I walked off the floor.

'Oh, come off it, luv. I was exaggerating about the

war.’ He followed and grabbed my arm. ‘It’ll just be a storm in a teacup, that’s all.’

He was still holding my arm when I went outside, where the sun was setting. It felt cooler. ‘I didn’t mean to upset you, Kitty,’ he said contritely. ‘I was exaggerating, like I said before.’

‘But there *might* be a war. Oh, Liam, I *hate* wars.’ I’d loathed sitting in the shelter listening to bombs explode all over Bootle, hated going to school next morning and seeing the empty spaces where houses had once stood and the empty desks of my classmates who’d lived in the houses and were now dead or injured. Most of all, I’d hated losing the brothers whom I’d loved with all my heart, then seeing my mother turn into an old woman almost overnight.

Liam took me in his arms, patted my back and said, ‘There, there,’ in the same tone my father had used to my mother earlier on. I was about to push him away, ashamed of appearing weak, when Claire appeared in the doorway.

‘Should I divorce you now, Liam, for having an affair with me little sister, or wait until I’ve got more evidence?’ she asked, smiling. She’d recovered her good humour.

‘I just told Kitty some bad news I heard on the wireless,’ Liam explained. ‘She’s taken it hard.’

‘Trust you not to be able to keep your big mouth shut, Liam Quinn,’ Claire said amiably. ‘You can tell me the bad news tomorrow. I’m not in the mood for it right now. Come on, Kitty, luv, let’s go in the kitchen and I’ll make us a cup of tea.’

‘I wonder if our Norah’s reached Bridgnorth yet?’ Claire said. She switched on the urn in the shabby kitchen and put two spoonfuls of tea in a giant metal pot.

‘I’m not sure how far away Bridgnorth is.’ Norah and Roy were staying the night there and carrying on to Cornwall in the morning.

‘Neither am I.’ Claire grinned. ‘I don’t envy her, sleeping with Roy Hall for the first time – or it might not be the first time, who am I to say? I can’t understand why she married the chap.’

‘Cos Peter Murphy jilted her, that’s why.’

‘Yes, but all she had to do was wait a while and someone else would’ve come along, someone with a bit more spunk in them who didn’t look like death warmed up.’

‘And have a moustache like Hitler’s,’ I added.

‘And have a moustache like Hitler’s,’ Claire agreed with another grin. ‘In fact, I can’t understand why women are always in such a rush to get married.’

‘You did when you were twenty,’ I pointed out.

‘Yes, but I had to, didn’t I? Didn’t you know that?’ she said when my eyes widened in surprise. ‘I thought the whole world did, or at least the whole of Amethyst Street. Our Patsy was born seven months after the wedding. Oh, Mam went round telling everyone she’d arrived early, but no one believed her.’

‘I did,’ I said indignantly. ‘I expected to see this titchy little baby, but Patsy was quite big and I wondered what she’d have looked like if you’d gone the whole nine months.’

Claire laughed. ‘Poor innocent little Kitty! Anyroad, not long after Patsy came along, Liam was called up and, instead of spending the next five years doing war work and having a good time with me mates, I was stuck in the house with a baby to look after. I love the bones of Liam, but I wish we hadn’t had to get married when we did.’ Her expression grew serious. ‘Take my advice, Kitty, if

you ever feel tempted to go with a feller, make sure you don't fall for a baby and end up having to marry him. It might not be someone like Liam Quinn you get stuck with, but a chap like our Danny, who I wouldn't trust any further than I could throw him. He'd make a terrible husband.'

'I'll remember that,' I vowed.

Of course, I didn't. The day came when I made the same mistake as Claire but, in my case, it turned out very differently.

The night wore on. Mam and Dad returned, both looking rather strained. Our Danny asked Marge to dance twice, and her face bore a triumphant smile as she whirled past in his arms. Me and Aileen agreed we couldn't be bothered to go home and change our frocks. No one mentioned the fact that North Korea had invaded the South – or was it the South had invaded the North? I'd never heard of Korea before and could have got it the wrong way round. Liam found our Jamie in a drunken sleep at the back of the scout hut. Claire told him to leave him there.

'Let him sleep it off, the daft little bugger. Serve him right if he wakes up in the middle of the night and everyone's gone home.'

'You're a hard woman, Claire Quinn,' Liam said, shuddering.

'Don't I need to be with an idiot like you for a husband?'

Liam looked at me, as if to say, 'What have I done wrong?'

Roy's mother exchanged blows with her husband, and my father had to separate them. An old lady fell asleep in the only lavatory and couldn't be budged until someone

climbed over the door. Ada Tutty had to take Mrs Tutty home when she swore she was having a heart attack, but it turned out to be indigestion.

All in all, it was a typical Liverpool wedding and, apart from one or two hiccups, I quite enjoyed myself. It was the day I began to look very differently on life. Perhaps it was Norah getting wed to drippy Roy Hall, the things Claire had said about not marrying young, Marge going on about old maids or the way Ada had looked at our Danny, but it was on that day that I decided I wasn't willing to stay in my dead-end job until a fellow came along and rescued me. I would find another job, go to night school and be taught where to put commas. Oh, and I'd only get married to a man I was head over heels in love with. If I didn't meet one, then I'd be quite content to become an old maid, though I promised myself I wouldn't be sad.

I'd worked in the packing department of Cameron's Shoe Factory in Hawthorn Road since I left school at fourteen. I wrapped shoes in tissue paper, placed them in the right-sized box, and stuck a label on the end: Lady's Red Court, size 4; Gent's Grey Brogue, size 10; Child's Brown Sandal, size 1. The label also had a little drawing of the model inside and a reference number for re-ordering. It wasn't exactly an inspiring job, but I worked with three other women – Betty, Enid and Theresa. We got on well and had a good laugh.

Betty and Enid were both sixty if a day, and Theresa I'd known for years, long before I came to work at Cameron's, as she'd been engaged to our Jeff. They were going to get married when the war was over. I'd always admired her lovely serene face and smooth brown hair, which she still wore coiled in a bun at the back of her

neck. She was now married to a chap called Barry Quigley and had two children, a boy and a girl. Her mother looked after them during the day.

‘How did the wedding go?’ she asked when I arrived on Monday. It looked as if Betty and Enid were going to be late.

‘Fine,’ I told her. ‘I’m sorry you weren’t invited, but Mam couldn’t stand the idea of seeing you with the children. It would’ve reminded her too much of Jeff.’

‘Perhaps I’d’ve been too much reminded of Jeff an’ all,’ Theresa said quietly. She’d never said anything, but I don’t think she was very happy with Barry. ‘Your mam wasn’t the only one whose heart was broken when Jeff was killed,’ she went on in the same tone. ‘But you have to move forward, not live in the past and make everyone around you as miserable as sin. You know, luv, I shouldn’t say this, but it’s about time your mam came to terms with the fact that Jeff and Will are dead. Oh, I’m not suggesting she get over it, that’d be too much to ask, but it’s not fair on the rest of you for her to keep on grieving so that it stays fresh in your minds, as if it only happened yesterday, not six years ago.’

I had already begun to have the same thoughts myself, but didn’t have the opportunity to say so because Betty and Enid came in together, full of their weekends and also wanting to know about the wedding. I only told them the funny bits, like the old lady falling asleep in the lavatory, and our Jamie coming home in the early hours of the morning having woken up behind the scout hut with a terrible hangover and highly indignant at being left behind.

‘I could’ve been murdered,’ he’d complained when I went downstairs to see what the noise was, worried he’d disturb Mam.

‘It would have served you right,’ I told him, ‘getting drunk at your age.’

The others, Theresa included, found this highly amusing, and the supervisor, Ronnie Turnbull, came to ask what was so funny.

‘Your face,’ Enid cackled, and we laughed even more as we continued to pack shoes and stick labels on boxes – Ronnie never had any reason to complain about our work.

As the hours passed and my arms began to ache, I remembered that I’d vowed to find another job. I’d spent five years in Cameron’s – eight hours a day, five and a half days a week – and it wasn’t exactly rewarding. I’d miss my mates, but there had to be more to life than packing shoes.

I discussed it next day with Theresa in the canteen when we were having our dinner, and explained how I felt.

‘I’ve often wondered what you were doing here, Kitty. It’s the sort of job where you only need half a brain. I do it for the money and Betty and Edna for the company. But you?’ She smiled at me warmly and I desperately wished she’d married our Jeff and we were sisters-in-law. ‘Unless you intend getting wed shortly, you’d be better off doing something more interesting.’

‘Anything would be more interesting than what I do now.’ I gave a dismissive sniff.

‘Not necessarily, luv. At least we have each other for company so the time doesn’t drag.’

‘I suppose that’s true.’

‘It is true, Kitty, there’s no suppose about it. There’s some Mondays I look forward to coming to work after a weekend at home. Me and Barry don’t exactly get on.’ She gave me a wan look.

‘I’m sorry.’ I put my hand over hers.

That night, I looked through the dozens of vacancies in the *Liverpool Echo*. I hadn't the experience for the ones I fancied, and didn't fancy any of the rest.

'Are you thinking of getting another job, luv?' Dad asked when he noticed the page I was reading. We'd just finished our tea. Danny was upstairs getting ready to go out – I've no idea what he did to himself up there, but he took ages and never came down looking any different apart from having put on a suit – and Jamie had his face buried in the *Wizard*. Mam was resting in the parlour.

'Yes, Dad, but there's none really suitable, least not tonight.'

'Well, you can look again tomorrow. Is there anything in particular you're after?'

'Well,' I leaned on the table and rested my chin on my hands, 'I wouldn't mind being an actress or a singer or a writer, but I can't act, I can't sing and I can't spell.'

Jamie lifted his head out of the *Wizard*. 'Ha, ha,' he sneered. He seemed to think it was my fault he'd been left behind at the scout hut.

'Have you got a big enough brain to read that comic?' I asked frostily. 'Or are you just looking at the pictures?'

'The *Wizard* isn't a comic, it's a magazine,' he retorted.

I stuck out my tongue. 'Ha, ha.'

Dad smiled at this exchange and it struck me how rare it was that he smiled. Suddenly, I wanted to throw my arms around his neck and kiss him, but he wasn't a demonstrative man and it might make him feel embarrassed. I was also struck by how ill he looked; his face was chalky and heavily wrinkled, and his eyes were dull. I felt the urge to cry. If anything happened to him, if he

died, I didn't know what I'd do. He was our rock, strong and immovable, the person our family depended on more than any other. A docker all his life, he worked long hours in a job that required great strength, but the last six years had taken its toll and I couldn't help but worry if he was still up to it.

'Would you like me to make more tea, Dad?' I asked, swallowing hard. It was all I could think of.

'I wouldn't mind, luv. Ta.'

I went into the kitchen and was filling the kettle when Mam shouted weakly from the parlour. 'Bob, are you there?'

'It's all right, Dad. I'll go.' I hurried back to the living room and rested my hand on his broad shoulder, squeezing it gently. I glanced at Jamie and jerked my head in the direction of the kitchen. 'Make the tea,' I mouthed. He nodded.

'Where's your dad?' Mam whispered when I went in. She was lying on the settee with a blanket thrown over her. Her face was pale and her hair completely white. It was hard to believe this was the same woman who'd once been so pretty and full of energy that the girls in school had envied me having her for a mam.

'Our Jamie's about to make him a cuppa, Mam.'

'Ask him to come in will you, Kitty?'

I squeezed myself on to the edge of the settee. I could feel her legs against me, as thin as sticks. 'What is it you want? I'll get it for you.'

'I just wanted to talk to him a minute,' she said fretfully.

'Well, talk to me. As I said, Jamie's making him a cuppa. He's hardly been home from work an hour and he's dead tired.' I did my best to hold back the tears. 'I'm worried about him, Mam. He doesn't look a bit well.'

‘Doesn’t he?’ I saw fear come to her eyes. She, more than anyone, would be lost without Dad.

I remembered what Theresa had said that morning and felt my sympathy swing wildly between my mother and my father. Mam couldn’t escape from the trap of grief and my heart bled for her, but she was also keeping Dad inside the trap. I stroked her brow; it was hot and sticky. ‘Paul Temple’s on the wireless tonight, Mam. Why don’t you listen to it? It’ll do Dad good to have a nice peaceful evening. I’ll go round to Reilly’s and buy you some sweets, shall I?’ I only had enough money for a couple of bars of chocolate, but they’d be better than nothing.

She managed the ghost of a smile. ‘You’re a good girl, Kitty. I’ll do what you say.’

‘Would you like a cup of tea an’ all?’

‘Indeed I would. In fact, I’ll come in the other room and drink it with you.’

I helped her off the settee. Jamie had made the tea and Danny had come downstairs. We all sat around the table and it was almost like old times, though I felt as if we were treading on eggshells. I worried that one of us would say the wrong thing and Mam would dissolve into tears.

Later, I went to Reilly’s and bought a bar of Cadbury’s Caramel and a bar of Fruit and Nut, Dad’s favourite. When I got back, Danny had gone, Jamie had re-buried himself in the *Wizard*, and Mam and Dad were discussing buying a new three-piece. ‘We could go into town on Saturday afternoon and look around the shops,’ Dad was saying.

Mam nodded. ‘That’d be nice.’

I hoped she was being sincere, not just making the effort, but either way it was a good sign.

★

'You're late,' Marge said accusingly when she opened the door of the house in Garnet Street where she lived with her mam. 'The first picture will have already started.'

Marge was an only child, her dad having done a bunk before she was even born. It wasn't surprising considering Mrs King was the most horrible woman in the world, with a vicious temper and a habit of taking a swipe at anyone who came within range. Once, when we were little, she'd actually hit me, and my own mam had come round to Garnet Street and torn her off a strip.

I said I was sorry. 'Things were happening at home and I couldn't get away.'

'That's all right.' I was forgiven. 'Come on in, Kitty.'

'Is your mam home?' I asked nervously. I was still afraid of Mrs King.

'No, she's gone to the pub, so I've got the house to meself till closing time.'

'We can go to the pictures tomorrow.' *Bride of Vengeance* with Paulette Goddard and Macdonald Carey was on at the Palace in Marsh Lane and I was anxious to see it. Then I remembered I'd spent all my money on the chocolate and would have to borrow some.

'I can't tomorrow. It's Tuesday and I'm going out with your Danny, aren't I?' She gave an irritating smirk.

'I'd forgotten.' We went into the parlour, a dismal room that smelled dusty and unused, and sat on the lumpy settee. 'What about Wednesday?'

'OK. Where's Danny tonight?' she asked in an offhand way.

'I dunno.' I shrugged. 'He went out earlier.'

'Has he got a date with someone?' Her tone was slightly less offhand, almost anxious.

'I dunno,' I repeated, though was pretty sure Danny

was going out with one of Norah's friends he'd met at the wedding – he probably had a date with the other one on Wednesday.

'I think he likes me.' She was looking at me, as if expecting me to say, 'He's mad about you, Marge,' but Danny never discussed his complicated love life with anyone.

'Everyone likes you, Marge,' I said instead, which was true. It probably applied to Danny, but he liked an awful lot of girls – too many, if the truth be known.

I continued to look in the paper for a job but, unless I was willing to work in a shop, swap one factory for another or become a cleaner, there was nothing I could apply for.

'You're getting awful choosy in your old age,' our Claire said huffily when the family came round to tea on Sunday and I told her about my predicament. She'd worked in Scott's Bakery before she'd married Liam.

'It's not that,' I tried to explain. 'I don't think I'm too good to work in a baker's, fr'instance. I'm just looking for something more interesting, that's all.'

'It was quite interesting in Scott's. Some of the customers were a scream.'

'Leave her be,' said Mam. 'If she wants to change her job, then let her.'

'She seems better,' Claire whispered when Mam went into the kitchen. Dad and Liam had taken the children to play in Stanley Park. 'Did she make this fruit cake?' I nodded. 'It's ages since she made a cake. It's the gear.'

'I said something to her the other day about Dad looking ill; I think it got through to her that she was wearing him out.' I only wish I'd thought to say

something like that before. ‘Yesterday, she and Dad went into town to look at three-piece suites.’

‘Did they now?’ Claire’s eyes gleamed. ‘If they get a new one, d’you think they’d let me have the old? I really fancy brown tweed like the one our Aileen bought from Maple’s for her posh new house, but Mam and Dad’s will do. Norah won’t want it: she and Roy are in furnished rooms. Our suite was second-hand, or might have been third, when we got it ten years ago; now it’s not fit for a tramp to use.’

‘I’m sure she will.’ Claire lived nearby in Opal Street in a house similar to our own. Liam was a labourer for one of the biggest landlords in Bootle, but he didn’t earn much. She was jealous of Aileen and her ‘posh new house’, and Aileen was jealous of Claire because she had three children. People were never satisfied with their lot, but then neither was I, so who was I to talk?

I discovered the Workers’ Educational Authority held classes in the Community Centre on Strand Road, so put my name down for English Grammar when the new term started in September. I felt very pleased with myself for taking the first step towards becoming the new Kitty McCarthy, though it was a month since the wedding and I was no nearer finding a job than I’d been then.

Mam and Dad had bought a new three-piece – oatmeal moquette – and Liam cheerfully wheeled our old one home on a handcart. Claire had given *their* old one away, amazed anyone was willing to give it house room.

Norah and Roy had returned from their honeymoon. Norah looked quite pleased with herself so perhaps Roy was all right once you got to know him.

The war in Korea had hardly been mentioned, not

surprising seeing as it was so far away, unlike the last one. Britain had sent troops, but the general opinion was no one would be called up. Dad always made sure Mam didn't hear the news on the wireless, so she knew nothing about it.

Marge had been going out regularly with our Danny at least twice a week and she gave the impression of being madly in love. Every time we passed a jeweller's she stopped to price engagement rings.

'It looks as if there's a chance I'll be your sister-in-law, Kit,' she'd said only the other day. We were on the ferry on our way back from New Brighton. It was all we could afford as it was Thursday, the day before we got paid, and we were both virtually skint. All we'd bought was a threepenny bag of chips to share between us.

'Just because you've been out with him half a dozen times, it doesn't mean he'll marry you.' I was watching the lights reflected in the River Mersey, the way they wobbled in the rippling waves.

'It's eight times, actually.' She looked smug.

'Eight times, then. Peter Murphy went out with our Norah hundreds of times before he jilted her.' Since Claire had pointed out what a terrible husband Danny would make, I wasn't sure if I wanted him and my best friend to get married.

Female required, 18-40 years, to help look after two small children Monday to Friday. Hours 9-5.30. £2.10.0d. References essential. Mrs F. Knowles, 12 Weld Road, Orrell Park, Liverpool.

I read the advert several times. It wasn't quite what I'd been after, but it would be a change and I liked children – at least, I liked our Claire's three. Mrs Knowles hadn't

mentioned needing experience and Orrell Park was only a bus ride away from Bootle. The wage was five bob less than Cameron's and I'd have fares to pay, but it didn't put me off.

'What do you think of this?' I showed the advert to Jamie who was the only one around.

'With you looking after them, sis, those kids will be dead within a month,' he snorted.

'Seriously, though,' I insisted.

'I was being serious. Oh, all right!' He ducked when I hit him with the paper. 'Sounds dead boring to me. I wouldn't do it if they paid me twice that much, but I suppose it'd be better than packing shoes. Have you got references?'

'I can get one from Cameron's.'

Later, Mam and Dad said it wouldn't hurt to apply, so I sat at the table and wrote a letter in my very best handwriting, reaching for the dictionary more than once. I couldn't remember if there was one 'p' or two in apply, or whether birth was spelled with an 'e' or an 'i'. When I looked, it could be spelled either way, but the one I wanted had an 'i'.

When it was finished, I took it next door to show to Ada Tutty, along with the advert. 'Does this seem all right, Ada?' Her house was even more miserable than Marge's. Mr Tutty worked on the docks, like my own dad, and their two sons were long-distance lorry drivers, so it wasn't as if they were poor, but Mrs Tutty was a real money-grubber and preferred to keep the money under the mattress rather than spend it.

'Well, it's not too bad,' Ada said after she'd looked the letter over.

'What's wrong with it?' I felt hurt.

'Rather than saying "I want to apply" it'd be better to

put “wish”. And “Dear Mrs Knowles” sounds friendlier than “Dear Madam”. You’ve missed the “h” out of school and the whole letter’s one long paragraph when it should be split into three. Would you like me to correct it,’ she asked kindly, ‘so you could do it again? There’s one or two other things that would look better put a different way. Fr’instance, you don’t sign Miss Katherine McCarthy, but Katherine McCarthy, and put the “Miss” afterwards in brackets.’

‘Thanks, Ada.’ I hadn’t bothered to look up ‘school’ as I’d thought I could spell it. ‘It must be nice to be clever,’ I said admiringly.

‘It’s not much use when you work behind the counter in a butcher’s,’ she said bitterly. ‘I wish I could’ve gone to secondary school, but Mam said we couldn’t afford it. She couldn’t wait for me to go work and bring in some money.’

She scrawled all over the letter and handed it back. ‘Is Marge King courting your Danny?’ she asked casually. ‘I’ve seen them out together a few times.’

‘Marge thinks they’re courting, but I doubt very much if our Danny’s of the same mind.’

A reply to my letter came by return of post. F. Knowles (Mrs) requested that I attend for interview on Monday afternoon. Weld Road was a mere two minutes walk away from Orrell Park Station, the letter informed me. I wondered what the ‘F’ stood for – Freda, Fanny, Fay, Florence? There’d been a girl in my class at school called Francesca.

I decided to take the whole of Monday off and not tell anyone beforehand except Theresa. If I got the job I’d give my notice in on Tuesday. If I didn’t I’d say I’d been sick.

Monday, I put on my best cream frock, a straw halo hat Norah had left behind, and lace gloves I'd borrowed off Aileen; I had lace gloves of my own, but they were full of holes and needed mending. I parked myself in front of the mirror, put on some lippy, powdered my nose and stood back to examine the effect. I quite liked my face. I could judge my looks better than most people could because my sisters and I looked very much the same: Claire's face was the plumpest, Aileen's eyes a paler blue than the rest of us, and Norah's hair a slightly darker red. I had the widest mouth – I could have sworn it was getting wider and one day it would reach my ears. I adjusted the hat on my short curls. Aileen and Norah wore their hair long, but me and Claire preferred it short; it was less trouble.

It was only half past twelve when I set off, and hardly one when I got off the bus by Orrell Park. It was a brilliant day, the sun shining hot enough to crack the flags. I found Weld Road straight away and identified number twelve – it was a three-storey semi-detached house with a long front garden. The grass was badly in need of cutting and the front door could have a done with a lick of paint. I was about to walk back as far as the shops where there was a Woolworths and I could buy a few things, when a small boy of about three, wearing only underpants, came hurtling round from the back of the house on a little three-wheeler bike. He pedalled like a maniac down the path and was about to enter the road through the open gate, when the front door opened and a woman came out.

'Oliver!' she called limply. 'Oliver, darling, please come back.'

I stood in front of the child. When it appeared he was

intent on running me down, I leaped out of the way and grabbed the handlebars.

By now, the woman had reached the gate. ‘Thank you,’ she gasped. ‘He wants to go and see his father. He’s in Egypt at the moment – well, I got a card from there this morning, but he’ll be somewhere else by now.’

I looked down at the child who was still trying to pedal the bike, despite my hold on the handlebars. He reminded me of a cherub, with black curly hair, rosy cheeks and a little pink mouth. His big eyes were almost as dark as his hair. ‘You’ll need more than a bike to get you as far as Egypt, Oliver,’ I told him.

‘Wanna see Daddy,’ he said stubbornly.

‘Then you’ll have to wait until the next time he comes home.’ I lifted up both Oliver and the bike so they were pointing the other way and he pedalled up the path and disappeared behind the house.

‘I try to keep the gate latched, but the postman always leaves it open,’ the woman said distractedly. I guessed she was in her forties – quite old, I thought, to have two small children; I took for granted it was Mrs Knowles. She wore slacks and a cotton blouse, no make-up, and her hair hadn’t been combed in quite a while. I admired her fine bone structure, straight nose and beautifully moulded cheekbones. Her eyes were silvery grey.

She smiled at me wearily, said thank you again, and was about to return to the house when another cherub, a smaller version of Oliver, came tottering down the path completely naked.

‘Robin! Oh dear God, he’s climbed out of his cot and come down the stairs on his own,’ she screamed. She scooped the boy up in her arms and rushed inside the house. I followed, latching the gate firmly behind me.

‘Look,’ I said loudly through the still open door, ‘my

name's Kitty McCarthy and I applied for the job of looking after the children. Would you like me to give you a hand?'

The woman was sitting at the bottom of the stairs, clutching Robin and looking moidered to death. The sweat glistened on her forehead and had begun to run down her lovely cheeks.

'You're early,' she said in a quivery voice. Robin chuckled and pulled his mother's hair.

'I know. I only came to make sure I knew where the house was, then I intended doing a bit of shopping until two o'clock, but Oliver came out . . .' I didn't go on, she knew what had happened then. 'Shall I put some clothes on Robin?'

'If you don't mind. They're in his bedroom at the back of the house.' At that moment I think she would have handed Robin over to the Loch Ness monster.

'Right.' I held out my hand. 'Come on, Robin. Let's get you dressed.'

Robin willingly took my hand and led me upstairs. The bedroom was a midden: clothes and toys were all over the place, and the sheets on his cot and the single, unmade bed where his brother must have slept could have done with a good wash. I found underclothes, a tiny pair of cotton trousers, a short-sleeved shirt and a pair of sandals, but socks were nowhere to be seen. While I was dressing him, he grabbed my hat and flung it to the floor, then looked at me challengingly, his eyes full of devilment and his little pink tongue sticking out.

'This isn't a game,' I told him severely. 'I'm not going to put it back on so you can pull it off again. Now, put your feet in these sandals. I'll ask your mam for socks when we're downstairs, otherwise your heels will get rubbed raw.'

Oliver came in and looked at me curiously, probably wondering who this strange woman was who had stopped him from going to Egypt and was now dressing his little brother.

‘You look smart enough to get dressed by yourself,’ I told him. ‘Shall I sit here and watch while you do it?’

Five minutes later, I took them downstairs and found Mrs Knowles fast asleep in a huge kitchen, which looked as if a typhoon had just swept through it. Her head was resting on the table. I shook her arm and she came to with a start.

‘Oh, I see you’ve got them dressed. How on earth did you manage that?’ Without waiting for an answer, she went on, ‘Thank you again. You’d better go now. I take for granted you don’t want the job.’

‘You haven’t interviewed me yet.’

She looked at me, astounded. ‘You’re not still interested?’

‘Nothing’s happened so far to put me off.’ I picked up Robin and sat him on my knee. He immediately grabbed my hair and I was reminded that I must collect our Aileen’s hat before I went home.

‘I interviewed three women this morning: one said all they needed was discipline and their bottoms smacked regularly, another that they should be locked in their rooms, and the third one had some airy-fairy notion about teaching them to dance and sing. “That’ll keep them occupied,” she claimed.’ She dragged herself to her feet. ‘Would you like a drink? I’m longing for a coffee. I haven’t had one for hours. Robin had me awake at six this morning, which means I’ve been up seven hours and I’ve hardly done a thing.’ She shook her head tiredly. ‘I don’t know where the time goes.’

‘I’d love some coffee, ta.’ The McCarthys weren’t coffee-drinkers, but I enjoyed the occasional cup.

She ran water into a percolator while looking at me over her shoulder. ‘You said your name was Kitty. I can’t remember getting a letter from a Kitty.’

‘I signed it Katherine, Katherine McCarthy.’

‘Oh, yours was the nicely written one, beautifully set out. You work in a shoe factory, don’t you?’

I preened myself, though it was Ada Tutty who should take credit for the letter. ‘Yes, I took the day off to come here.’

‘Would it be possible for you to start tomorrow?’

It was probably the quickest interview anyone had ever attended: she hadn’t asked a single important question nor mentioned references. ‘Not really. I have to give a week’s notice. It’ll still be a day short if I give it in tomorrow, but I doubt if anyone’ll mind.’

She looked disappointed as she spooned coffee into the percolator and put it on the stove. ‘It was the lady in the Post Office who suggested I get help with the children. Once I’d got the idea in my head, I wanted someone immediately. I’m amazed I hadn’t thought of it before, but I suppose it just made me feel even more inadequate, the idea that I couldn’t manage two small children on my own.’

Oliver had put his chin on the table and his dark, mischievous eyes were darting from me to his mother and back again. ‘I’m a handful,’ he announced.

‘Oh, isn’t that terrible?’ Mrs Knowles groaned. ‘I should never have said that in his hearing.’

‘A *real* handful,’ Oliver stressed, as if intent on making his mother feel worse.

‘Darling, would you mind going into the garden and looking for your red ball? I’ve a horrible suspicion it

might have been thrown into next door's garden and the lady will be terribly cross again.'

'The lady next door is a bitch,' Oliver said. 'We hate her, don't we, Mummy?' With that, he marched outside to look for the ball.

'It's in the shed,' Mrs Knowles confessed. 'I just wanted him out the way a minute while I explain my circumstances.' She cleared her throat. 'Both Eric and I – Eric is my husband – have been married before. My first husband was in the Navy and was killed in the first year of the war; Eric's wife died in the London Blitz.'

I made the appropriate sympathetic noises, which she acknowledged with a little nod.

'I met Eric in nineteen forty-four and we got married after the war ended. I was thirty-eight and he forty-three. We never really intended to have children – I have a son from my first marriage – but were pleased when I found I was expecting Oliver. I never dreamt,' she said with a shudder, 'that I would find looking after a baby so tiring. My doctor tells me I'm anaemic, which is why I have so little energy.'

'That's a shame.' Robin was standing on my knee, our noses pressed together. I removed his chubby hands from my ears.

'I don't know why I'm telling you all this, Kitty,' his mother said, sitting down. 'I've hardly known you five minutes and you already know my life story. I suppose I don't want you to think I'm one of those women who farms her children out to someone else because she can't be bothered looking after them. I try, I really do try, but I'm afraid, once Robin came along, that I just couldn't cope. My sister, Hope, has lived with me for the past year and she can't stand children. She tells me I'm an ineffectual mother.'

‘They’re very lively,’ I remarked as Robin began to screw my nose off.

‘Excessively so. They hardly sleep and are on the go all day long.’ She got to her feet. ‘The coffee should be ready now. Do you take milk and sugar?’

‘Both, please. Would you like me to take the children for a walk in a minute so you can have a rest?’ I’d noticed a big pram in the hall.

‘That would be lovely. Thank you, Kitty. I haven’t washed yet and I can’t remember when I last combed my hair.’ She ran her fingers through it, making it look worse. ‘Lord knows what those women thought this morning. I’d meant to make myself respectable, but never found the time. Is it all right if I call you Kitty? My name is Faith, by the way.’

Faith and Hope! I wondered if there was a Charity, too. ‘You’re not from Liverpool, are you?’ She hadn’t even a trace of a scouse accent.

‘No. I was born in Richmond on the outskirts of London. We came to live in Liverpool because it’s where Eric’s ship usually docks. He’s captain of a cruise liner,’ she said proudly. ‘He usually sails between here and America, but at the moment he’s going round the world.’ She smiled cheerfully and appeared far less harassed than when I’d first arrived. ‘Now, Kitty, I’ve told you all about myself. It’s about time I knew something about you. Have you any brothers and sisters, for instance, a boyfriend? Oh, I do hope you’re not likely to get married any minute and leave!’

I felt an inner glow. I haven’t even started the job yet and she was already worried I might leave. It was *me* who was responsible for the cheerful smile. I liked Faith Knowles very much. Her children were little monkeys,

but I was looking forward to taking care of them. I'd never looked forward to packing shoes.

I told her my life story – it sounded very uninteresting – then took the children for a long walk in the pram as far as Derby Park where I let them run around on the grass for a while. They behaved like wild animals who'd been released from their cages and I had a job catching them.

When I got back to Weld Road, Faith had washed, combed her hair and put on some make-up. She'd changed out of the slacks and blouse, and now wore a pretty flowered summer dress. She looked quite beautiful.

'It's the first time I've worn a dress in ages,' she cried. 'And I even managed to iron it.' She stared into the pram. 'They're both asleep,' she exclaimed. 'I can hardly believe my eyes: they never go to sleep during daytime.'

'They're both exhausted. I'll carry Oliver upstairs, shall I? We can leave Robin where he is.'

'I've got more coffee on the go for when you come down.'

We grinned triumphantly at each other, and I knew that me and Faith Knowles were going to get along just fine.