The Girl from No 22

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Chapter One

'I'm going to the shops, Ada. Is there anything yer'd like me to get for yer?' Harriet Watson looked up to where her next-door neighbour was standing on the top step. 'Save yer going out yerself.'

'No, I'm going to the shops meself, girl, but thanks all the same. I haven't made up me mind what to get for the dinner yet.' Ada Fenwick opened the door wider. 'If yer want to come in and wait a few minutes, Hetty, I'll come with yer. I've only got to wash me hands and comb me hair.'

'Yeah, okay, I'm not in a hurry.' Hetty smiled at what she was about to say. 'I've even got time for a cuppa.'

'Ye're a cheeky sod, Hetty Watson. Ye're certainly not backward in coming forward. And I suppose yer'd like a biscuit to dunk in the tea?'

Hetty squeezed past her neighbour of twenty years. 'It pays to be cheeky sometimes, queen. But I'll repay yer kindness by giving you afternoon tea, eh?' Her mousy-coloured hair was neatly combed, and with her slim figure and the smile that was never far from her pretty face, she looked much younger than her thirty-eight years. 'We could always buy ourselves a cake to bring back, and make a proper job of it.'

'Don't be going all posh on me, Hetty Watson. Next yer'll be

asking me to go to Reece's tea dance with yer.' Ada's ample body shook with laughter. 'Someone told me once, bragging like, that Reece's dance hall had a sprung floor, and it would need it if I started doing me stuff on it. I used to be quite a raver in me time. Jimmy will tell yer, the boys used to queue up to dance with me.'

'To hear you talk, anyone would think yer were like Two Ton Tessie O'Shea. Ye're not fat, Ada, ye're pleasantly plump. Yer can certainly move when ye're in a hurry. While I'm puffing and panting, you sail along as though ye're floating on air.'

Ada's bonny, rosy face broke into a smile. 'No, girl, I only float on air after two bottles of milk stout. Anyway, I'll go and make that pot of tea, girl, before I forget I promised yer a drink. Once I get started on the old days, I don't know when to stop.'

Hetty looked around the room and nodded. It was like a little palace as usual. You could see your face in the sideboard, it was so highly polished. The net curtains on the front and back windows were pure white, and the panes of glass gleaming. 'Have yer got any bright ideas for what to get in for the dinner?' she called. 'It's a worry every day, trying to come up with something for a change.'

Ada came in drying her hands. 'It's a toss-up between a sheet of ribs, which would please Jimmy and Danny, or sausage and mash. We had stew last night so we can't have that again, or I'll be getting complaints. The kids aren't fussy. They're like me, they'll eat anything that's put in front of them.'

'Me too. I'm not a fussy eater,' Hetty said. 'It was easy before Sally and Kitty left school and started work, they weren't fussy then either. But now they expect me to do miracles with the few bob they hand over.' Her elder daughter, Sally, was eighteen, and her younger, Kitty, was seventeen. 'So shall we stick with ribs tonight, sausage tomorrow, and to hell with whether they like it

or not? I'm not going to start cooking different meals for everyone, they'll have to eat what's put in front of them. As me mam used to say, hunger's a good sauce.'

The kettle began to whistle, and Ada made for the kitchen to turn off the gas and pour the boiling water into the brown teapot. 'Yeah, we'll do that, girl,' she shouted back. 'Not that mine would moan no matter what I served up, but I like to please Jimmy and Danny. I think they deserve to come home to something they fancy after putting in a hard day's work. And when the two youngest start work and are bringing a few bob in, then I'll listen to their likes and dislikes.'

Hetty pushed her chair back and walked into the kitchen. 'You bring the cups in, queen, I'll carry the pot.' She turned her head to add, 'And don't forget the promised biscuit.'

When they were sitting facing each other across the table, Ada said, 'I haven't seen much of Eliza the last few days. D'yer know if she's all right?'

Eliza Porter was an elderly woman who lived across the street from them, and most of the near neighbours kept an eye on her. 'She waved to me this morning when she was taking her milk in, so she's all right.' Then Hetty frowned. 'Mind you, come to think of it, I haven't see her going to the shops for a few days. Shall we give a knock on our way out, and ask if she needs any shopping?'

Ada nodded. 'Yeah, we'll do that, just to make sure.' Again she nodded her head, but this time it was towards the plate. 'Yer may as well dunk that last ginger snap, then I can take the empty plate out. I'm not going to ask if yer want any more, 'cos our Danny would blow his top if there were no ginger snaps.' Danny was her eighteen-year-old son, and her pride and joy. 'Honest, he's like a big soft kid sometimes.'

'Oh, don't be trying to kid me, Ada, for I know yer love the bones of him, and yer spoil him rotten. But I have to admit if he was my son I'd spoil him too. He's a lovely lad, and it'll be a lucky girl who gets him.'

'She'll have to be more than lucky to get past me,' Ada said jokingly. 'I'll want to know everything about her and her family, right down to how many blankets they have on their beds.'

'For heaven's sake leave the lad alone and let him enjoy himself.' Hetty tutted. 'He's only young once.'

'And he's making the most of it, girl, believe me! He's out every night at one dance hall or another, having the time of his life. And I don't begrudge him one minute of it. He may as well enjoy himself before he settles down. His mates tell me he's a smashing dancer, and he's got all the girls after him. But Danny never mentions girls to me, so I can't see there being anyone in particular . . . not yet, anyway.'

'He wouldn't tell you if there was, queen, not the way you dote on him. He knows he'd get the third degree if he even mentioned a girl's name.'

'Ay, I'm not that bad! I'm only thirty-seven years old, young enough to remember what it was like to have a mother who wanted to know every time I took a breath. She was so strict with me, I used to have to tell her fibs, just so I could go out.' Ada chuckled. 'I have to confess, though, that I asked for it. I was a cheeky little beggar when I was at school, and a damn sight worse when I left. I thought the world was there for me to enjoy meself, and I led me poor mam and dad a merry dance.' She became serious, and said, 'I made it up to them, though, when I learned a bit of sense. I met Jimmy, we fell in love, and suddenly I realised what I'd put me parents through.'

'Yer were the only child, weren't yer, queen?'

Ada nodded. 'I didn't know, 'cos in those days nobody mentioned having babies, not in front of children, anyway. I must have been about thirteen when I heard one of me aunties talking to me mam, and I heard her saying something about when I was born the doctor had told me mam, and me dad, that she mustn't have any more babies, for her life would be at risk. It all went over me head, really; I didn't understand. And I was too young to ask anyone about it. All I knew was, me mam never had any more babies after me.'

Hetty was leaning forward, interest in her eyes. In all the years they'd been neighbours and friends, Ada had never mentioned this. 'When did yer eventually find out?'

'When I met Jimmy. He asked me about having any brothers or sisters, and I told him what I'd heard me auntie saying. When I'd been out with him a few times, I asked me mam if I could bring him home to meet her and me dad. I remember she seemed really pleased that I'd asked her, and both her and me dad really liked him. And a few weeks later, Jimmy made it seem like a joke when he asked if I'd been such a bad baby that they'd decided not to have any more. It was me dad who told us, with me mam sitting blushing like mad. But when I heard the real story, it made me pull me socks up, I can tell yer. I made up for all those years when I'd never told them how much I loved them. And I thank God that I did, for me mam was only forty-seven when she died. I took time off work to help me dad nurse her. I was courting Jimmy at the time, and he would call every night to see if he could do anything.' Ada swallowed hard to rid herself of the lump forming in her throat. 'She was only bedridden for four weeks, and she wasn't in a lot of pain, thank God. But me dad was out of his mind when she died. He idolised her. He never went back to work,

he just seemed to fade away. And six months after me mam died, he passed away. The doctor said he'd died of a broken heart.' She sniffed up. 'I should never have told yer all that, I've upset meself now. Ye're the first one I've ever told the full story to, and I'm sorry, girl, if I've upset yer. But yer can blame yerself, for you were the one what started it.'

'I know, I was being nosy. I'm sorry I've brought it all back, queen. I should have minded me own business and kept me mouth shut.'

'No, it does me good to talk about me parents, even though it does make me weepy. Never a day goes by I don't think of them, and thank God I made it up to them for the worries I caused when the only person I thought about was meself. And I was also able to give them the love they deserved.' Ada smiled at her neighbour. 'Anybody watching us two over the last fifteen minutes would have thought they were in the Gaumont watching a sad movie and clutching their hankies wringing wet with tears. So let's liven ourselves up and press ahead with our daily chores.'

Hetty looked round. 'From the looks of things, yer've done all yer chores, except seeing to the dinner for the family. My living room doesn't look like this, it's a shambles. I cleaned the grate out, washed the breakfast dishes, and was about to start polishing when me mind went on strike. It told me to stop work and go out and get some fresh air in me lungs. So I threw the duster on the couch, combed me hair, and here I am.'

'That mind of yours will get yer in trouble one of these days. It sounds bolshie to me. If yer were working in a factory, it would make yer into a real troublemaker, and yer'd have the whole factory out on strike. I can see yer now, standing outside

the factory gates, with all the workers behind yer carrying big banners and chanting slogans about low wages.'

Hetty looked at her neighbour with eyes wide. 'My God, Ada, yer don't half let yer imagination run away with yer. I wouldn't say boo to a goose, and you've got me bringing a whole factory out on strike. Plus ruddy banners!'

Ada chuckled. 'There's worse things yer mind can make yer do than bring workers out on strike, girl, but yer'll have to put yer foot down hard if it does.'

Hetty's eyes narrowed. 'I don't know whether to ask what it is, or leave well alone. Me mind says don't bother asking, 'cos there's nothing can be worse than starting a revolution in a factory. But me nose is telling me not to be so miserable, 'cos it would like to know. So go ahead and I'll keep tight hold of the table.'

'Before I say a word, Hetty,' Ada said, laughter building up inside her, 'yer do believe that all is pure to the pure, don't yer? And don't be looking at me with that blank look on yer face, it was an easy question. You are pure at heart, aren't yer?'

'Yeah, I suppose so. As pure as you are, anyway.'

Ada pursed her lips and wagged her head from side to side. 'Ooh, that was the wrong answer, girl. Yer should have thought of something else.'

'Why? You're pure at heart, queen, aren't yer?'

'That's debatable, girl. Sometimes I have very un-pure thoughts in me head. Perhaps we'd better leave things as they are, and get down to the shops.'

'Not on your ruddy life, Ada Fenwick. I'm not moving from here until yer tell me when I should put me foot down when me mind tells me to do something.'

'Okay, yer asked for it.' Ada was really enjoying herself. 'Can yer imagine yerself in bed one night, and your Arthur is getting very amorous? And just at the height of his passion, your mind tells yer to go on strike! Where would that leave your Arthur if yer didn't put yer foot down and tell yer mind to sod off?'

A grin spread slowly across Hetty's pretty face, then it gathered momentum until she was roaring with laughter. 'Oh, you are a case, Ada,' she said, wiping her eyes. 'Yer don't know my Arthur very well, do yer? If yer did, yer'd know he wouldn't let a little thing like my mind, or my foot, put him off. When my husband's feeling passionate, queen, not even a storm would put him off. In fact, we'd both be making more noise than the storm.'

'Oh, he's that good, is he? Mmm, I'll have to have a word in his shell-like ear, and ask him if he'll pass on any tips to my Jimmy.'

'Yer've pulled me leg over a few things, queen, but I'm not falling for that one. What yer seem to forget is, I live next door, and the walls are not very thick.'

Ada held her hands up in mock horror. 'Oh, girl, ye're not saying yer stand with yer ear glued to the wall, are yer?'

There was a look of triumph on Hetty's face as she tried to even the score. 'I don't need to, queen, not with you having such a loud voice.'

Ada leaned forward and patted her hand. 'Good for you, girl. I think that just about makes us quits now. So I'll swill me hands and comb me hair, while you carry the dishes out for me. Then we'll knock and see if Mrs Porter is all right.' A grin crossed her face. 'I know we won't be going in her house, but just in case, I don't think we should tell her what we've been talking about. Not at her age.'

Hetty stacked the cups and saucers on top of the plate, and pushed her chair back before picking them up. 'I won't even tell Arthur what we've been talking about, never mind a woman of eighty-two. She'd think we're a couple of brazen hussies.'

Ada opened a drawer in the sideboard and took out a comb. 'You speak for yerself, girl. I'm proud of being a brazen hussy. Even if the only man in my life is me own husband. We have a very healthy sex life, and it doesn't half make life worth living.'

'I've left the dishes on the draining board, queen,' Hetty said, coming in from the kitchen. 'I'll help yer wash them when we get back from the shops.'

When Ada had closed the front door behind them, and they were about to cross the cobbles to a house opposite, she put a hand on Hetty's arm. 'Ay, girl, yer can't really hear me through the wall, can yer?'

'Of course not, soft girl. I was only acting the goat, same as yerself.'

'Thank God for that,' Ada said. 'Yer had me worried. I mean, if you could hear me and Jimmy, what about Danny and me two kids? If I thought for one minute that they could hear, I'd die of humiliation.'

'Well, if ye're that worried, queen, there is an answer to yer problem.'

'What's that, girl?'

Hetty was lifting the knocker on Eliza Porter's door when she answered. 'Yer could behave yerselves.'

'There's another solution, girl. I could always join a ruddy nunnery!'

The door was opened by eighty-two-year-old Eliza, and she was smiling. 'Somehow I can't see you in a nunnery, Ada. The life wouldn't suit yer.' The old lady's hair was pure white, and

she had it combed back and pleated into a bun at the back of her head. She was a slim woman, with faded blue eyes, who held herself straight and was always neat and tidy. She was the oldest resident in the street, both in years and in the time she'd lived in the same small two-up-two-down house in the narrow street. Gentle and kind, she was very much loved by all the neighbours, old and young alike. She was smiling when she asked, 'You're not on your way there now, are you, Ada? You haven't called to say farewell?'

Ada was really fond of the old lady, and she felt like putting her arms round her and holding her tight. But Eliza was so frail, Ada had to be content with a kiss on the cheek. 'I did try the nunnery last week, Eliza, but they wouldn't have me. I didn't have the right qualifications, yer see. And me and me mate haven't come to wish yer a fond farewell, but to ask if yer want anything from the shops.' She gave the old lady a sly wink. 'I'd have been there and back only for Tilly Mint here. I was soft enough to invite her in, just while I combed me hair, like, so I'd look respectable, and she's done nothing but gab for an hour. Honest, I couldn't get a word in with her.'

'Why, you cheeky article!' Hetty said with fire in her voice. 'Yer've talked the ear off me without stopping to take a breath, and ye're standing there like little Miss Innocent, putting all the blame on me. It's the last time I call to see if I could do yer a favour.'

'Which brings us to why we came and knocked on Eliza's door.' Ada was pleased to see the old lady smiling. 'If yer want anything from the shops, sunshine, me and Hetty could go on a message for yer. We've got to go to the butcher's, the greengrocer's and the bread shop. Anything yer want, all yer have to do is say, and we'll be only too happy to get it for yer.'

'That's very thoughtful of yer to think of me, ladies, and I appreciate it. But I've got all the food in that I need to last me a few days. My son and his wife came yesterday, and they brought tea, sugar, bread, margarine and some biscuits. And Edith, next door, she was kind enough to get me some stewing beef this morning, which will do me today and tomorrow. There's really nothing I need, but I'm beholden to yer for asking.'

'That's fine, girl. As long as yer larder is full, yer can't come to any harm.' Ada smiled. 'How are John and Vera keeping, and yer granddaughter?'

'They're very well, Ada, thanks.' Eliza's son and his wife had lived with her when they first got married, and their first baby was born there, a girl they named Patricia. But they found the living conditions cramped in the small two-up-two-down, and they moved to a six-roomed house in Knotty Ash. They never failed to visit Eliza, though, even though they had to get a tram and then a bus from their home. Their daughter was a mother herself now, and Eliza had two great-grandchildren, Brian and Pauline, whom she doted on.

'Next time they come, sunshine, tell them me and Hetty were asking after them. And Pat and the children. Ay, they must be quite grown up now?'

It was Hetty who told her, 'They're the same age as your two younger ones. Don't yer remember, each time you had a baby, Pat gave birth two months later. We all remarked on the coincidence at the time. Aren't I right, Eliza?'

Eliza nodded. 'Yer've got a much better memory than me, Hetty, for I would never have remembered that far back.'

There was a chuckle in Ada's voice when she said, 'My mate has got a good memory, but I wouldn't want her mind. Yer see, her mind is stronger-willed than she is, and it orders her around.

I wouldn't stand for it meself, but then I haven't got a good memory. So between the two of us, we've got one good mind and one good memory. As long as we stick together we won't come to any harm.'

Hetty decided it was time to move before her mate had the old lady blushing. 'We're keeping Eliza standing, queen. I suggest we go about our business and let her get back to that lovely comfortable rocking chair she's got.'

'Yeah, I often think of that chair,' Ada said, well aware she was rubbing her mate up. 'In fact, I've promised to buy meself one when I've got the money. I've seen the one I'd like, in the window of that furniture shop on Stanley Road.'

Enough was enough, Hetty thought as she pulled on Ada's arm. 'Come on, there's a good girl. And if yer behave yerself, I'll take yer along to that shop one day, and I'll ask the kind man if yer can have a little rock in it.'

Ada entered into the spirit of things. Clapping her hands in glee, and speaking in a childish voice, she said, 'Oh, thank you, Mummy. Can we go there now, Mummy? I'll cry if yer won't take me there today.' Stamping one of her feet in temper, she went on, 'I'll tell Daddy on yer when he comes in from work.'

Eliza watched the smaller woman pulling the larger one away, promising she'd buy her a lollipop if she stopped crying. And the old lady had a smile on her face as she closed the door. She lived alone, but her life wasn't lonely, thanks to the wonderful neighbours she had.

'I'm not having that sheet of ribs, Ronnie Atwill, yer can give it to some other poor sucker.' Ada jerked her head back in disgust. 'That poor bloody sheep died of starvation, there's no ruddy

meat on his bones. I feel so sorry for him, if I'd known when his funeral was, I'd have gone to it and taken a bunch of flowers.'

Hetty opened her mouth to say ribs didn't come from sheep, but she noticed the spark in her neighbour's eyes and kept quiet. The butcher was used to Ada, and he'd give back as good as he got. And the customers in the shop would get a laugh out of the confrontation.

'Do yer really feel sorry for the sheep, Ada?' Ronnie asked. 'If ye're that partial to lamb, why don't yer have some nice lamb chops?'

'I don't want no bleeding lamb chops, I want a sheet of healthy-looking ribs, with bags of meat on them.'

'What have yer got against pigs, Ada?'

'Dirty buggers, pigs are. Have yer never seen the way they wallow in dirt? Ugh, I could be sick at the thought of it.'

Ronnie's young assistant, sixteen-year-old Barry, had two customers in front of him, and when he'd asked them what they wanted, they'd told him to leave them for a while to give them time to make their minds up. They lived in the next street to Ada and Hetty, and many's the laugh Ada had given them. So there was no way they were going to leave that shop until the matter of the ribs was sorted out. And the young lad thought of the saying that if yer couldn't beat them, join them, and he folded his arms and leaned back against the chopping block.

'Yer wouldn't be inconsiderate enough to be sick in me shop, would yer, Ada?' Ronnie asked, laughter in his blue eyes and a rosy glow to his cheeks. 'If yer did that, I'd have to close the shop while I cleaned the floor, then yer'd get no chops, no ribs, just sweet Fanny Adams.'

'I'm fussy where I'm sick, Ronnie Atwill, thank you very

much. And why did yer go all round the world, bringing Fanny Adams into it, instead of just saying I'd get bugger all?'

'Because I don't swear in front of ladies, that's why. And to get back to what your feller's having for his dinner tonight, would yer consider having a sheet of bacon ribs, even though yer think pigs are horrible?'

Ada shook her head. 'Not on yer life, I want a sheet of lamb's ribs and I'll stand here until I get one.' She winked at one of the women whose back entry door faced hers. 'It's coming to something when yer can't have what yer want, isn't it, Dora?'

'Ye're right there, queen, no doubt about it,' said Dora. 'I was only saying to Helen as we walked here that the world isn't what it was years ago. Didn't I, Helen?'

Helen wasn't going to argue when her neighbour was twice the size of her, and known to have a quick temper. 'Yes, yer did, Dora, they were yer very words.'

Ronnie could see two more customers coming in, and he decided they'd had enough fun for one day. After all, business is business. 'I'll tell yer what I'll do, Ada, seeing as it's you, and you and Hetty are two of me favourite customers.' He felt Dora's eyes on him, and quickly added, 'Along with Dora and Helen, of course. So I'll take this sheet of ribs out and find one that will take yer fancy.' He knew he had customers waiting, but a joke was a joke, and if he didn't say it now, he'd forget it. 'By the way, Ada, do yer prefer a sheep what came from Wales, or Scotland?'

Ada pretended to ponder. It was a serious business this. In the end she turned to Hetty. 'What do you think, girl? Wales or Scotland?'

'I'm quite happy with the sheet of ribs Ronnie's got in his hand,' Hetty said. 'I don't care where it came from.'

'Okay, that settles it,' Ada said. 'Find another sheet of lamb's ribs, exactly the same as the one yer've got in yer hand, and they'll do for me and me mate.'

While young Barry was serving the other customers, Ronnie came out of the stockroom with two sheets of bacon ribs that were thick with lean meat. 'How do they look to yer, ladies?'

'Oh, brilliant, Ronnie,' Hetty said. 'My feller will be in his element.'

Ada nodded in agreement. 'See what yer can do if yer try, Ronnie? Now those ribs come from a sheep what got well fed and had lovely green fields to play in.'

Ronnie wrapped them up separately, then handed them over. 'That will be three bob each, ladies, and they'll taste a treat.'

As Ada handed her money over, Ronnie said, 'Seeing as yer like lamb so much, Ada, I'm surprised yer've never asked me for a sheep's head. They make lovely soup.'

'Go 'way, yer dirty bugger.' Ada pretended to retch as she leaned on the counter. 'I've gone off sheep now. I've a good mind to ask yer to take these ribs back, and I'll have a sheet of bacon ones.' She shuddered. 'Just imagine lifting the lid off the pan and seeing two eyes staring up at yer.'

Dora nodded. 'It doesn't bear thinking about.'

Helen forgot her neighbour's temper for a minute, and, with real feeling, said, 'My mother used to say sheep's head soup was delicious, and good for yer.'

'She would,' Dora snorted. 'She was soft in the head and you take after her.'

Timid as she was, Helen wasn't going to stand for that. 'My mother was a very clever woman, and a real lady. That's more than can be said for yours.'

Hetty sensed trouble brewing and tugged hard on Ada's arm. 'Come on, queen, we've still got a lot of shopping to do before the shops close for dinner.'

Ronnie chortled when he saw Ada being pushed through the door. 'See yer tomorrow, ladies. Ta-ra!'

'Yeah, see yer tomorrow, Ronnie,' Ada called from the pavement. 'Ta-ra for now, lad.'

Hetty kept her eyes straight ahead, but she could feel the daggers coming her way. And to nip any criticism in the bud, she said, 'When we get to the greengrocer's, yer won't ask Stan if he's sure the cabbage comes from Ormskirk, will yer? After all, I'd like to get home in time to put the ribs in steep.'

Ada managed to look surprised, even though she was chuckling inside. 'I didn't know they grew cabbages in Ormskirk! Well, I never! It just goes to show yer learn something new every day.'

Round the table that night, when the Fenwick family were tucking into their dinner, Ada told them about pulling the butcher's leg about the sheep's ribs. And she went on to say how she'd pretended to feel sick when he asked why she didn't buy a sheep's head to make soup. When she came to the part about lifting the pan lid to see two eyes staring at her, her husband and son, Danny, thought it was funny. But the two youngest, Monica and Paul, looked absolutely horrified.

'Oh, you, Mam!' twelve-year-old Monica said, pulling a face. 'That's terrible, that is. It's enough to make yer feel sick.'

'They don't really make soup with a sheep's head, do they, Mam?' Ten-year-old Paul had gone right off his dinner. 'Yer wouldn't ever do it, would yer?'

'Yer mam is pulling yer leg,' his father told them. 'Yer know

how she likes her little jokes. She'd faint if she saw a sheep's head, never mind making soup with it.'

'The only sheep's eyes yer'll see round here,' Danny said, laughing, 'is when me mam wants to cadge some money off our dad to go a matinee to see her heart-throb, Cary Grant. And if the sheep's eyes don't work, she gives him cow's eyes.'

That cheered the children up, and the atmosphere round the table became light and cheerful again. 'I know it's a daft question to ask, Danny, but are yer going out tonight?'

Dimples appeared in the handsome face. 'As yer said yerself, Mam, it was a daft question to ask. Of course I'm going out.'

'Jazzing again, I suppose?'

'Right again, Mam! Ye're doing well tonight.'

'When are we going to meet this girlfriend of yours?' Jimmy asked. 'Yer not ashamed of us, are yer? Or has the girl got two heads?'

Danny stared at him blankly. 'Girlfriend? That's the first I've heard of it, Dad. Who's been spreading that story?'

'Nobody has been spreading any story, son,' Ada told him. 'It's just that me and yer dad don't think yer go to dances every night to dance on yer own. Which means yer dance with a member of the opposite sex.'

'Mam, ye're breaking the record tonight, yer've been right every time.' Danny was like his father in looks, with fair hair, hazel eyes, and a very happy disposition. And he only had two more inches to grow before he reached his father's six foot. But his humour came from his mother. 'I'll come clean and tell yer the truth. There is a girl, and she's a smashing dancer. But unfortunately she's pigeon-toed, bow-legged, and wears big thick glasses 'cos she's very short-sighted.'

Monica and Paul sat open-mouthed. Their Danny going out

with a girl who was bow-legged and pigeon-toed? Why would he do that when half a dozen nice-looking girls in the street were after him?

'Ah, God help the girl,' Ada said, wanting to laugh at the expression on the kids' faces. 'My mam always said yer should never mock anyone 'cos yer never knew what the future held for yerself. Apart from being bow-legged, pigeon-toed and short-sighted, has the girl got anything good going for her? There must be something, or why would yer bother dancing with her? I mean, if her toes are turned in, and her legs bent out, it must be hard going trying to dance in a straight line.'

'When yer love someone, Mam, yer don't mind putting up with little inconveniences. You did, didn't yer? Yer told me yer didn't pretend not to know me dad when his glass eye fell out on the dance floor. Now, that's what I call true love.'

Paul's eyes were like saucers. 'Me dad hasn't got a glass eye!'

'Not now he hasn't, sunshine,' Ada said. 'We saved up and bought him a real one.'

'They're pulling yer leg, son,' Jimmy told him. 'What happened was, I had a fight with this bloke who was as big as a mountain, and he gave me a belting black eye. Me face was so swollen, yer couldn't see me right eye at all, and everyone thought I'd lost it.'

'Can we leave your eye where it is for the moment, and get back to the business of our son and his girlfriend? I'd like to know her name, where she lives, what does she look like, and what did she have for her dinner last night?'

Danny threw his head back and roared with laughter. 'Mam, there is a girl in me life, and last night she had stew for her dinner. You should know, you made it. There's only one girl in my life at present, and that's you. And I'm quite happy with things as they are.'

Ada was delighted, for she doted on her first born. But her last born wasn't a bit happy. 'No wonder yer get yer own way all the time, crawling to me mam. I think I'll have to try it and see where it gets me.'

Ada stood up and began to collect the plates. 'Yer don't have to butter me up, Paul, 'cos I have the same amount of love for all me kids. Danny gets a bit more, I admit, but then he's a working man, and bringing a wage in. And he gives you and Monica tuppence a week pocket money, so he's not a bad brother, is he?'

'No.' Monica and Paul shook their heads. Their brother was the nicest-looking lad in the street, and they were proud of him. But they weren't going to tell him that.