

Prologue

'Have you reached a decision?'

The coroner's voice made my heart skip a beat, and silence fell as the foreman of the jury stood up.

'Twelve agree that it is Cynthia Owen's baby.'

I broke down completely. I felt eleven-years-old again. My baby had just died.

'Twelve agree that it was 4 April 1973.'

The words danced in my head. I had finally proved I wasn't mad, and I wasn't a liar.

I was forty-five-years old, and I had a daughter who would be almost thirty-four-years old, had she lived.

'Twelve agree the place of death was 4 White's Villas, Dalkey.

'Cause of death: haemorrhage due to stab wounds. Twelve agree. An open verdict.'

The room erupted. People started clapping and shouting, 'Yes!', at the top of their voices. I felt like a volt of electricity was coursing through my body.

Cynthia Owen

I took the stand, barely able to support myself on my shaking legs, and the room fell silent again.

'Mrs Owen, I believe you have given your baby a first name, is that correct?'

'Yes,' I whispered.

'And what is that name?'

'Noleen.'

Her name hung in the thick silence for a moment, then I listened, awestruck, as the coroner said he was officially identifying the baby found in Lee's Lane on Wednesday 4 April 1973 as my daughter, Noleen Murphy, stabbed to death in my family home.

I looked at the jury and mouthed, 'Thank you,' then dropped into my husband Simon's lap and broke down into loud, unruly sobs.

When I finally staggered outside I looked up at the clear sky and smiled broadly. I had waited so long for this day to come, and I could scarcely believe it was real.

'Rest in peace, my darling Noleen,' I whispered up to heaven. 'Mummy loves you.'

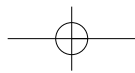
I would like to be able to tell you that my battle to be formally identified as Noleen's mother and to have the details of her short life publicly recorded was the worst struggle I faced after the trauma of losing her, but sadly that is not the case.

I faced many more nightmares, each one testing me to the

Living With Evil

limit and threatening to push me over the edge. If it hadn't been for my wonderful husband, Simon, I am certain I would not have survived.

Thanks to his unconditional love and support, I am alive and well, and able to tell the rest of my story.



Chapter 1

4 White's Villas

I'm eight-years-old and in bed waiting for Daddy to come in from the pub, and I'm trembling.

Mammy forced me upstairs to bed hours ago, but I can't sleep. I'm in my vest and knickers, huddled under dirty coats and smelly blankets, and I'm terrified about what will happen tonight.

Daddy always comes in when it's very dark, but that is the only thing I can be sure of. When I hear his leather shoes crunching up the short path to our council house, my heart starts to thump in my chest.

Sometimes I say a prayer, pressing my hands together tight like the nuns at school taught me: 'Please, God, please can it be a good night tonight? I've been a very good girl, so I have.'

Daddy usually goes straight to the pub after work and drinks and smokes all night with his friends. The pubs are near our

Cynthia Owen

house in Dalkey, and sometimes he can take in three or four in one evening, depending on his mood.

Mammy always stays in our house at 4 White's Villas. Every night she rocks in her chair by the coal fire, drinking glass after glass of sherry and lighting one cigarette from another.

When Daddy gets home, sometimes they shout and scream if they have both had lots to drink, but sometimes he doesn't even speak to her.

I'm listening hard, but I'm so nervous I start breathing really quickly, and I'm gasping noisily for breath. It feels like I'm being strangled, but it's just the fear choking me and making it hard for the air to fill my lungs.

It sounds quiet downstairs, and that is normally a good sign. Daddy is ignoring Mammy, and she's not speaking either. That's very good. I hate it when I hear their voices get louder, because then the fights and arguments start.

It scares me, because when Daddy is cross it usually means bad things for me. Despite the good signs, I still can't relax. I listen out for sounds that tell me he is on his way upstairs. I never know what he's going to do, and every time I hear the bedroom door open I start to shake.

Daddy's in the room now. I hear him use the toilet bucket at the end of the bed. The smell is terrible. It makes my eyes sting even when I'm hiding under the covers, and my stomach starts to churn so much it hurts.

There's no lid on the bucket, and we never have anything

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to put in it to make it smell better. We don't even have toilet paper.

I've buried myself deep under my covers, but I can't escape the stench. It seems to follow me, clinging to my skin and sticking in my throat. I can't get away from it.

I can hear Daddy stripping off his trousers. He always sleeps in just a shirt, or sometimes nothing at all.

My throat goes very dry now, and I'm trying to pretend I'm fast asleep, even though I'm shaking so much the covers must be moving up and down, telling him I am wide awake.

Maybe Daddy will leave me alone tonight?

He wasn't staggering about like he does some nights, and he didn't shout at Mammy. Maybe he will fall into bed and start snoring loudly, giving me the sign that tonight I can go to sleep knowing he's too drunk to do those horrible things to me, that just for tonight, he will leave me alone.

I always prayed hard, but it didn't seem to make any difference whether Daddy was in a good or bad mood. It didn't matter if he was laughing and joking or ranting and raving when he came in, I never knew what would happen next. Sometimes he got into bed and fell straight into the deep sleep I prayed for, but mostly he didn't.

It started when I was seven years old.

'Cynthia, you're to sleep in the double bed, d'you hear me?' Mammy ordered.

Cynthia Owen

Normally, I slept in the single bed in the same room, but I didn't argue with Mammy. She didn't like it if I argued, and so I always tried hard not to. If I made her cross she hit me round the head or called me horrible names, so I always did as I was told.

When Daddy got into bed he started to tuck himself up right behind me. He was very close, and I didn't like it. I could feel his bare legs against mine and they felt horrible.

This wasn't what I had expected at all – and now what was happening?

Daddy was moving in a strange, shuffling way behind me. I felt frightened of him, petrified whenever I heard his footsteps on the stairs at night. When Daddy started doing other things too, much worse things, I absolutely dreaded going to bed and would lie there every night shaking with nerves and feeling sick with fear.

I never knew what he would do, and even if he did nothing I expected the worst and lay there feeling terrified, especially when he would come in drunk and raging.

'You're a fuckin' whore,' Daddy would shout. 'You're nothing but a stupid bitch.'

I'd squirm under the covers as I heard her scream back at him. She wasn't frightened of him and always gave him the fight he seemed to be looking for.

'You bastard! Don't call me a whore! I bet you're the one who's been sleeping around. Don't you come near me ...'

She would totally lose control of her temper.

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'Where's the money? Have you been gambling again, you stupid bastard?'

Mammy looked fiery, with long red hair and blazing green eyes. I'm sure she drank more than Daddy, and she certainly matched him insult for insult.

They never had ordinary conversations and seemed to really hate each other. They tried to avoid each other as much as possible, but whenever they were in the same room they seemed to be fighting and arguing.

'Fuck off, woman!' Daddy would shout as he slapped Mammy across the face or punched her body. 'Leave me alone, you stupid cow.'

Daddy was quite a small man, and he and Mammy looked like an even match for each other in their fights. But she always came off worse. Neither got really badly hurt, they just got madder and madder with each other.

It was like watching a wrestling match that had burst out of the telly and landed in our living room, and it just went on and on as they traded insults and blows.

At nighttime I covered my ears when their voices rose through the old lino on the bedroom floor and bounced off the wood-panelled walls around me.

I hated listening to it, but the house was so small that however hard I pressed my hands over my ears, I could never seem to block the noises out.

I would lie in bed picturing exactly what I was hearing.

Mammy would be stalking round in her dirty, floral dress

Cynthia Owen

with her knitted cardigan swinging wildly across her bosom, and Daddy would be swaggering around in the same saggy black trousers he wore every day.

I never really knew how or why the argument started, and I wondered if they did themselves. It seemed that even just the sight of each other made them so angry they wanted to hurt and lash out.

I said lots of prayers to God asking them to stop fighting, but no matter how much I pleaded nothing changed.

Once my father had got into bed with me that first time I prayed even harder for them to stop. I was scared his fights with Mammy might make him act more strangely and hurt me more, but I soon learned that there was no routine at all.

When my prayers *were* answered, it was such a huge relief, because I knew that when Daddy fell asleep, he never stirred again until 7 a.m.

He would get out of bed the minute he woke up and rarely said a word to anyone. Every day he put on his dirty clothes off the floor, smoothed Brylcreem through his greasy black hair, washed his teeth over the kitchen sink using a bar of carbolic soap and the family's one toothbrush, splashed on some Old Spice and stormed off to work.

That was his routine every working day, and I loved hearing the door slam behind him as much as I loved hearing him fall asleep at night.

Even if Daddy left me alone in bed, though, I never slept well. My head itched really badly. It didn't matter how much

Living With Evil

I scratched and scratched, the lice kept crawling all over my scalp, driving me mad.

I clawed and dug my fingernails deep into my scalp to make them stop, but that made the itching worse.

My skin crawled too, because all our beds were jumping with fleas. I knew this because if ever we had a visitor, Mammy used special powder to get rid of them, but otherwise she mostly didn't bother.

I could feel them biting me all over as I lay there. I'd try my best not to itch, but when I couldn't stand it any longer I would rake at my skin with my fingernails, making the bites bleed and weep. It felt like a thousand fleas gnawed at me every night, but however deeply I scratched the itching never stopped.

There was no heating in our house either, save for the coal fire in the living room, so in winter the bedroom was freezing cold. All the blankets and sheets smelled terrible and had dirty marks all over them. Some had blood and other nasty stains, but it was so cold I had to use them.

When there weren't enough blankets to go round I put coats on top of me to keep warm. They prickled my skin and smelled of dust and dirt, but the cold was so bad I'd have huddled under anything to stop myself from freezing.

I always slept in just my vest and knickers, or just my knickers. I never owned a pair of pyjamas.

Mammy usually slept in her clothes. She did own a few satin nightgowns, given to her by one of my aunts, but she rarely bothered changing into them. She stayed up all night.

Cynthia Owen

Sometimes she didn't come upstairs until just before 7 a.m., when Daddy got up. It meant they were hardly ever in bed together. Mammy said she had jobs to do downstairs at night like cleaning and washing, but our house was never clean and our clothes were always filthy.

The lino on the floor had a thick layer of dirt on top, the white bits on the patterned wallpaper were stained yellow like Mammy's fingers and the kitchen at the back of the living room was covered in thick grease and grime. Daddy had to shout at Mammy to get her to wash his shirts for work when they got too dirty.

I felt very lonely lying in bed in the dark feeling smelly and dirty and itchy. I always stared into the blackness for hours, only falling asleep when misery and discomfort had sapped my very last drop of energy.

It was pitch black in the bedroom, even in summer, because Mammy insisted we always had a thick black blanket nailed over the window. It was the same with all the front windows in the house. The downstairs was just one room, and the front window looked on to the street, but you could never see out.

Mammy told me it was to keep the sun out, which I thought was a shame, because it meant the house always felt cold and gloomy and suffocating.

Mammy was forever telling us that what happened at home was 'nobody's business but ours'. I wondered if she put the black blankets up because really she didn't want people to look in. 'Don't you go telling anyone what goes on in our

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house,' she'd warn. 'I don't want anyone poking their nose in our business, do you hear?'

I knew she felt strongly about this, because usually she gave me a clout round the ear to emphasize her point. 'Keep your mouth shut, you little bitch. Don't answer the door. Don't let anyone in, d'you hear me?'

The hall window was the 'strictest' window of all in the house, and Mammy was always going on about it.

'Don't you dare move that blanket, you little cow!' she warned me, time and time again, raising her hand to show me what I would get if I disobeyed her.

Mammy only allowed us to have one lightbulb in the house, and that was usually used in the living room. I hated going to the toilet at night, not just because I was scared of spiders crawling up my ankles outside in the dark, but because I was terrified of picking my way through the pitch-black house and into the backyard to use it.

Mammy would sometimes put extra lightbulbs in if one of her relatives visited, but she took them out as soon as they left. It made me think that it couldn't be right to keep the house in darkness – so why did she do it? Why didn't she want us to see at night?

She told me it was because we couldn't afford lightbulbs, but she said it with an odd look on her face, which made me think it wasn't true. I knew we could afford cigarettes and alcohol, because we always had lots of Mammy's favourite drinks, and she and Daddy smoked sixty cigarettes each a day.

Cynthia Owen

Lightbulbs cost less than cigarettes, didn't they? I didn't think we could be that poor.

The front bedroom of the house was the most stifling room of all, because of the smell from the toilet bucket and the stink of stale smoke and sweat that always hung in the air. Every night I felt as if I was trapped there all alone, even when I wasn't.

There were always other kids in the house. I already had five older siblings when I was born in October 1961, but I always felt like the odd one out, the one who didn't fit in, and was on my own.

My oldest brother, Joe, lived round the corner with Granny, and my three big sisters were much more grown-up than me. Esther was nearly eight years older, Margaret six years older, and Catherine was almost five by the time I was born.

My other brother, Peter, was just two years older than me, but he always acted really grown up and had a reputation for being tough and streetwise. Mammy adored him. I looked up to Peter and wanted him to like me. I felt safe when I was with him, because everybody in the neighbourhood thought he was 'hard'. He seemed to carry this reputation like a badge of honour. It was almost as if, the worse he behaved, the more Mammy protected, loved and cherished him.

With me, she was totally different. She never said a kind word to me or gave me a cuddle, and she regularly started fights and beat me.

'Cynthia, will you empty the bucket now!' she said to me

Living With Evil

one day. It was 4.30 p.m. I'd already done the washing-up after school and been to the shop for her cigarettes, while she had just got out of bed after another late night. That was her routine every single day.

'I won't be a minute, Mammy,' I shouted. My stomach turned over at the thought of emptying that toilet bucket, but it was one of the many chores I had to do, or else. Mammy kept an old jam jar by her bed that she'd spit and cough phlegm into, and it would be my job to empty that out too. I loathed it.

Peter was nowhere to be seen, and my big sisters were out, as usual. I felt like the baby stuck at home with Mammy doing the chores and being shouted at, smacked and hit, however hard I worked.

'Get up here now, you lazy bitch,' Mammy screamed again. 'The bucket needs emptying right now!'

I ran upstairs in a panic. She was in a terrible mood, and I didn't want to risk a bad beating, so I grabbed the bucket quickly and headed downstairs.

It was full to the brim, and the smell was diabolical. I retched and stumbled, and suddenly I was falling: I had dropped the bucket and the stinking contents slopped everywhere.

I didn't see her coming at me, but the next thing I felt was the smashing of Mammy's fists into my back. I gasped in shock, breathing in a cloud of vile-smelling air, and retched so badly my stomach felt as if it had jumped up into my throat. When I looked around I felt a stinging 'slap, slap, slap' across my cheeks.

Cynthia Owen

Mammy was looming tall over me, her green eyes flashing crazily and her red hair dancing like flames around her.

'Sorry, Mammy, I'll clean it up quick, Mammy,' I cried.

But there was no stopping her now, and she started to punch me in the stomach and down my arms, then in my face. My head was spinning and I was sure I was going to throw up, what with the smell and the pain.

'You stupid little bitch. Didn't I tell you you're a stupid, lazy little bitch!'

I didn't think I had been lazy. As usual, I'd done the washing-up the minute I got in from school, hoping it would make Mammy less likely to give me a beating. The water was so cold it made my fingers numb. Maybe that's why I dropped the bucket? I really wished I hadn't.

I winced in pain as I tried to clean up the mess with an old rag and more ice-cold water, still trying to work out why Mammy called me lazy. I always worked hard to keep the dishes clean. She left them there all day, waiting for me to come home. How could *I* be lazy when *she* was the one in bed all day?

The washing-up was a tough job. Mammy never bought washing-up liquid or any other cleaning products, and we only ever had one dirty old tea towel, which was never washed. It meant the dishes were never properly clean. It didn't help that when Daddy came home drunk he would often wee in the sink, regardless of whether the dishes were in there or not.

Whatever mess was left for me, I always tried hard to get rid

Living With Evil

of the smell and wash the dishes as best I could. I mustn't have done it well enough that day. That must be the reason Mammy called me lazy, because I couldn't think of anything else.

Daddy came in unexpectedly that night. He usually went straight to the pub from work, but tonight he'd come home for his tea.

For a second I was pleased to see him. Maybe it was the day he gave Mammy her housekeeping money, which usually made her happy for a while.

But Daddy looked furious and was sucking hard on a cigarette when he came into the sitting room. He spoke to Mammy in an angry voice, and then I felt his beady eyes track me across the room.

'Get here now!' he screamed, pulling his leather belt off his trousers. I froze in fright, and in a flash I was being dragged across the living-room floor, and my bare legs were being whipped and whipped.

'Please, Daddy, no!' I yelped. 'Please stop!' I was already bruised and sore from my mother's beating. The extra pain was unbearable.

He was coughing and choking with the effort of beating me and didn't seem to hear my pleas. The lashings went on and on, with him shouting, 'Fucking bitch! Messy little bitch! I'll teach you. Fuckin' little cow.'

The belt buckle cut into the tender skin on my thighs and smashed across my knuckles when I tried to defend myself.

He left me crying in a crumpled little heap on the cold

Cynthia Owen

floor while he ate his tea, swore at Mammy about the state of his boiled ham and cabbage and went to the pub saying, 'Fuck the lot o' you.'

I couldn't sit down comfortably for days afterwards. I didn't even bother showing Mammy, because I knew she would show no sympathy and wouldn't even offer me a plaster.

I knew she didn't care about me, and that I was her least favourite child. The only time she spoke to me was to order me about, tell me to do the housework or to insult me.

'You're trouble,' she'd tell me. 'You're the awkward one. Get out of my sight. Don't you know, Peter is my favourite? I don't like you, Cynthia! Didn't I tell you that already?' Then she'd cackle like a witch or give me one of her funny false smiles, which scared me.

She regularly told my siblings and relatives I was bad, and seemed to delight in doing so. 'That child is trouble. Don't trust her, she's an evil little bitch. She's a lying little cow. A devil child.'

I didn't know why Mammy said those things, and nobody seemed to argue with her or defend me. I didn't blame them, I was just very confused about why Mammy hated me so much.

I worked hard and listened to what the priests in church and the nuns at school taught me about being a good girl. Living in a strong Catholic community, it was drummed into me all the time that 'bold' girls were sinners, and I knew what happened to sinners: they would burn in hell.

Living With Evil

'Be sure your sins will find you out,' Mother Dorothy would say at school. From a young age, I'd tremble in my seat, imagining the flames of hell licking up my legs because I'd forgotten to say my prayers or had missed church on Sunday again.

I didn't cause problems, I tried to avoid them. Yet I always seemed to end up in the most trouble. I couldn't work it out. I'm sure I gave Mammy no reason to hate me.

Sometimes she was nastier to me when she had been drinking a lot. I knew drinking was her favourite pastime, and that other mummies didn't stay in bed all day, but I didn't blame the drinking for the way she treated me, because Mammy always drank. I didn't know any different.

Daddy usually had a reason for beating me, but Mammy seemed to pick arguments out of thin air and turn the whole house upside down in a split-second.

It didn't seem to make any difference what I said or did, she always had it in for me, and twisted everything I said into an argument. She'd smack me round the head all the time, so I was often scared of asking the most basic questions, even when I got older. Throughout my childhood, I thought twice about most things I said, afraid of her reaction.

'Mammy, please can you buy some soap?' I asked once. I picked my moment carefully, while she was looking calm, doing her knitting and listening to Johnny Cash on the radio.

'What do you want soap for?' she shouted, throwing her knitting needles down and clouting me round the ear. 'You're a dirty little bitch, who are you washin' yourself for?'

Cynthia Owen

I had no idea what she was on about, I just wanted soap because I didn't want to be smelly. I didn't understand how I could be called dirty for wanting to clean myself with soap.

Mammy used the word 'dirty' a lot. She also called me a 'filthy whore', and often told me that my private parts were 'filthy' parts of my body. She made a fuss of dressing or undressing in front of me, and if I walked into the bedroom when she was in her bra or nightdress, she shouted: 'What are you looking at, you dirty bastard!'

Of all us kids, everybody said I looked the most like Mammy. People would see me in the local shops and say: 'You've got to be Josie Murphy's daughter – you're the image of her!'

Later on, I would wonder if, for some strange reason, that was why she hated me so much. Did I look too much like her, despite my blond hair? Was that why she had it in for me? It didn't make sense, but there had to be some reason.

I remember unsuspecting relatives and neighbours often used to say, 'Poor Josie, she's got her work cut out!' They seemed to feel sorry for Mammy because she had lots of kids and not much money.

I didn't really understand why they said she had her work cut out though, she barely did any work at all. I think they thought she was stuck in the house, working her fingers to the bone, but I knew that wasn't true.

Daddy worked really hard though, and he seemed to be well respected too. Even though he was always dressed in shabby old clothes, he still made a good impression, like you

Living With Evil

couldn't ignore him when he walked into a room. He didn't scare me as much as Mammy, but I was still afraid of his temper, and I always tried not to make him angry.

He drank for hours every single night, but he didn't get drunk as often as Mammy. And at least he worked; even at weekends he did extra jobs to get more money. He always put food on the table, as well as plenty of cigarettes and alcohol for Mammy, and in return he spent every night in his favourite pub lounges at the Club, McDonagh's, Hogan's, the Arches or the Queens in Dalkey. Mammy didn't complain. I think she was glad to have him out of her sight.

Daddy was employed by the local Dun Laoghaire Corporation all his working life, first as a street cleaner and then as the clerk of the town hall. He wasn't particularly badly paid, but we went without lots of things because he and Mammy chose to spend nearly all of the money on drink and cigarettes.

Daddy's job seemed to give him some recognition in the community. Everybody knew him and seemed to like him, and they treated him like a big man.

'Give my regards to your da!' shopkeepers would call out as I walked by. 'How's your Daddy doin'? Tell him to call round and see me soon. I'll see him for a pint in Hogans!'

Daddy used to regularly come home with things he had been given, and at Christmas we got huge joints of ham, a giant turkey, bags of coal, yet more cigarettes and cases of beer, sherry, port and whiskey, all from Daddy's friends.

When she'd had a few drinks, Mammy loved to reminisce

Cynthia Owen

and tell colourful tales about the past and her courting days with Daddy.

I lapped up every word when I heard her describe how she used to dance the night away wearing glamorous dresses in the local dance halls, with Daddy swinging on her arm.

She said plenty of other things too – some I didn't understand at the time, and some that turned out to be lies.

Over the years, I've pieced together the truth about my parents' history. My mother was born in 1933 and christened Josephine, but everyone called her Josie.

She grew up with my Granny Mary O'Neill, three sisters, Ann, Mag and Cathleen, and a brother, Henry. Her dad died when she was seven.

She had my oldest brother, Joe, when she was seventeen, but she wasn't thrown into an unmarried mothers' home in disgrace, as young Catholic girls often were in those days.

Instead, she stayed at home with baby Joe, and Granny made quite a fuss of her, from what I hear. Mammy eventually got a job as a housekeeper for a rich family, which meant she was earning quite a bit of money to help pay her keep.

It wasn't long before she was out drinking and dancing again, and she met my father on a night out in Dalkey.

They married when my mother was pregnant with my sister Esther in 1953, and she spent her 'honeymoon' in Holles Street Hospital giving birth.

My father, Peter Murphy, was six years older than my mother, born in 1927. Unlike her, he never once reminisced

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or even made the slightest reference to his past. As a child, all I knew was that he grew up in an orphanage with his two brothers and four sisters, but he never mentioned any of them, ever.

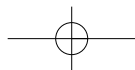
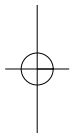
‘Tell me, Daddy, have I got cousins on your side of the family? I’d love to meet them – can’t you tell me where they are?’

His reaction was the same every time. ‘Will you shut up asking? I can’t remember. The past is in the past and leave it at that.’

He wouldn’t even tell me what date he was born, so it felt as if he had no past or history behind him, and as soon as a day was over in his life he never spoke about it again. Sometimes I wondered if he’d been dropped off at our house by aliens.

Now I know he was placed in a Catholic orphanage from the age of two and a half, along with his siblings, after my grandmother died. My mother once said my father was sexually abused in the orphanage, but he refused ever to talk about it.

Little wonder my father never discussed his family background.



Chapter 2

Don't Wake Mammy

I'm sitting in the big blue cot in the front bedroom. Peter is wedged up next to me, and we're both sucking on a bottle. It's one of those banana-shaped bottles with teats on both ends, and we're both sucking away like mad, trying to get more milk than the other. The milk tastes sweet, and we can't get enough of it. We're glugging away like demons, pulling silly faces at each other and making slurping sounds. When the milk has all gone we suck air for a while, making funny squeaking noises, and then everything goes very quiet.

We sit with our legs dangling through the bars of the cot, wondering what to do next. My tummy feels warm under my jumper, but my bare feet are stinging with the cold. I'm nearly four years old, and Peter is six.

The room is dark, even though we can hear the birds singing in the morning sky outside. The grey curtains are shut, and

Cynthia Owen

behind them the black blanket is firmly nailed in place. Mammy likes to sleep in the daytime while everybody else is out, and we know not to disturb her.

I peep over at her, lying in her double bed next to the cot. Her hair is splayed all over the pillow. I think it looks like golden threads, and I'd like to touch it, but I'm not allowed to touch Mammy. Even when she's awake she doesn't like me to touch her. I wonder what it would be like to hold her hand or sit on her knee. I'd like to try it, but I know she doesn't want me to, because she always shouts something nasty or shoves me away if I get too close.

Her skin looks lily-white against the darkness of the room, and I think she looks pretty, like a lady on the telly, although she isn't in a fancy bed. She's lying on her side, with a brown overcoat piled on top of the covers. The sheets and blankets have hundreds of little holes in them and look very old. Some of them have blood on them. Mammy doesn't seem to mind though. I never see her wash or change them.

The room smells horrible, as usual, much worse than our outside toilet. My jumper has the same smell, and so does the blanket in the cot and all the dirty clothes on the floor. Even my dolly's hair has a stinky smell, and sometimes I can't get to sleep because of the stench that hangs in the air after Daddy uses the bucket late at night.

There is a glass dish next to Mammy's bed that's piled high with ash and the end bits of cigarettes, and I can still smell the smoke from last night. It mustn't smell that bad to Mammy

Living With Evil

though, because she never empties the bucket or the ashtray, even when they are full, and she always sleeps very deeply, like nothing bothers her at all.

I stare at her face. Some days her cheeks are red and puffy, but Mammy always puts bright-red lipstick on at night to sit in the chair and have a drink, or to do her knitting while she listens to country and western music or watches the news. This morning she's still wearing her lipstick. It's a little bit smudged, like the way it looked when I put it on my dolly once, but there are no sores spoiling Mammy's face today, so that's good.

There was a fight downstairs last night.

This one began like lots of others, when Daddy came in from the pub. It was very late when I heard his key in the lock, but I was still wide awake. I couldn't sleep because my head was really itchy, and I couldn't stop scratching it.

I felt scared when I heard the front door creak open, wondering what would happen. I held my breath, listening to see if Mammy and Daddy would start shouting or hitting each other.

'You're a selfish bastard!' Mammy yelled, and my heart went cold. 'You're a good-for-nothing lazy bastard!'

I heard her race across the room into the hallway and hit Daddy lots of times with her fists. I think he slapped her across the face, because I recognized the sound it made from when Mammy slapped my face. 'Fuck off, you mad whore!' Daddy yelled. 'Get away from me, you madwoman. Go back to your sherry.'

Cynthia Owen

I didn't want to hear any more. It made me so sad and afraid, and I wanted it all to stop for ever. Even though Mammy isn't ever kind to me, and Daddy doesn't seem to notice me, I want them to be happy. Then maybe I will be happy too.

I buried my head deep under my blanket, held my hands tightly over my ears and said a little prayer. 'Please God, can you make everything nice and quiet? Amen.'

I think He might have heard me, because when I woke up, Daddy had already gone to work, and Mammy was fast asleep under the coat.

Now the house is ever so quiet. All I can hear is the birds and the rustling of trees in the breeze outside the window, and Mammy breathing deeply.

When I hear the rag-and-bone man outside, shouting, 'Any old rags! Any old rags!' I climb out of the cot and peep through a tiny crack in the side of the blanket on the window to catch a glimpse, making sure I don't let too much light in and wake Mammy.

I scuttle around quietly in my bare feet, knowing full well that if I make any noise or knock one of Mammy's holy statues off the sideboard by mistake there will be big trouble.

I watch the rag-and-bone man for ages, longing to run down the street after him. I see him give a little girl a bright-yellow balloon and wish I could have one too. Mammy won't let me open the front door or go out on my own.

Living With Evil

Sometimes we didn't have enough money to pay the rent or the milkman, so Mammy never let any of us kids open the door, in case it was someone 'knockin' for money we don't have'.

Even when I was allowed to play in the street with the older ones, all of us had to use the back door.

Today, I can see other little ones out for a stroll with their mummies, but my mammy never takes me anywhere. A neighbour goes by. She has lots of little kids but still looks like a teenager, she's so fashionable in her patterned mini skirt with her hair all piled up. She's holding hands with two of her children as they walk to the shops, all of them chattering and laughing.

Mammy doesn't like her. 'Look at her – she looks like an ol' whore! A prostitute!' she said the first time she ever clapped eyes on her. 'No married woman should dress like that!'

I wondered why Mammy said that and what it all meant. The neighbour was a very nice mammy. I wished my mammy would get herself washed and dress up in nice clothes. I wished she would take me for a walk with her hair all done and talk to me and make me laugh, but she never once did. My mammy wore dirty dresses with cigarette ash spilled down the front, and she hardly ever left the house.

We had a television downstairs, but if anybody asked what was on, the answer was usually 'on the bloody blink'. I wasn't allowed to touch anything like that while Mammy slept. Sometimes Peter and I made up games with a couple of dolls

Cynthia Owen

that had been scribbled on with biro, or some old wooden blocks. We made the dollies whack and kick each other to pass the time.

It was always cold in the house in the daytime, because the fire was never lit until Mammy got up. My bare feet stung every time they hit the ice-cold lino, and you could see your breath in front of you on winter days.

Sometimes I would root out some old clothes from under the stairs. There were always loads of bags of stuff. Daddy brought them home after there had been a jumble sale at the town hall, and seeing as we didn't have wardrobes, it all stayed in big piles in cupboards.

I'd pretend it was a treasure chest, trying on old belts with shiny buckles and cotton dresses with fancy buttons. Everything smelled of dust and made me sneeze. Nothing looked like it went together, some things had stains on and smelled sweaty and musty like my Granny's long skirts, but it was something to do, and much better than being cold.

At lunchtime, Esther came home. 'Peter, Cynthia, come on and get your dinner!' she shouts, daylight flooding in behind her. Her arrival was the highlight of my day. Esther was kind, and I loved her to bits. Sometimes it felt as if Esther was actually our mammy, because she looked after us so much when Mammy was in bed.

She came home every lunchtime on schooldays and at weekends to fetch us bread and cold meat and give us a drink of milk or water. We never went hungry, although usually there

Living With Evil

was only just enough to go round and you had to be quick to get your fair share.

Peter and I tucked in like a pair of demons, tearing at the warm bread and gobbling up the scraps of corned beef greedily, stuffing it into our mouths with our dirty fingers.

It was an extra treat if we got to go round the corner to Granny's, because she gave us fruit too. She was great at getting fruit. Some days I went with her to the grocer's at closing time to ask for 'spoilt' fruit and then Granny would chop off the bruised bits and we'd gobble up the guts of a plum or a pear.

Granny was a great storyteller too. 'Come here and sit with me, Cynthia,' she would smile. 'Did I tell you the story about the banshee?' Mammy and Daddy hardly spoke to me at all, let alone told me stories that made my eyes widen like saucers.

I'd sit on the floor beside Granny's long skirts for ages listening to her tales. I loved the one about the banshee, who was an old woman with long white hair who came to warn you of death. Granny told me it again and again, but it was one of my favourites and I lapped it up every time.

'If the banshee howls three times before midnight, then someone in the house will die,' Granny would say with a glint in her eye. 'If you happen to come across her yourself, usually sitting on a wall, combing her long white hair, and she throws her comb at you, then you will die instantly!'

I loved my granny. I heard people say she looked pious, but

Cynthia Owen

I wasn't sure what that meant. She looked like a jolly nun to me, with her round face, big red cheeks and shoulder-length grey hair, which was so straight it looked like it had been ironed. She was sweet and kind, and always made me feel special.

'Be good now, you two,' Esther smiles after lunch when she leaves us at home again, Mammy still in bed. 'I'll be back as soon as you know it.'

Every time I watch my big sister disappear round the corner of our street, my heart aches for her to come back.

Often I sit on the greasy lino under the kitchen table, scratching the bites on my legs. Sometimes I scratch so much I make myself bleed, and then yellow stuff bubbles up on my skin, so I wipe it away with the squares of old newspaper we use as toilet paper.

I scratch my head too. I can feel things crawling in my hair. I try to pick out whatever it is, but I can never tell if I catch anything because my fingernails are black. I don't think I do, because the itching just gets worse and worse the more I pick.

It seems like I spend hours some days, just sitting there doing nothing, waiting for the bigger ones to get home, wondering how long they will be.

When they do come home, Mammy gets out of bed and lights the fire.

I like the warmth and I like the bustle when the house first starts to fill up, but on some days it feels like living in a big

Living With Evil

cooking pot. With so many of us around, I sometimes feel hot and bothered, like something is going to boil over at any minute.

One day it does. Mammy suddenly yells something out so loudly it makes my ears whistle. She sounds livid, as if she wants to kill someone. 'Who did that? How dare you!' Now she is hitting me with a sweeping brush, bashing it into my back. I have no idea what has caused this particular outburst, but I have no choice but to endure it.

I shut my eyes as tightly as I can, so tight my whole face aches. I can hear my howls and screams echoing round my head, and my bones are rattling inside my body.

I keep my eyes glued together and huddle myself into a ball. I make myself as small as possible as Mammy moves away from my cowering body. I just want to be invisible, so nobody will notice me and I won't get another beating for getting in the way.

When Mammy's voice gets near to me again, I hug my knees in closer to my chest, pulling my skirt down to make a tent over my ankles and pushing my forehead into my kneecaps.

Amongst the shouting and screaming I hear the front door open and shut, and I freeze when I hear my oldest brother Joe's voice. 'Jesus, what's up with you?' he says.

Joe only ever comes round at night when Daddy is in the pub. He lives with my Granny, so I'm not used to him being around much.

Cynthia Owen

I always pray Daddy won't come in when Joe is there, as any change in routine can set Daddy off on a rant. It doesn't take much. Any one of us can be the cause of a fight. Drink makes it all much worse. He will explode with anger and start telling anyone, but especially Joe, to 'Fuck off out of here'.

Mammy will defend her oldest son and start fighting with Daddy. Sometimes, I sit hugging my knees for hours, praying for calm. My mind often clouds over, and I try to think about nice things. Maybe I'll be allowed to go to school with my big sisters soon? Nobody ever talks to me about school, but I imagine it to be some magical place, like stepping into a whole new shiny world of friends and books and fun.

I don't think my dream will come true any time soon. I never dare hope that good things might happen to me, ever. Peter is two years older than me, and he doesn't go to school, so I think I have a long time to wait until I can be a big girl, instead of being stuck in the cold, dark house all day.

But, a few weeks later, Mammy said she had something to tell me. I was surprised because she hardly ever spoke to me or told me anything.

'Now, Cynthia, you're going to be starting school tomorrow with your brother,' she announced, no warmth in her voice at all.

I couldn't believe what I was hearing and was worried that Mammy was telling me lies, but she said Peter and I were to join the baby class together, on the very same day!

Living With Evil

'You're jokin' me, Mammy, aren't you? Is it true, is it really true? How come we're starting together?'

Mammy told me Peter couldn't start school until he came off the bottle, and now he was six he was old enough to give up his milk. 'Aren't you the lucky ones, starting together? It'll keep the two of you out of trouble,' she said.

Mammy had another baby by now, my little sister, Mary. I was no longer the baby of the family, and I was starting school. I felt incredibly grown up. I was thrilled to be joining my three big sisters, and delighted my big brother would be in the very same class as me.

Best of all, I didn't have to stay stuck in the house any more. I hated it. Even having a new baby sister hadn't made it any more of a home. I loved babies, and Mary was adorable, but she cried a lot and Mammy seemed more tired than ever, because she even slept when Mary was screaming.

I did my best to help Mammy get the milk and change the cloths she used for nappies, because that's what the older kids were expected to do in our house, but school would be much more fun.

I imagined myself surrounded by hundreds of storybooks and mountains of pens and paper, devouring every word the nuns said to me. That's what happened at school, wasn't it? I was sure it would be much better than being at home.

I'd never been shown a book before. I'd been told that Mammy couldn't read or write, and we had no books in the house. Daddy read the newspapers, and I often looked at the

Cynthia Owen

pictures, but he never read anything out to me. Now I was going to learn to read like a big girl, and I couldn't wait to get started.

I'd make friends too! And not just with the kids who lived in the council houses by us who I saw in the street and the shops sometimes. I'd make friends from all over Dalkey – with kids from the fancy big houses up by the beach and the mansions around Dalkey Hill and Killiney Hill, where Esther sometimes took me for a walk or a picnic.

The night before I started, I picked up a few things about the school from my sisters. I heard it had a great reputation and lots of parents fought over places. We only lived a ten minute walk away, so all the Murphy kids got a place without a fight.

I wanted to make a fine first impression. There was no uniform, so I went rummaging under the stairs.

As well as the clothes Daddy brought home from the jumble sales, there were bags of clothes kind people had left on the doorstep, knowing there were lots of kids to clothe in our house, as well as some navy-blue school knickers donated by the St Vincent de Paul charity.

I was thrilled beyond words when Esther helped me get dressed for my first day. I had a navy skirt I didn't remember any of my sisters ever wearing, so that was officially mine. I added a long-sleeved shirt, and an old V-neck jumper of Peter's, I rolled the sleeves up because they were too long. It wasn't perfect, as girls were meant to wear roundnecks, but I was happy with it all the same.

Living With Evil

All I needed was shoes. The only ones that looked the part and more or less fitted had broken buckles, but Mammy told me not to wear them in any case, because I didn't have any socks. Instead, I finished off my outfit with a pair of blue Wellingtons, and we were off!

Esther walked me and Peter to school on our first morning. I looked at the other kids, all with their mummies, and wished my mammy could walk with me to school too. But I knew she was still in bed. She never walked any of her kids to school or even got up to wave us off.

It didn't matter. I was beside myself at the thought of meeting the holy nuns who would teach us, imagining them to be very wise and kind old ladies who would fill my head with fascinating facts and amazing stories like the ones Granny told me.

I'd seen nuns at church, even though we hardly ever went. Daddy would go to funerals or First Holy Communions, which were always very big occasions in our village, but Mammy didn't like going to church at all. She had pictures of the Pope and Jesus hanging on the walls, holy ornaments on the fire-place, and once there was even a pot of holy water we had to dip our fingers in on the way into the bedroom.

But Mammy told us only sinners went to church, to ask God for forgiveness. 'We're better off at home,' she'd say. 'I'm not going again and havin' posh folk lookin' down their noses at us!'

Sometimes the parish priest would come hammering on our door of a Sunday evening, demanding to know why we

Cynthia Owen

hadn't been in church again. Daddy would go mad about being 'shamed' on his own doorstep like that.

Mammy would stub out her cigarette and rush to the door to tell the priest one of us kids had been 'so very ill, Father' even when I was sure everyone was well. I thought it wasn't right to tell a fib to the priest, but I knew better than to say anything.

The following Sunday an older sibling would have to take us to church to 'shut the priest up' and 'stop him sticking his nose in where it's not wanted'.

On the rare occasion I did go to church, I liked the feeling of peace there. Nobody shouted, and I knew nobody was going to hit me, what with the good priest and holy nuns all around. I believed in God and said lots of prayers. I felt safe, and it was nice and clean and bright compared to our house.

I was sure being taught by nuns in a grand school was going to be just like going to church, only better. I simply couldn't wait to start, and I grinned all the way there on my first day.