

THE QUARRY

Elizabeth Mead

The Belle of Belfast City

‘LUCINDA ELIZABETH MARGARET O’CONNOR!’

Her mother burst into the room, Baby Mary in one hand and a bowl of ‘Special K’ in the other.

‘What, in God’s name, do you think you are doing? Mass starts in five minutes and you’re not dressed.’

In one swift motion, the cereal bowl was on the desk and the covers were upturned. Lucy was dragged from her bed and shoved into the corner, where her mother thrust her Sunday Best into her chest.

‘You have two minutes to get in that dress, brush your hair and get out the front or I will give you a bowl-cut. You hear me?’

Lucy definitely heard her. Samuel, the third youngest and in his first year of school, had been given a bowl haircut last month for refusing to eat dinner. He was tormented at school for weeks and it still hadn’t grown back. Imagine how much worse it would be for a girl. No way. No sleep-in was worth losing hair over.

Lucy put the dress on and headed downstairs. She hated dresses. Particularly this one. It was powder blue and lacy, falling to an awkward length just below her knees. When she was younger, her mother had made her wear white, kitten-heeled Communion shoes with the dress, and a big, blue bow tied around her head. But, hitting teenager-hood meant Lucy could ditch the childish shoes and wear flats instead.

The house was chaotic and cluttered as usual. Lucy had to dodge several strange flying objects, most probably clothes and toys, clean up a large chocolate milk spill and judge some sort of gymnastics competition going on in the front room. By the time she made it to the sad, brownish-looking front lawn, however, the whole family seemed to be there, looking decent and ready to go.

The Church of St Vincent De Paul stood at the end of their street. The families from neighbouring households were trudging down the footpaths on either side of the road – mothers tugging on their son’s ties and tidying their daughter’s ribbons; fathers shuffling alongside their wives, hands in pockets. Mr O’Connor, Lucy’s father, walked in front of their pack. He had caught up to Mr Nelson, who lived next door, whilst Deidre, his wife, was gossiping at the back of the pack with Lucy’s mother. When they reached the church moments later, the family had split up entirely and Mrs O’Connor was left to scurry about, rounding up the troops before they headed inside and sat in a pew close to the altar. A slither of sunlight was flickering through one of the stained-glass windows, sending coloured light dancing across the parishioners. The arched ceilings made the church echo with the loud, fast-talking voices of the Irish Catholics. People filled the pews and aisles, chatting and laughing while waiting for Mass to start. As the organ sounded, the congregation stood in staggered succession and began to sing the opening hymn. Lucy’s mother pinched her on the

arm, mouthing ‘Sing’, before joining in the chorus so loud that the parishioners in front turned around in fright.

Lucy rolled her eyes and whispered along to the hymn. She scanned the crowd. She knew every face. Everyone lived nearby. Many families had kids that went to her school. The McKay twins, five pews in front, were in her year. Sixteen, and had already slept with half the boys in their grade. In dresses of a decent length and no eye make-up, they almost looked innocent – before one noticed the matching skull tattoos on their ankles. Two pews ahead of them, on the other side, Mr Nelson, Deidre and their two kids sat quietly. They went to the integrated school a couple of suburbs away. Most of the people who lived in this area were Catholics through-and-through. They only knew Catholics, only spoke to Catholics and rarely ventured across to the Protestant suburbs of Belfast. That made the Nelsons outcasts. Their daughter, Claire, had a Protestant boyfriend, Jack, who lost all his friends by going out with her. He had to move to the integrated school to escape them. While much of the conflict between the two sectors had subsided, tension still clung to the suburbs that surrounded the wall which separated the Catholic and Protestant sides of the city.

Lucy was no longer listening to the Priest, who had finished reading the gospel and had just begun what would undoubtedly be a lengthy homily. She thought about closing her eyes when there was a sudden communal gasp. The window above the altar shattered and a large rock landed on the steps leading down to the central aisle. The priest looked up at the gaping hole in the stained glass above him. Shards of orange and purple were scattered over the carpet and several of the altar boys had gone dashing for cover under the pews reserved for the choir. Horrified chatter began as a few parishioners ran up to the altar to check if the Priest was alright.

‘By God, that could’ve *killed* someone,’ Mrs O’Connor muttered, leaning over to join the shocked murmurs of the women in the pew in front.

From her seat next to the aisle, Lucy could see the rock. It was large and dark grey, with a flat side that had white writing scrawled across it. Lucy squinted to read the words written in white-out.

‘Claire and Jack = SCUM.’

Lucy put out her arms to lean on the pew in front. She was trembling. She knew instantly who was behind this little stunt.

Lucy looked over at Claire Nelson, who held her head in her hands while her mother rubbed her back. The priest returned to the gospel stand and continued with his speech, as if nothing had happened, while a group of elderly women cleared away the glass shards with dust-pans and brooms.

After Mass, the congregation gathered outside for morning tea. There were general mutterings of anger and shock. The Nelsons were nowhere to be seen, fleeing the Church after Communion. The O'Connor kids, like all the other children, rushed to the food spread, devouring several cupcakes in seconds.

Lucy sat on the fence and looked across the street. Darcy had been lingering behind a tree for a few minutes now, looking over at her at steady intervals. Quickly glancing around to make sure no one was watching, Lucy crossed the road and turned into a connecting street, sitting behind a wall with a large mural on it. He came and sat down beside her, putting his hand on her knee and letting it slide up her skirt to rest on her inner thigh.

‘I just wanted to check that you’re okay...not hurt or anything,’ he said.

Lucy was quiet. She didn’t want to look at him. Instead, she fiddled with her hands, picking at the red polish that was chipping off her fingernails.

‘Rick just got home. He, uh, was talking to Dad about the rock and I overheard. I came straight here.’

Lucy looked up at Darcy. His dark hair flopped to one side and the buttons on his shirt had been done up wrong. He did *look* like he had rushed to get there. His eyes narrowed with concern.

‘Your brother is a good-for-nothing twat. You know that, right?’ she sighed. You should have seen Claire. She was – ‘

‘Upset, angry, of course – ‘

‘Mortified. She was *mortified*. The rock nearly hit the priest, for God’s sake.’

Darcy went quiet.

‘I’m sorry,’ he murmured sheepishly. ‘Rick and his mates are idiots.’

He leaned in to kiss her but she moved her head to the side and his lips barely brushed her cheek.

‘I just wonder what he’d do if he found out about *us*.’

They were both quiet then. Rick was a thug. He and Jack had been best friends before Jack and Claire started going out. Mr McKinnon, Darcy and Rick’s father, was a thick-blooded Protestant who had been on the frontline of the Belfast riots in the seventies. Rick somehow felt the need to keep his father’s anti-Catholic legacy alive. It was a wonder how Darcy didn’t end up like his trouble-causing bastard of a brother.

Lucy moved to rest her head on Darcy’s shoulder, lingering in the shadow of the old riot mural for a minute longer.

‘Where the fuck ‘ave you been then, son?’

Mr McKinnon was leaning against the kitchen sink while Rick sat at the breakfast bench, scoffing down a bacon and egg roll.

‘Went and saw a mate. School stuff.’

Darcy sat down opposite Rick. His large, tattooed arms sat heavily on the bench. He stared over at Darcy with beady eyes through thick, greasy hair. He was smirking behind the roll.

‘A mate, eh?’

Mr McKinnon moved over to the bench and leaned in to face Darcy, his yellow-tinged teeth gritted an inch away from Darcy’s chin.

‘Well, Rick saw you at the fucking Catholic Church with your arms around a fucking Catholic girl!’

Rick laughed out loud. A nasty laugh. Darcy stared at his father who was now shaking, the vein down the side of his neck pulsing beneath thick skin. Mr McKinnon pinned Darcy against the back of the chair and pushed his face so close that their noses were touching. With a clenched fist, he punched Darcy square in the stomach, winding him so badly that he collapsed and passed out on the floor.

‘They’ve gone! They’ve just left. I, I found the note on Claire’s bed. She didn’t even say where they were going —’

Deidre Nelson was sobbing on a stool in the kitchen. Through the crack in the door, Lucy could just make out her mother, standing behind, patting Deidre's shoulder.

'They'll be tryin' to get out of Northern Ireland, I s'pose. Get away from all this nonsense,' Mrs O'Connor sighed. 'Don't worry – Jack's a smart boy, he'll take care of her.'

Jack had been mugged on his way to work at the local milk bar. Lucy hadn't heard from Darcy since this morning – it was now close to dinner. A pot of spaghetti was gurgling on the stove in the kitchen.

'Lucy?'

Mrs O'Connor had opened the kitchen door and was looking down at her, sitting in the doorway with her mobile held to her chest.

'Be a darl and go get us a carton of milk and some chocolate. Deidre here needs a cuppa tea, I think.'

She thrust several pounds into Lucy's hand and gave her a gentle push towards the front door.

'Hurry back now,' she said, turning back into the kitchen.

Lucy ran down the street towards the wall. She pressed her phone to her ear, urging Darcy to pick up.

'Where are you?' she muttered to herself.

The wall was partly lit up by the street lights across the road. Thousands of messages of peace from all over the world were scrawled across it in permanent marker – tourists sending messages of confusion and sadness that such a divide still exists in the new millennium.

'Life is short. Forgive quickly, kiss slowly, love truly – James Dean.'

If only it were that easy, Lucy thought. Although the wall was called the 'Wall of peace', the fact that it still remained as a barrier between them meant it was not so. Lucy rushed along the wall towards the gate, stumbling into the caretaker as she turned the corner.

'The gate's closed. Sorry,' he mumbled.

Lucy looked at the large, black gates, padlocked shut.

‘Hoist me over then, please?’ Lucy pleaded, holding out the several pounds her mother had given her. The caretaker took them without saying a word.

The Church stood, dark and tall, beneath the cloudy night sky. Rick and his cronies held drums of petrol in each hand. Darcy was out in front holding the torch as Rick kicked the back of his knees every few paces, forcing him onwards.

‘Right then. Boys? Get to it,’ Rick called.

He opened one of the drums and began pouring it on the wooden entrance to the Church.

‘Oi!’

Darcy had dropped the torch and was doubled over, still in pain from his father’s punch. As Rick and the boys huddled outside the front door, Darcy stumbled over to the fence and leant wearily against the bars.

‘Darcy?’

Lucy’s face was badly bruised on one side. Her lip had split and her dress was ripped at the hem. Darcy reached out his hand and pulled her towards him, embracing her for a moment before the pain of standing upright got too much. Lucy held him by the waist and lowered him to sit at the bottom of the fence.

‘The caretaker of the gates must be one of Rick’s mates,’ she said dryly, gesturing to the bruises on her face.

Darcy didn’t seem to hear her – or if he did, he didn’t show it. His face was creased around the edges. He was holding his stomach like a child holds a puppy, squeezing it hard.

‘What the hell has happened to you?’ she asked, leaning so close that Darcy could smell the perfume on her neck.

Darcy winced, nodding towards the huddled pack standing about ten metres away at the Church entrance.

Lucy saw Rick and his friends. She saw the petrol cans in their hands. She saw the Church, the grand oak doors, the lighter sticking out of Rick's back pocket. In a second, it all made sense. As if only just realising Darcy had disappeared, Rick turned to see him and Lucy, hands entwined.

'What the fuck are *you* doing here?' he screamed.

Rick didn't move. He stood, still, while his friends gathered around him. Lucy was silent. She had no doubt that Rick would kill her if she gave him the chance. He reached into his back pocket and took out the lighter. Flicking it on, off, on, off, he walked over and stood in front of the wooden door he had so artfully glossed in petrol. He turned and smirked, tossing the lighter over his shoulder.

Lucy watched as the tip of the flame touched the puddle of petrol and created a ring of fire around the front of the Church. The fire began to gain height, climbing up the door and engulfing it before it exploded in a waterfall of orange and ash. The flames began to lick the walls, moving upwards and into the Church where the door had once been.

Rick, smiling smugly, had not turned around. He stood, in the same spot from which he'd thrown the lighter, looking at Darcy and Lucy. The heat of the fire behind sent beads of sweat dripping from his hairline into his eyes. It almost looked like he was crying. His friends were laughing, chucking the drums of petrol to each other and pointing at how high the flames had climbed. One of them dropped the can, spilling petrol over Rick's boots. Rick shoved his friend angrily. As he began to walk towards Darcy, a falling ember dropped onto his boot, causing his feet and jeans to catch fire. He screamed in pain as the flames crept upwards, surging up his pant-legs and over his back. His friends danced around him like children. A few of them fled.

Lucy watched Darcy leap towards Rick. For a moment, they were brothers again.

'GET WATER,' he screamed.

Darcy tore the jacket from his shoulders and threw it on Rick in an attempt to put out the flames crawling up his body. Lucy had moved to be close to Darcy. She could see the sticky flesh on Rick's legs as his jeans disintegrated. It smelt like a chicken roast at Sunday dinner.

One of Rick's mates returned with watering can from the Church garden and began to drench Rick from top to toe. Rick continued to roll around in the soot and ash that had once been his clothes.

Lucy wrapped her arms around Darcy and led him away. He was crying – thick, wet gulps. Mucus from his nose dripped down her dress. She could feel her own tears stinging the corners of her eyes. Lucy turned to look over her shoulder at the Church that had disappeared behind a blood-orange blaze and smoke. Rick lay on the lawn alone.

Darcy and Lucy shuffled away, eventually collapsing behind the shadows of the peace wall. There, they lay for a moment beneath the Northern sky and the peaceful messages of millions.