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As a rule Mrs Cissie Cassidy had no truck with the Irish, particularly those reprobates who occupied the crumbling tenements north of the Riverside Road. In fact, the widow Cassidy had a 'down' on most immigrant sons of Erin and the reason for her prejudice was not hard to find.

If you ventured the length of Salamanca Street past Paddy Maizie's pub to the drab little burial ground behind St.Kentigern's you would discover there a grave marked not by marble or granite but by a slab of indeterminate mineral that may, or may not, have been slate; a stone smeared with pigeon droppings and so stained by a decade of fogs, frosts and sour Scottish rains that it resembled the tomb of an ancient warrior and not the the last resting place of Eamon O'Connor Cassidy, who had died in the spring of 1864.

They said it was his heart, that wide-open Irish heart, big as all Killarney, that had burst with the strain of the digging, but it was drink not digging that had done for him and even now, ten years on, Cissie was still mad at herself for having run off with a useless Irish charmer, still fizzing at Eamon for boozing himself into an early grave and leaving her childless, penniless and teetering on the verge of fifty.

One windy evening in early March Mrs Cassidy came scuttling up Salamanca Street from Kennedy's bakery where she worked in the kitchen behind the shop. She had learned to cook at her mother's knee and, one way or another, had been at it ever since.

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The high point of her career had been half a year of service in the Royal Restaurant, but the stifling heat in the Royal's kitchens had undermined her health and one night, while helping to prepare a wedding dinner, she had fainted dead away and had shed what had existed of little Cassidy number four, just as she had shed his predecessors, after which she had been fit for nothing but staying at home and looking after Eamon.

Soon after Eamon's death, however, Mr Belfer had found her a job in the bakery and now, in Kennedy's airy kitchens, she bored her workmates stiff with tales of high life in Glasgow's posh West End. But of the little Cassidy's or, rather, their absence, she said nothing, for her failure to carry a child to full term was nobody's business but her own.

March then, in the evening: the wind plastered her skirts to her calves and tugged mischievously at her bonnet, while little Mrs Cassidy clung to the large cardboard box within which nestled three meat pies.

When she rounded the corner into Salamanca Street a particularly boisterous gust of wind whipped off her bonnet and before she could recover her balance an unfamiliar voice said, 'Allow me, missus,' and a hand as big as a soup tureen placed the bonnet back on her head.

The stranger was young, a great giant of a man with shoulders as broad as a roof beam, an open face, all chin and brow, and smiling brown eyes. He wore a short-jacket suit and a chequered cap, but no muffler. His bare throat rose from his collar as thick and smooth as a marble column.

'Where did you spring from?' Cissie asked.

'From the deck o the Rose o' Tralee,' the young man told her. 'Sprung as fast as me legs would carry me, for I was mighty glad to set foot on dry land after a perilous voyage on the bosom o' the deep.'

'You're Irish,' Cissie said.

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'That I am. Nolan McKenna at your service.'

'An Irishman an' - I'll stake my life on it - a digger.'

'A digger for sure,' Nolan McKenna said, 'or about to be so.'

It was on the tip of Cissie's tongue to inform him that she had once been married to a digger but, in spite of the stranger's size and easy air, he was Irish and she'd had enough of handsome Irishmen to last a lifetime.

He leaned towards her, and said, 'What is that lovely smell? By Gar, what have you got in that box?'

'My supper.'

'We could be doin' with a bite o' supper,' Nolan McKenna admitted. 'Fact is, we ha'n't had much since yesterday, a crust o' bread bein' the best o' it. Maybe you could be directin' us to where we could find a cheap bit o' tuck, since us poor travellers ain't got our bearin's yet.'

'Us poor travellers?' Cissie said. 'Have you brought the family with you?'

'Aye, all the family God has spared me.' He jerked his thumb at two girls who huddled, shivering, against the weeping brick wall. 'Me sisters - for what they're worth. Come on, girls, say "How do" to the pretty lady.'

The streets of Glasgow were littered with dirty little waifs, some as sharp as carpet tacks, others as dumb as oxen. The McKenna sisters appeared clean, however, and, Mrs Cassidy noted, had shoes with buckles, and trimmed shawls.

The smaller one even had a big straw bonnet decorated with silk ribbons and paper flowers that she held by her side as if she were embarrassed to be attached to such a frippery.

She advanced towards Cissie with quick, mincing steps and so resembled an elf or a fairy that when the wind gusted again Cissie was tempted to drop the box and grab the child just to stop her being swirled off into the sky.

'This is Evie,' Nolan McKenna said. 'The other 'un is Clare.'

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'Well, well,' said Mrs Cassidy, quite nonplussed. 'Well, well, well.'

They weren't children after all, Cissie realised, but might even be as old as seventeen or eighteen. Crouching over her bundle, the one called Clare nodded a sulky sort of greeting.

'This kind lady will be tellin' us where we can find our supper.' Nolan McKenna paused. 'Before we start searchin' for Eamon again.'

Cissie Cassidy's heart leapt into her throat and a sharp little pain trickled down the length of her breastbone.

'Eamon?' she said.

'Our uncle Eamon,' Evie informed her.

'Lots of Irishmen called Eamon in these parts.' Cissie just managed to keep the squeak out of her voice. 'Did - does this particular Eamon have another name?'

'Cassidy,' Evie said. 'Eamon O'Connor Cassidy. He's me mam's long-lost brother who shipped to Glasgow many years ago an' has not been heard of since. Mam's last words, whispered with her dyin' breath were, "Find Uncle Eamon; he'll see you right.'

'Are you from Killarney?'

'Aye, Killarney.' Evie's blue eyes filled with tears. 'I'm wishin' I was back there now with Mam still alive, the stew pot bubblin' on the fire like it was before the blight took off the tattie crop an' we lost the tithes.'

Sniffing and wiping her nose on her cuff, she fought back tears. Her sister shuffled up behind her and patted her on the shoulder, saying, in a curiously flat voice, 'There, there, Evie, when we find Uncle Eamon, he'll look after us till we get back on our feet.'

The pies were growing colder by the minute. Mr Belfer would boil a pan of water to heat his up and McMacpherson would give his a minute or two on a tin plate on the hob. Why was she fretting about pies when Eamon's nephew and

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nieces were standing before her? Killarney, though? She had never heard of a sister in Killarney. Eamon had steadfastly refused to discuss what lay behind him in Ireland, except to brag about an older brother who'd been hanged in Dublin for killing a man in a dispute over wages.

'If you haven't heard from your uncle in umpteens years,' she said, 'why have you come to Glasgow to look for him?'

'Had a letter,' said Evie promptly.

'Who had – you?'

'Me mam.'

'Where is it then?' said Cissie Cassidy. 'Let me see this letter.'

'Can't.'

'Why not?'

'It went.'

'Went? Went where?' said Cissie.

'Up in smoke,' said Evie.

'An' what did this letter that went up in smoke say?'

'Said he was wed to a lovely woman an' had a house in the Riverside.'

'When was the letter sent?'

'Years ago, long years ago,' said Evie.

'Ten years or more,' said Clare.

'Sure an' I was no more than six years old at the time,' Evie went on, 'but I remember the gladness it brought me mam.'

'The wife,' Cissie said. 'Did he mention the wife's name?'

'No name,' said Nolan.

'Or if there was, we've forgot.' Clare glanced at her brother. 'I told you, Nolly, it's a needle in a haystack. He could be gone, our man, shifted on somewhee else for all we know.'

'Aye, a miracle it will be,' said Evie, 'if we ever find him.'

'Supper an' a dry bed for the night will be miracle enough for me.' Nolan McKenna sighed. 'Well, lady, you've listened patient to our story an' it's none o' your blame we're lost,

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so we'll be goin' on our way. Come on, girls, hoist up your bundles. There's nothin' to keep us here.'

And against her better judgement Cissie Cassidy said, 'Wait.'

They followed the woman across Salamanca Street to a tall smoke-blackened tenement separated from its neighbours by a broad lane.

Father Fingle, at the Catholic Mission, had told them that most of the old properties in the Riverside were owned by the Blackstock brothers and that rooms were rented by the week or the month, complete with bedding and a few sticks of furniture.

'Wait here,' Mrs Cassidy said.

'Can we not be comin' in?' said Evie.

'Not till I have spoke with Mr Belfer,' the woman said.

'Mr Belfer? Who's Mr Belfer?'

'He collects our rents an' takes care o' us in a general way.'

'His word is law, is it?' said Evie.

'It is,' Mrs Cassidy said.

'Is there a privy inside?' Clare said.

'There's a closet on the bottom landing,' said Mrs Cassidy, adding, proudly, 'kept so clean in our buildin' you could eat your dinner off the floor.'

'Well, I've no dinner to eat,' said Evie, 'but I do need to pee.'

'You'll just have to hold it in,' the widow said. 'Mr Belfer doesn't like strangers usin' our facilities.'

Evie might have put up more of an argument if Nolan hadn't prodded her with his elbow, warning her to keep a clamp on her tongue. She was just weary enough to obey. Cork to Greenock at one shilling a head and all the bread you could eat, so the handbill promised. The bread had turned out to be mouldy and she had heaved most of it over the side before the voyage was half over. She felt now as if she had been travelling forever, forever hungry.

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'Go an' speak to your man,' Evie said. 'We'll wait here.'

'I'll be quick as I can,' the woman promised and, rearing up, pinched Evie's cheek reassuringly, then vanished into the close.

'Do you think she swallowed it?' Nolan asked.

'O' course she did,' said Evie.

'Hook, line an' sinker,' said Clare.