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Tara Road

Written by Maeve Binchy

Published by Orion Books Ltd

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Tara Road

Maeve Binchy



An Orion paperback

First published in Great Britain in 1998
by Orion
This paperback edition published in 1999
by Orion Books Ltd,
Orion House, 5 Upper St Martin's Lane,
London WC2H 9EA

An Hachette UK company

13 15 17 19 20 18 16 14

Reissued 2010

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-0-7528-7686-3

Typeset by Deltatype Limited, Birkenhead, Merseyside

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

The Orion Publishing Group's policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

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To my dearest Gordon, with all my love

CHAPTER ONE

Ria's mother had always been very fond of film stars. It was a matter of sadness to her that Clark Gable had died on the day Ria was born. Tyrone Power had died on the day Hilary had been born just two years earlier. But somehow that wasn't as bad. Hilary hadn't seen off the great king of cinema as Ria had. Ria could never see *Gone with the Wind* without feeling somehow guilty.

She told this to Ken Murray, the first boy who kissed her. She told him in the cinema. Just as he was kissing her, in fact.

'You're very boring,' he said, trying to open her blouse.

'I'm not boring,' Ria cried with some spirit. 'Clark Gable is there on the screen and I've told you something interesting. A coincidence. It's not boring.'

Ken Murray was embarrassed as so much attention had been called to them. People were shushing them and others were laughing. Ken moved away and huddled down in his seat as if he didn't want to be seen with her.

Ria could have kicked herself. She was almost sixteen. Everyone at school liked kissing, or said they did. Now she was starting to do it and she had made such a mess of it. She reached out her hand for him.

'I thought you wanted to look at the film,' he muttered.

'I thought *you* wanted to put your arm around me,' Ria said hopefully.

He took out a bag of toffees and ate one. Without even passing her the bag. The romantic bit was over.

Sometimes you could talk to Hilary, Ria had noticed. This wasn't one of those nights.

'Should you not talk when people kiss you?' she asked her sister.

'Jesus, Mary and Holy St Joseph,' said Hilary, who was getting dressed to go out.

'I just asked,' Ria said. 'You'd know, with all your experience with fellows.'

Hilary looked around nervously in case anyone had heard. 'Will you *shut up* about my experience with fellows,' she hissed. 'Mam will hear you and that will put paid to either of us going anywhere ever again.'

Their mother had warned them many times that she was not going to stand for any cheap behaviour in the family. A widow woman left with two daughters had enough to worry her without thinking that her girls were tramps and would never get a husband. She would die happy if Hilary and Ria had nice respectable men and homes of their own. Nice homes, in a classier part of Dublin, places with a garden even. Nora Johnson had great hopes that they would all be able to move a little upwards. Somewhere nicer than the big sprawling housing estate where they lived now. And the way to find a good man was not by flaunting yourself at every man that came along.

'Sorry, Hilary,' Ria looked contrite. 'But anyway she didn't hear, she's looking at telly.'

Their mother did little else of an evening. She was tired, she said, when she got back from the dry cleaners where she worked at the counter. All day on your feet, it was nice to sit down and get transported

to another world. Mam wouldn't have heard anything untoward about experience with fellows from upstairs.

Hilary forgave her – after all, she needed Ria to help her tonight. Mam had a system that as soon as Hilary got in she was to leave her handbag on the landing floor. That way when Mam got up to go to the bathroom in the night she'd know Hilary was home and would go to sleep happily. Sometimes it was Ria's job to leave the handbag out there at midnight, allowing Hilary to creep in at any hour, having taken only her keys and lipstick in her pocket.

'Who'll do it for me when the time comes?' Ria wondered.

'You won't need it if you're going to be blabbing and yattering on to fellows when they try to kiss you,' Hilary said. 'You'll not want to stay out late because you'll have nowhere to go.'

'I bet I will,' Ria said, but she didn't feel as confident as she sounded. There was a stinging behind her eyes.

She was sure she didn't look *too* bad. Her friends at school said she was very lucky to have all that dark curly hair and blue eyes. She wasn't fat or anything and her spots weren't out of control. But people didn't pick her out; she didn't have any kind of sparkle like other girls in the class did.

Hilary saw her despondent face. 'Listen, you're fine, you've got naturally curly hair, that's a plus for a start. And you're small, fellows like that. It will get better. Sixteen is the worst age, no matter what they tell you.' Sometimes Hilary could be very nice indeed. Usually on the nights she wanted her handbag left on the landing.

And of course Hilary was right. It *did* get better. Ria left school and like her elder sister did a secretarial course. There were plenty of fellows, it turned out. Nobody particularly special, but she wasn't in any

rush. She would travel the world possibly before she settled down to marry.

'Not too much travelling,' her mother warned.

Nora Johnson thought that men might regard travel as fast. Men preferred to marry safer, calmer women. Women who didn't go gallivanting too much. It was only sensible to have advance information about men, Nora Johnson told her daughters. This way you could go armed into the struggle. There was a hint that she may not have been adequately informed herself. The late Mr Johnson, though he had a bright smile and wore his hat at a rakish angle, was not a good provider. He had not been a believer in nor a subscriber to life insurance policies. Nora Johnson did not want the same thing for her daughters when the time came.

'When do you think the time will come?' Ria asked Hilary.

'For what?' Hilary was frowning a lot at her reflection in the mirror. The thing about applying blusher was that you had to get it just right. Too much and you looked consumptive, too little and you looked dirty and as if you hadn't washed your face.

'I mean, when do you think either of us will get married? You know the way Mam's always talking about when the time comes.'

'Well, I hope it comes to me first, I'm the eldest. You're not even to consider doing it ahead of me.'

'No, I have nobody in mind. It's just I'd love to be able to look into the future and see where we'll be in two years' time. Wouldn't it be great if we could have a peep?'

'Well, go to a fortune-teller then if you're that anxious.'

'They don't know anything.' Ria was scornful.

'It depends. If you get the right one they do. A lot of

the girls at work found this great one. It would make you shiver the way she knows things.'

'You've never been to her?' Ria was astounded.

'Yes I have actually, just for fun. The others were all going, I didn't want to be the only one disapproving.'

'And?'

'And what?'

'What did she tell you? Don't be mean, go on.' Ria's eyes were dancing.

'She said I would marry within two years ...'

'Great, can I be the bridesmaid?'

'And that I'd live in a place surrounded by trees and that his name began with an M, and that we'd both have good health all our lives.'

'Michael, Matthew, Maurice, Marcello?' Ria rolled them all around to try them out. 'How many children?'

'She said no children,' Hilary said.

'You don't believe her, do you?'

'Of course I do, what's the point giving up a week's wages if I don't believe her?'

'You *never* paid that!'

'She's good. You know, she has the gift.'

'Come *on*.'

'No, she does have a gift. All kinds of high-up people consult her. They wouldn't if she didn't have the power.'

'And where did she see all this good health and the fellow called M and no children? In tea-leaves?'

'No, on my hand. Look at the little lines under your little finger around the side of your hand. You've got two, I've got none.'

'Hilary, don't be ridiculous. Mam has three lines ...'

'And remember there was another baby who died, so that makes three, right.'

'You are serious! You do believe it.'

'You asked so I'm telling you.'

'And everyone who is going to have children has those little lines and those who aren't haven't?'

'You have to know how to look.' Hilary was defensive.

'You have to know how to charge, it seems.' Ria was distressed to see the normally level-headed Hilary so easily taken in.

'It's not that dear when you consider ...' Hilary began.

'Ah, Hilary, please. A week's wages to hear that kind of rubbish! Where does she live, in a penthouse?'

'No, a caravan as it happens, on a halting site.'

'You're joking me?'

'True, she doesn't care about money. It's not a racket or a job, it's a gift.'

'Yeah.'

'So it looks like I can do what I like without getting pregnant.' Hilary sounded very confident.

'It might be dangerous to throw out the pill,' said Ria. 'I wouldn't rely totally on Madame Fifi or whatever she's called.'

'Mrs Connor.'

'Mrs Connor,' Ria repeated. 'Isn't that amazing. Mam used to consult Saint Ann or someone when she was young. We thought that was mad enough, now it's Mrs Connor in the halting site.'

'Wait until you need to know something, you'll be along to her like a flash.'

It was very hard to know what a job was going to be like until you were in it and then it was too late.

Hilary had office jobs in a bakery, a laundry and then settled in a school. There wasn't much chance of meeting a husband there, she said, but the pay was a bit better and she got her lunch free, which meant she

could save a bit more. She was determined to have something to put towards a house when the time came.

Ria was saving too, but to travel the world. She worked first in the office of a hardware shop, then in a company which made hairdressing supplies. And then settled in a big, busy estate agency. Ria was on the reception desk and answered the phone. It was a world she knew nothing of when she went in, but it was obviously a business with a huge buzz. Prosperity had come to Ireland in the early eighties and the property market was the first to reflect this. There was huge competition between the various estate agents and Ria found they worked closely as a team.

On the first day she met Rosemary. Slim, blonde, and gorgeous, but as friendly as any of the girls she had ever met at school or secretarial college. Rosemary also lived at home with her mother and sister, so there was an immediate bond. Rosemary was so confident and well up in everything that was happening. Ria assumed that she must be a graduate or someone with huge knowledge of the property market. But no, Rosemary had only worked there for six months; it was her second job.

'There's no point in working anywhere unless we know what it's all about,' Rosemary said. 'It makes it twice as interesting if you know all that's going on.'

It also made Rosemary twice as interesting to all the fellows who worked there. They found it very difficult to get to first base with her: in fact, Ria had heard that there was a sweepstake being run secretly on who would be the first to score. Rosemary had heard this too. She and Ria laughed over it.

'It's only a game,' Rosemary said. 'They don't really want me at all.' Ria was not sure that she was right; almost any man in the office would have been proud to escort Rosemary Ryan. But she was adamant, a career

first, fellows later. Ria listened with interest. It was such a different message from the one she got at home, where her mother and Hilary seemed to put a much greater emphasis on the marriage side of things.

Ria's mother said that 1982 was a terrible year for film stars dying. Ingrid Bergman died, and Romy Schneider and Henry Fonda, then there was the terrible accident when Princess Grace was killed. All the people you really wanted to see, they were dying off like flies.

It was also the year that Hilary Johnson got engaged to Martin Moran, a teacher at the school where she worked in the office.

Martin was pale and anxious and originally from the west of Ireland. He always said his father was a small farmer, not just a farmer but a *small* one. Since Martin was six foot one it was hard to imagine this. He was courteous and obviously very fond of Hilary, yet there was something about him that lacked enthusiasm and fire. He looked slightly worried about things and spoke pessimistically when he came to the house for Sunday lunch.

There was a problem connected with everything. The Pope would get assassinated when he visited England, Martin was sure of it. And when he didn't, it was just lucky and his visit hadn't done all the good that people had hoped it would. The war in the Falklands would have repercussions for Ireland, mark his word. And the trouble in the Middle East was going to get worse, and the IRA bombs in London were only the tip of the iceberg. Teachers' salaries were too low; house prices were too high.

Ria looked at the man her sister was going to marry with wonder.

Hilary, who had once been able to throw away a week's salary on a fortune-teller, was now talking

about the cost of having shoes repaired and the folly of making a telephone call outside the cheap times.

Eventually a selection was made and a deposit was paid on a very small house. It was impossible to imagine what the area might look like in the future. At present it was full of mud, cement mixers, diggers, unfinished roads and unmade footpaths. And yet it seemed exactly what her elder sister wanted out of life. Never had Ria seen her so happy.

Hilary was always smiling and holding Martin's hand as they talked, even on very worrying subjects like stamp duty and auctioneers' fees. She kept turning and examining the very small diamond which had been very carefully chosen and bought from a jeweller where Martin's cousin worked so that a good price had been arranged.

Hilary was excited about the wedding, which would be two days before her twenty-fourth birthday. For Hilary the time had come. She celebrated it by manic frugality. She and Martin vied with each other to save money on the whole project.

A winter wedding was much more sensible. Hilary could wear a cream-coloured suit and hat, something that could be worn again and again, and eventually dyed a dark colour and worn still further. As a wedding feast they would have a small lunch in a Dublin hotel, just family. Martin's father and brothers, being small farmers, could not afford to be away from the land for any longer than a day. It would be impossible to be anything but pleased for her. It was so obviously what Hilary wanted. But Ria knew that it was nothing at all like what she wanted herself.

Ria wore a bright scarlet coat to the wedding, and a red velvet hairband and bow in her black curly hair. She must have been one of the most colourful

bridesmaids at the drabbest wedding in Europe, she thought.

When Monday came she decided to wear her scarlet bridesmaid's coat to the office. Rosemary was amazed. 'Hey, you look *terrific*. I've never seen you dressed up before, Ria. Seriously, you should get interested in clothes, you know. What a pity we have nowhere to go to lunch and show you off, we mustn't waste this.'

'Come on, Rosemary, it's only clothes.' Ria was embarrassed. She felt now that she must have been dressed like a tramp before.

'No, I'm not joking. You must always wear those knock-them-dead colours, I bet you were the hit of the wedding!'

'I'd like to think so, but maybe I was a bit too loud, made them colour-blind. You've no idea what Martin's people were like.'

'Like Martin?' Rosemary guessed.

'Compared to them Martin's a ball of fire,' Ria said.

'Look, I can't believe you're the same person as yesterday.' Rosemary stood in her immaculate lilac-coloured knitted suit, her make-up perfect and amazed admiration written all over her.

'Well, you've really put it up to me. Now I'll have to get a whole new wardrobe.' Ria twirled around once more before taking off her scarlet coat and caught the eye of the new man in the office.

She had heard there was a Mr Lynch coming from the Cork branch. He had obviously arrived. He wasn't tall, about her own height. He was handsome, and he had blue eyes and straight fair hair that fell into his eyes. He had a smile that lit up the room. 'Hallo, I'm Danny Lynch,' he said. Ria looked at him, embarrassed to have been caught pirouetting around in her new coat. 'Aren't you just *gorgeous*?' he said. She felt a

very odd sensation in her throat, as if she had been running up a hill and couldn't catch her breath.

Rosemary spoke, which was just as well because Ria would not have been able to answer at all.

'Well *hallo* there, Danny Lynch,' she said with a bit of a smile. 'And you are very welcome to our office. You know, we *were* told that there was a Mr Lynch arriving, but why did we think it was going to be some old guy?'

Ria felt a pang of jealousy as she had never before felt about her friend. Why did Rosemary always know exactly what to say, how to be funny and flattering and warm at the same time?

'I'm Rosemary, this is Ria, and we are the workforce that keeps this place going, so you have to be very nice to us.'

'Oh I will,' Danny promised.

And Ria knew he would probably join the sweepstake as to who would score first with Rosemary. Probably would win, as well. Oddly he seemed to be talking to Ria when he spoke, but maybe she was just imagining it. Rosemary went on, 'We were just looking for somewhere to go out and celebrate Ria's new coat.'

'Great! Well, we have the excuse, all we need is the place and to know how long a lunch break so that I don't make a bad impression on my first day.' His extraordinary smile went from one to the other; they were the only three people in the world.

Ria couldn't say anything; her mouth was too dry.

'If we're out and back in under an hour then I think we'll do well,' said Rosemary.

'So now it's only where?' Danny Lynch said, looking straight at Ria. This time there were only two of them in the world. She still couldn't speak.

'There's an Italian place across the road,' Rosemary

said. 'It would cut down on time getting there and back.'

'Let's go there,' said Danny Lynch, without taking his eyes away from Ria Johnson.

Danny was twenty-three. His uncle had been an auctioneer. Well, he had been a bit of everything in a small town, a publican, an undertaker, but he also had an auctioneer's licence and that's where Danny had gone to work when he left school. They had sold grain and fertiliser and hay as well as cattle and small farms, but as Ireland changed, property became important. And then he had gone to Cork City and he loved it all, and now he had just got this job in Dublin.

He was as excited as a child on Christmas Day, and Rosemary and Ria were carried along with him all the way. He said he hated being in the office and loved being out with clients, but then didn't everyone? He knew it would take time before he'd get that kind of freedom in Dublin. He had been to Dublin often but never lived there.

And where was he staying? Rosemary had never seemed so interested in anyone before. Ria watched glumly. Every man in the office would have killed to see the light in the eyes, the interest in every word. She never enquired where any of her other colleagues lived, she didn't seem to know if they had any accommodation at all. But with Danny it was different. 'Tell us now that you don't live miles and miles away, do you?' Rosemary had her head on one side. No man on earth could resist giving Rosemary his address and finding out where *she* lived too. But Danny didn't seem to regard it as a personal exchange; it was part of the general conversation. He spoke looking from one to the other as he told them how he had fallen on his feet. He had really had the most amazing bit of luck. There

was this man he had met, a sort of madman really called Sean O'Brien, old and confused. A real recluse. And he had inherited a great big house in Tara Road, and he wasn't capable of doing it up, and he didn't want all the bother and the discussing of it and all, so what he really wanted was a few fellows to go in and live there. Fellows were easier than girls, they didn't want things neat and clean and organised. He smiled apologetically at them as if to say he knew that fellows were hopeless.

So that's where Danny and two other lads lived. They had a bedsitter each, and kept an eye on the place until poor old Sean decided what he was going to do. Suited everybody.

What kind of a house was it, the girls wanted to know?

Tara Road was very higgledy-piggledy. Big houses with gardens full of trees, small houses facing right on to the street. Number 16 was a great old house, Danny said. Falling down, damp, shabby now. Poor Sean O'Brien's old uncle must have been a bit of a no-hoper like Sean himself, it must have been a great house once. You got a feel for houses, didn't you? Otherwise why be in this business at all?

Ria sat with her chin in her hands listening to Danny and looking at him and looking at him. He was so enthusiastic. The place had a big overrun garden at the back. It was one of those houses that just put out its arms and hugged you.

Rosemary must have kept the conversation going and called for the bill. They walked across the road back to work and Ria sat down at her desk. Things don't happen like this in real life. It's only a crush or an infatuation. He's a perfectly ordinary small guy with a line of chatter. He is exactly like this to everyone else. So why on earth did she feel that he was

so special, and that if he got to share all his plans and dreams with anyone else she would kill the other person? This wasn't the kind of way people went on. Then she remembered her sister's wedding two days ago. *That* wasn't the way people went on either.

Before the office closed Ria went over to Danny Lynch's desk. 'I'm going to be twenty-two tomorrow,' she said. 'I wondered ...' Then she got stuck.

He helped her out. 'Are you having a party?'

'Not really, no.'

'Then can we celebrate it together? Today the coat, tomorrow being twenty-two. Who knows what we'll have to celebrate by Wednesday?'

And then Ria knew that it wasn't a crush or an infatuation, it was love. The kind of thing she had only read about, heard about, sung about or seen at the cinema. And it had come to find her in her own office.

At first Ria tried to keep Danny to herself, not wanting to tell anyone about him or to share him with other people. She clung to him when they said goodbye as if she never wanted him to leave her arms.

'You're sending me very funny signals, my Maria,' he said to her. 'You want to be with me and yet you don't. Or am I just a thick man who can't understand?' His head was on one side, looking at her quizzically.

'That's exactly the way I feel,' she said simply. 'Very confused.'

'Well we can simplify it all, can't we?'

'Not really. You see for me it would be a very big step. I don't want to make a production out of it all, but you see I haven't with anyone else. Yet I mean ...' She bit her lip. She didn't dare tell him that she wouldn't sleep with him until she knew that he loved her. It would be putting words in his mouth.

Danny Lynch held her face in his hands. 'I love you, Ria, you are utterly adorable.'

'*Do* you love me?'

'You know I do.'

The next time he asked her to go back to the big rambling house she would go. But, oddly, he didn't ask her at all in the days and nights that followed. He told her about himself, his time at school where he was picked on because he was small and how his elder brothers taught him to fight. His brothers were in London, both of them. One married, one living with a girl. They didn't come home much. Usually went to Spain or Greece on their holidays now.

His parents lived in the same house as they had always done. They were very self-contained, went for long walks with their red setter. She felt that he didn't get on well with his father, but even though Ria ached to ask she didn't probe. Men hated that kind of intimate chat. She and Rosemary knew this from reading magazine articles and even from their own experience. Fellows didn't like being questioned about feelings. So she did not ask him about his childhood and why he spoke so little of his parents and rarely went to see them.

Danny didn't ask questions about her family, so she forced herself not to prattle about how her father had died when she was eight, how her mother was still bitter and disappointed by the memory of him. And how dull Hilary and Martin's wedding had been.

There was no shortage of things to talk about in those heady days. Danny did ask about what music she liked, and what she read and where she had been on holidays, and what films she went to see, and what kind of houses she liked. He showed her books about houses, and pointed out things that she would never have noticed. He would love to own the old house,

Number 16 Tara Road, he told her. He would do it up and take such care of it. He would put so much love into the house that the house would return his love.

It was wonderful having Rosemary to talk to. At first Ria held back. She was so afraid that if Rosemary smiled just once more, Danny would leave Ria's side and join her, but as the days went by she began to have a little more confidence. And then she told Rosemary everything, where they went, what he was interested in, about his strange lonely family in the country.

Rosemary listened with interest. 'You've got it very bad,' she said eventually.

'Do you think it's foolish, just a crush or something? You know a lot about these things.' Ria wished for an oval face and high cheek-bones so desperately it almost hurt.

'He seems to have it just as bad,' Rosemary pronounced.

'He *says* he loves me, certainly,' Ria said. She was answering Rosemary's question but she didn't want to sound too confident.

'Of course he loves you, that was obvious the very first day,' Rosemary said, twirling her long blonde hair around her finger. 'It's the most romantic thing I've ever seen. I can't tell you how envious we all are. Total love at first sight and the whole office knows. What nobody knows is are you sleeping with him?'

'No,' said Ria firmly. And then, in a much smaller voice, 'Not yet.'

Ria's mother wondered was she ever going to meet him.

'Soon, Mam. Don't rush things, please.'

'I'm not rushing anything, Ria. I'm just pointing out that you have been going out with this fellow every single night, week after week, and common courtesy

would suggest that you might invite him home with you once in a while.'

'I will, Mam. Honestly.'

'I mean, Hilary brought Martin back to meet us, didn't she?'

'Oh she did, Mam.'

'So?'

'So, I will.'

'Are you going home for Christmas?' Ria asked Danny.

'Here is home.' He embraced all of Dublin in a gesture.

'Yes, I know. I meant to your parents' home.'

'I don't know yet.'

'Won't they expect you to go back?'

'They'll leave it to me.'

She wanted to ask about his brothers over in England and what kind of a family *was* it if they didn't all gather around a table for a turkey on Christmas Day. But she knew she must not sound too inquisitive. 'Sure,' she said unconvincingly.

Danny took both her hands in his. 'Listen to me, Ria. It will be different when you and I have a home. It will be a real home, one that people will want to come running back to. That's what I see ahead for us. Don't you?'

'Oh yes, Danny,' she said, with her face glowing. She did understand. The real Danny was a loving person like herself. She was the luckiest woman in the world.

'Ask him for Christmas Day so that we can get a look at him,' her mother begged.

'No, Mam. Thank you, but no.'

'Is he going back down the country to his own people?'

'I'm not sure, he's not sure.'

'He sounds a real fly-by-night to me,' her mother sniffed.

'No, Mam, he's not that.'

'Well, a mystery man ... he won't even put in an appearance to give the time of day to his girlfriend's family.'

'He will, Mam, when the time comes,' Ria said.

Someone always behaved badly at the office party.

This year it was Orla King, a girl who had drunk half a bottle of vodka before the festivities had even started. She tried to sing, 'In the jungle the mighty jungle the lion sleeps tonight'.

'Get her out before the top guys see her,' Danny hissed.

It was easier said than done. Ria tried to urge Orla to come with her to the ladies' room.

'Piss off!' was the response.

Danny was there. 'Hey sweetheart, you and I have never danced,' he said.

She looked at him with interest. 'That's true,' she agreed.

'Why don't we go out and dance a bit where there's more room?'

'Yesh,' said the girl, surprised and pleased.

In seconds Danny had her out on the street. Ria brought her coat. The cold fresh air made her feel sick. They directed her to a quiet corner.

'I want to go home,' she cried afterwards.

'Come on, we'll walk you,' Danny said.

Between them they supported her. From time to time Orla tried a chorus of 'The lion sleeps tonight' without much success.

When they let her in the door of her flat she looked at them in surprise. 'How did I get home?' she asked with interest.

'You're fine, sweetheart,' Danny said soothingly.

'Will you come in with me?' Orla ignored Ria entirely.

'No, honey, see you tomorrow,' he said, and they were gone.

'You saved her job, getting her out of there,' Ria said as they walked back to the office party. 'She's such a clown ... I hope she knows how much she owes you.'

'She's not a clown, she's just young and lonely,' he said.

Ria got a stab of jealousy as sharp as a real pain. Orla was eighteen and pretty; even drunk and with a tear-stained face she looked well. Suppose Danny was attracted to her? No, don't suppose that.

Back at the party they hadn't been missed. 'That was very smart of you, Danny,' Rosemary said with approval. 'And even smarter, you missed the speeches.'

'Anything we should know?'

'Oh, that we had a profitable year and there would be a bonus. Onwards and upwards sort of thing.'

Rosemary looked magnificent, with her blonde hair swept up in a jewelled comb, a white satin blouse, tight black skirt and those long slim legs. For the second time that evening Ria felt a pang of envy. She was dumpy and fuzzy-looking. How could she keep a man as gorgeous as Danny Lynch? She was foolish even to try.

He whispered in her ear, 'Let's circulate, talk to the suits for a bit and then get away.'

She watched him joke easily with the senior figures in the agency, nod respectfully to the managing director, listen courteously to their wives. Danny had

only been there a matter of weeks. Already they liked him and thought he would do well.

'I'm getting the Christmas Eve bus tomorrow.'

'I'm sure it'll be nice, lots of returned emigrants and everything,' she said.

'I'll miss you,' he said.

'Me too.'

'I'll hitch-hike back the day after Christmas ... there's no buses.'

'That's great.'

'I wonder could I come and see you at home and, you know, meet your mother maybe?'

He was asking, she hadn't dragged him or forced him.

'That would be great. Come and have lunch with us on the Tuesday.' All she had to do now was force herself not to be ashamed of her mother and her sister and her dreary brother-in-law.

It wasn't a military inspection on Tuesday. It was only lunch. They were going to have soup and sandwiches.

Ria tried to see their home through Danny's eyes. It was not the kind of place where he would have liked to live, a corner house in a long road of the big estate. He's coming to see me not the house, she told herself. Her mother said she hoped he wouldn't stay after three because there was a great movie starting on the television then. Ria gritted her teeth and said no, indeed, she was sure that he wouldn't.

Hilary said she was sure he was used to fancier meals but he'd have to put up with this like anyone else. With a huge effort Ria said that he would be delighted to put up with it. Martin read the paper and didn't look up at all.

She wondered would Danny bring a bottle of wine or a box of chocolates or a plant. Or maybe nothing at

all. Three times she changed her dress. That was too smart, this was too dowdy. She was struggling into the third outfit when she heard the doorbell ring.

He had arrived.

'Hallo Nora, I'm Danny,' she heard him say. Oh God, he was calling her mother by her first name. Martin always called her Mrs J. Mam would just hate this.

But she heard in her mother's voice the kind of pleased response that Danny always got. 'You're very, very welcome,' she said, in a tone that hadn't been used in that house for as long as Ria could remember.

And the magic worked with Hilary and Martin too. Eager to hear about their wedding, interested in the school where they worked, relaxed and easygoing. Ria watched the whole thing with amazement.

And he had brought no wine, chocolates or flowers. Instead he gave them a game of Trivial Pursuit. Ria's heart sank when she saw it. This was not a family where games were played. But she had reckoned without Danny. Their heads were bent over the questions. Nora knew all the ones about film stars and Martin shone in general knowledge.

'What hope have I against a teacher?' Danny groaned in despair.

He said he was leaving long before they wanted him to go. 'Ria promised to come and see the place I live,' he said apologetically. 'I want us to go while there's still light.'

'He's gorgeous,' Hilary whispered.

'Very nice manners,' her mother hissed.

And then they were free.

'That was a lovely lunch,' Danny said as they waited for the bus to Tara Road. And that was all he would say. There would be no analysis, no defining. Men like Danny were straightforward and not complicated.

And then they were there. And they stood together in the overgrown front garden and looked up at the house in Tara Road.

'Look at the shape of the house,' Danny begged her. 'See how perfect the proportions are. It was built in 1870, a gentleman's residence.' The steps up to the hall door were huge blocks of granite. 'Look how even they were, they were perfectly matched.' The bow windows had all the original woodwork. 'Those shutters are over a hundred years old. The leaded glass over the door has no cracks in it. This house was a jewel,' Danny Lynch said.

There he was living in it, well, more or less camping in a room in it.

'Let's remember today, the first day that we walked together into this house,' he said. His eyes were bright. He was just as sentimental and romantic as she was in so many ways. He was about to open the peeling front door with his key and paused to kiss her. 'This will be our home, Ria, won't it? Tell me you love it too.' He meant it. He wanted to marry her. Danny Lynch, a man who could have any woman. And he meant he was going to own a huge house like this. A boy of twenty-three with no assets. Only rich people could buy houses like this, even one in such poor repair.

Ria didn't want to pour cold water on his dreams, and particularly she didn't want to sound too like her sister Hilary with her new obsession with the cost of everything. But this was fantasy. 'It's not possible to own a place like this surely?' she said.

'When you come in and see it you'll know this is where we are going to live. And we'll find a way to buy it.' He talked her through the hallway with its high ceiling. He pointed out the original mouldings on the ceiling to take her eyes off the bicycles clogging the hallway. He showed her the gentle curve of the stairs,

and made no mention of the rotting floorboards. They passed the big room with its folding doors. They couldn't go into it. Sean O'Brien, the eccentric landlord, was using it as some kind of storeroom for giant-size containers.

They went down the steps to the huge kitchen with its old black range. There was a side door here out to the garden, and numerous storage rooms, pantries and sculleries. The magnitude of it all was too great for Ria to take in. This boy with the laughing eyes really thought that he and she could find the money and skills to do up a house of this size.

If it were on their books back at the office it would have the customary warnings printed all over it. In need of extensive renovation, suitable for structural remodelling, ready for inventive redesign. Only a builder or developer or someone with real money would buy a property like this.

The kitchen had an uneven tiled floor. A small cheap tabletop cooker had been laid on the old black range.

'I'll make us some coffee,' Danny said. 'And in years to come we'll remember the first time we had coffee here together in Tara Road ...' At that moment, as if on some kind of cue, the kitchen was suddenly lit up with one of those rays of watery winter sunshine. It came slanting in at the window through all the briars and brambles. It was like a sign.

'Yes, yes I will remember my first coffee with you in Tara Road,' Ria said.

'We'll be able to tell people it was a lovely sunny day, December the 28th 1982,' said Danny.

As it happened it also turned out to be the date of the first time Ria Johnson ever made love to anybody. And as she lay beside Danny in the small narrow bed she wished she could see into the future. Just for a moment. A quick look to see would they live here

together for years and have children and make it the home of their dreams.

She wondered if Hilary's friend Mrs Connor, the fortune-teller on the halting site, would know. She smiled at the thought of going to consult her. Danny stirred from his sleep on her shoulder, and saw her smiling.

'Are you happy?' he asked.

'Never more so.'

'I love you, Ria. I'll never let you down,' he promised.

She was the luckiest woman in the country. No, she told herself, think generously, who was luckier anywhere? Make that the world.