

A tale of finding
happiness in the most
surprising places



The
Seven
Secrets of
Happiness

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The Seven Secrets of Happiness
by
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1. The Gift

‘Oh, go on, Ruby! Why don’t you? They’re absolutely gorgeous,’ Jasmine said encouragingly. The two women were looking in the window of a fancy shop in Victoria Square shopping complex in Belfast. It was five o’clock on Christmas Eve, but the shops were still thronged with people enjoying the Salvation Army carol service and the general festive spirit.

‘I’d love to, but they’re so expensive,’ Ruby said.

‘Yes, they are. But didn’t you say that Jonathan needed a new pair of brogues?’ Jasmine replied.

‘I did. His favourite shoes have got a bit worn and these ones are so lovely,’ Ruby sighed. ‘Just look at the stitching. Perfect.’

‘Well then?’

‘But four hundred pounds for a pair of shoes?’ Ruby said doubtfully. ‘I always get Jonathan a coffee-table book about NASA or photography. Something small like that?’

‘Fucking hell! A book about NASA! Ruby O’Neill, you can’t give your husband a book for Christmas,’ Jasmine said, shaking her head in pity. ‘I mean, really, a book? Would you ever get real? Books are only stocking fillers.’

‘He likes books.’

‘Oh, Ruby.’

‘He does. He really likes those big, heavy, coffee-table books.’

‘Just buy the shoes.’

‘Our monthly mortgage is four hundred pounds.’

‘That’s it. I give up.’

The two women had been firm friends for the best part of a year – ever since Jasmine had come to work alongside Ruby in a small but successful clothes shop on the elegant Ravenhill Road, close to the heart of Belfast city centre. Theodora Kelly owned the shop. She was a sprightly spinster of eighty-two and wore her hair in silvery-white waves like the Queen.

Jasmine was twenty-seven years old. She was tall and super-slim with dark blue eyes and waist-length, honey-blond hair. Ruby was thirty-one and had hazel eyes and a sleek, black bob. But sometimes she might as well have been fifty-one as far as Jasmine was concerned. Ruby was simply too sensible for her own good.

‘Lighten up, Ruby O’Neill! Scrooge himself wouldn’t have a look-in with you,’ Jasmine muttered under her breath. But Ruby heard her.

‘You single girls don’t have to be as careful with your money as the rest of us,’ she began, trying her best to be tactful.

‘Yes, we do, excuse me. We have rent to pay,’ Jasmine protested at once.

‘Well, yes. Rent, of course.’

‘Extortionate rent, I might add. I probably pay more to rent my one-bed apartment than it costs some couples to buy a big detached house. If they bought before the boom, that is. And I have nobody to split the utilities with.’

‘True,’ Ruby admitted, biting her lip with indecision.

‘Maybe I should start buying Lotto tickets again?’ Jasmine said in a dejected voice.

‘No, don’t do that! You said they were becoming addictive,’ Ruby reminded her.

‘Oh, so I did! Right! Let’s wrap this up. Can you afford the shoes?’ Jasmine asked matter-of-factly.

‘Yes, I suppose I can,’ Ruby replied.

‘Okay. Listen to me, Ruby. Why don’t you go mad for once in your life? I’ve only been in your house a few times but Jonathan has more than enough books already from what I can see. So nip in there immediately and buy your husband a decent present for Christmas,’ Jasmine commanded, elbowing Ruby through the crowds and straight up to the black marble counter.

‘I-I’d like to see that pair in a size eleven, please?’ Ruby stuttered, pointing at the shiny leather brogues. The young assistant duly placed the heavy black shoes in front of Ruby and took a deep breath. The sales pitch was long and complicated and she was very tired. But Jasmine was in a hurry.

‘They’re perfect. We’ll take them. And can you gift-wrap them as well? Thanks,’ she said firmly as Ruby meekly handed over her credit card. ‘Well done, Ruby. He’ll be so pleased he’ll be chasing you around the house all week,’ Jasmine said casually, tossing her long hair over one shoulder and checking out her glittery eye make-up in a huge Rococo mirror on the wall.

‘I hope so,’ Ruby whispered to Jasmine as she felt her own face begin to redden with excitement.

‘He will. He’ll totally love those shoes.’ Jasmine smiled. ‘Well, if that’s us done shopping, we can treat ourselves to a quick steak sandwich and a glass of wine in the bar next door. There’s live music on all day. And the lead singer’s quite sexy,’ she added with a laugh.

‘Yes, okay,’ Ruby agreed. She glanced at the sales assistant, who was still gift-wrapping the box. ‘You go ahead and order for both of us and I’ll be across in a minute. Just a fizzy apple juice for me, mind. I’m driving.’

‘Right,’ Jasmine said, clutching the giant carrier bag containing her fabulous new white mohair coat from River Island. She’d just got fifty per cent off in a pre-Christmas sale. ‘I love shopping, but I have to say I’ll be wearing flat pumps next time.’

‘Off you go then,’ Ruby told her. ‘I’ll be along in a minute. And try not to get into any trouble. Find out if that singer has a jealous girlfriend with a bad temper before you go batting your eyelashes at him.’

‘Hey, you watch it! I hardly ever get myself into trouble, Ruby. Nine times out of ten the trouble comes to me,’ Jasmine said resignedly. ‘Is it my fault so many guys seem to find me attractive?’

But Ruby knew she was only joking. Or maybe half joking . . . ‘Okay, I’m sorry,’ she sighed. Jasmine was a great friend, really.

‘Right then. Don’t hang about in here chatting to the staff and keeping them back,’ Jasmine said, laughing. ‘I’ve a party to go to at eight thirty this evening.’ And off she went, marching across the street in her spike-heel boots, skin-tight jeans and short leather jacket. Her long legs were attracting discreet, appreciative glances from most of the men in the vicinity, Ruby noticed. Ruby didn’t get admiring looks nearly as often, though she was rather attractive herself. But when men glanced at her full-length black overcoat and her sleek black bob and biker-style boots they knew she wasn’t the type of girl to be chatted up on a

windblown city pavement. Ruby wasn't exactly intimidating, but there was something about her that was somehow simply unapproachable. She was aware of it, but she didn't mind. Jonathan was the only man she ever wanted to notice her or fancy her or love her.

Ruby was glowing with happiness as she sat down at her kitchen table later that evening to admire the fancy flock-style wrapping on Jonathan's gift. There was also a big, black reflective ribbon on the box that caught the light from her little glass lantern and dazzled like a thousand stars. The gift looked very expensive indeed wrapped up like that.

'How exciting,' she said to herself, gradually getting used to the idea of splashing the cash. Even if it was only very occasionally.

Jonathan would be home from work soon. They'd be having a few drinks in the office, no doubt. And giving each other silly or naughty gifts in the traditional Secret Santa. But Ruby knew her husband would never drink and drive. Or risk hurting anyone's feelings by giving them condoms (for any man with more than two children) or a saucy peephole bra (for the office flirt) for Christmas. He'd be having only soft drinks. And he'd bought gift vouchers in M&S for the Secret Santa, knowing that the person he was supposed to be buying a gift for was a bit short of money that year. Jonathan O'Neill was the sexiest man Ruby had ever met, but he had impeccable manners and the kindest heart as well, it had to be said. And that was precisely why Ruby had fallen for him in the first place. Yes, her Jonathan was the perfect package.

She touched the gift-wrapped box again lovingly and her

heart gave a little wobble of excitement. Maybe Jonathan *would* chase her around the house all over the holidays. Maybe next year they *would* have their first child. Then she poured herself a very small glass of Merlot and sat happily for a minute admiring the glossy black and silver packaging. Outside the kitchen window the sky was an inky violet colour with just a smattering of stars visible between the ghostly clouds. Soon Jonathan would be home and they would have a cosy supper and later curl up together on the sofa to watch telly.

Filled with a renewed sense of hope about falling pregnant that month, Ruby jumped up from the table and began to get things ready. She switched on the central heating and the various table lamps. She opened some last-minute Christmas cards and slotted them into her trendy wire cardholder in the hall. She set a beef casserole into the oven to heat through. She stacked the dishwasher and filled the washing machine and snapped them both on happily, thinking where she would be without her mod cons. She did a quick vacuum of the hall rugs and tidied up the coats on the hat-stand.

‘There,’ she said to herself. ‘The house looks perfect now. What else was I supposed to do? There was definitely something else. Oh yes, I’ve got to phone home.’

Ruby took the phone into the kitchen and speed-dialled her parents’ large house in the countryside. It lay at the end of a very long, very dark driveway in County Fermanagh in the west of the country and Ruby had never liked it much when she was growing up. Her parents had made a lot of money selling off Ruby’s father’s family land in the 1980s so the council could build more social housing and they’d been living off the proceeds ever since.

‘Hello?’ Ruby’s mother said hesitantly.

‘Hi, Mum! It’s me,’ Ruby said brightly.

‘Hello dear,’ came the usual subdued reply.

‘Merry Christmas, Mum!’

‘Yes indeed, and the same to you.’

‘Have you got everything ready for tomorrow then?’

Ruby asked, hoping she could entice her mother into a cosy chat. It was a faint hope but it was always there.

‘Everything ready? What are you talking about? There’s only the two of us here,’ her mother said in a flat voice.

‘Yes, but there’s still an awful lot to do, isn’t there? Pudding to set in the steamer, cream to whisk, tablecloth and napkins to press, and the turkey to stuff?’

‘We’ll manage well enough, Ruby. I’m only cooking a breast of turkey from the supermarket this year. Last year we couldn’t eat the half of it. It went in the bin on Boxing Day.’

‘But it wouldn’t be Christmas without a turkey,’ Ruby persisted.

‘Whatever you say.’

‘You sound a bit tired,’ Ruby said in her most sympathetic voice.

‘You phone me up and then tell me I sound tired? That’s not very nice of you. I’m fine.’

‘Okay, okay. I’m sorry I spoke.’

‘No, really, I’m fine,’ Ruby’s mother sighed.

‘What’s wrong, Mum?’

‘Nothing’s wrong. Nothing at all.’

‘You can tell me if there is?’

‘I’m fine. Jesus!’

‘You could both come to me for Christmas Day? I have

the whole house decorated,’ Ruby said hopefully. ‘You’re still welcome to join us tomorrow.’

‘You know I like to stay at home, Ruby. Burglars never take a day off.’

‘But you have the alarm now.’

‘I don’t like to use the alarm.’

‘Oh, Mum!’

‘It’s so noisy when it goes off.’

‘It’s meant to be noisy,’ Ruby said gently.

‘Anyway, what use is it? Nobody would hear it blaring and beeping: not all the way out here. The whole place would be ransacked and wrecked and nobody would be a bit the wiser.’

This was familiar territory: Ruby’s mother’s lack of faith in her state-of-the-art burglar alarm.

‘And you’re sure you don’t want us to come and visit you instead?’ Ruby asked.

‘No, not at all. Are you out of your mind? I hear we might have snow coming, for heaven’s sake. I won’t have you both breaking down on the road and freezing to death. Not on my account! And if you did make it this length you might be stranded here for days and then your own home would be broken into.’

They both sighed heavily.

‘Okay, Mum. Well, I’ll see you sometime then?’

‘Yes, sometime.’

‘And I hope you have a lovely day tomorrow.’

‘Yes. You too.’

‘Say hello to Dad for me, won’t you?’ Ruby added.

‘I will surely. He’s out in the garage, smoking a cigarette.’

‘Right then. Merry Christmas again.’

‘Yes, yes. Bye, dear.’

‘Bye, Mum. Love you.’

‘Yes, same here.’

Ruby hung up feeling slightly disappointed as she always did after speaking to either one of her parents. They didn’t like a lot of fuss and hugging and kissing and ‘silly nonsense’ as they put it. They liked to stay at home for Christmas and they didn’t like the stress of having to entertain visitors. Even Jonathan was still classed as a visitor after seven years of marriage and ten years altogether as Ruby’s partner. Oh well.

Next she rang Jonathan.

‘Hello, love. How’s the party going?’

‘Hi, babe. Oh God, it’s been totally hilarious. My sides are sore laughing. Somebody bought Robert a pair of super-strength odour-eaters and he went buck-mental and pushed the Christmas tree over and broke the lights. Then he fell on top of it and got all caught up in the tinsel. He is so plastered . . .’

‘Poor Robert. Are his feet really smelly?’

‘Just a bit.’

‘Oh God love him! What did Susan get?’

Susan was the office chatterbox.

‘Wait for it. A dog’s muzzle.’

‘Oh Jesus! No way! Was she raging?’

‘No, she was delighted with it. She’s wearing it now. It’s a white muzzle with pink stones on it. She said she’s going to wear it in bed tonight and drive her boyfriend wild with lust.’

‘She’s not shy then?’

‘No, she’s not shy. She’s a proper nutcase. No, she’s a good laugh really.’

‘She sounds it. Will you be leaving soon?’ Ruby asked eagerly.

‘Yes, I will. It’s all winding up here now anyway. I just have to drop some papers off to a client in Ballynahinch and then I’ll be straight home. Took ages to wind up the accounts. They were in such a muddle.’

‘Ballynahinch? But, love, that’s miles away. Can’t it wait till after Christmas?’

‘Not really. It’s a bankruptcy case. It’s urgent. There’s going to be an auction on the twenty-sixth. I *am* the boss, after all, so it’s only fair I drop off the papers. And this lot are wasted anyway.’

‘Oh, well then. Poor guy going bankrupt on Christmas Eve.’

‘Yes, he’s a farmer. He tried going organic, but it didn’t work out for him. I’ll just be an hour or so, I promise.’

‘The traffic’s pretty crazy,’ Ruby reminded him.

‘I know, I know. But then I’ll be off work for two whole weeks,’ he said brightly.

‘Me too. Won’t it be heaven?’ she sighed. ‘All those lovely lie-ins?’

‘Oh yeah! Wonder what we’ll do with so much free time! I can think of one thing, at least!’ he laughed, then added, ‘I love you.’

‘I love you too,’ she replied automatically.

‘That’s my girl. I won’t be long.’

‘Okay. I made a casserole last night, by the way. It’s heating in the oven as we speak.’

‘Brilliant. I can’t wait. I’m bloody starving. The party nibbles were great, but not the same as one of your casseroles.’

‘Ha! Thanks,’ she laughed.

‘Oh, has the tree arrived?’

‘No, not yet.’

‘They’re leaving it a bit late, aren’t they?’ he said, a little anxiously.

‘You didn’t forget to order it?’ she joked.

‘I called them again last week,’ he replied.

When Jonathan came home, they would fix up the tree together. Jonathan always liked to decorate the tree late on Christmas Eve. It was a sort of tradition of his. And then they would go for a walk along Ravenhill Road and look at the other trees sparkling in bay windows and hallways. And they’d hold hands like teenagers and finally kiss by the garden gate on the way home.

‘Oh, wait a minute, there goes another round of party poppers,’ said Jonathan. ‘Hey, watch it, you lot!’ There was a riotous cheer in the background as a handful of poppers exploded. Jonathan collapsed into a fit of laughing.

‘Did you hear that, Ruby? Fuck’s sake! They’re a mental bunch in here. Robert’s lying asleep in the corner and even that almighty bang didn’t wake him up.’

‘Jonathan, listen, I bought you a lovely present today,’ Ruby said tentatively. She just couldn’t help mentioning it, could she? Silently, she chided herself, but the words were out now.

‘Did you really? How exciting!’

‘Yes. Jasmine talked me into it.’

‘Jasmine, huh? Sounds pretty expensive then. Actually I bought you something nice too.’

‘Did you, honestly? Shall we swap gifts at midnight tonight?’

‘Okay. If you like.’

‘Be careful coming home, won’t you? The traffic is bumper to bumper.’

‘I’m always careful,’ Jonathan said tenderly.

‘Yes, I know. See you soon then?’

‘Very soon. Bye, love.’

‘Bye.’

Ruby hung up and sipped her wine thoughtfully. Jonathan hadn’t sounded cross at all about her lovely present. In fact he’d sounded strangely pleased. She smiled at her reflection in the darkened window.

‘He’ll love the shoes,’ she told herself. ‘I just know it.’

2. The Tree

Ruby was just starting to doze off in her favourite armchair when suddenly there was a loud knock at the front door. Startled, she spilt some red wine down the front of her black crewneck sweater.

‘You silly eejit,’ she said to herself, setting her glass down on the table.

What am I like? she thought. Just because I’ve gone a bit mad with the credit card I’m all on edge.

She quickly dabbed the wine off with a tea towel and went rushing to answer the door, expecting to find the carol singers from her local church outside. Yawning widely, she opened the door.

‘Tree for Ruby O’Neill?’ said a tall man with longish brown hair tucked behind his ears. He had earnest-looking, dark brown eyes with the beginnings of some serious crow’s feet around them.

Ruby was relieved when she realized it wasn’t the carol singers. They were a lovely gang, but they usually sang and sang until every drop of heat had been drained from the house. And Ruby always had to stand there smiling at them like an idiot while Jonathan hid in the kitchen, giggling at her embarrassment. They must have come earlier when she was still out with Jasmine. And then Ruby felt guilty that she hadn’t been in the house to give them a few pounds for their collecting tin.

‘This is the right address?’

‘Yes, yes. I just thought you might be the carollers.’

‘Sorry, I’m not,’ the man said shyly.

‘No, you’re not,’ replied Ruby.

‘Hope I’ve not come at a bad time?’ the man said, glancing into the hallway behind her.

‘Not at all,’ Ruby said, and then she smiled warmly at him. Not the usual young guy from the garden centre, but he seemed nice enough. Lovely brown eyes actually, she thought to herself. Handsome almost, even though he must be about forty-five, forty-six? Lovely deep voice. It was very calming.

‘The tree? You still want it?’ the man asked, reaching down to pick it up from where it lay on the tiled path.

‘Yes indeed, I still want it.’

He straightened up again.

‘Eight-foot spruce? No stand required. Yes?’

‘That’s right. I’ve still got my stand from last year,’ Ruby replied.

‘Okay. That’ll be thirty-five quid, please.’

‘Surely. Just a minute,’ Ruby said, and she darted back to the kitchen to get her purse.

‘Cheers,’ the man smiled as she paid him. ‘And a Merry Christmas to you.’

‘Merry Christmas yourself,’ Ruby said at once, pulling the heavy, netted tree further into the hall. ‘Are you new at the garden centre?’

‘No, I’m from Camberwell. I’m the head gardener there. I’m the only gardener there, to tell you the truth. But head gardener sounds better.’

‘Camberwell? The stately home?’

‘That’s right. We’re selling trees now. Been growing them

commercially for ten years and the first lot were just ready to sell this Christmas.'

'I see. How lovely.'

'Yes. The garden centre sold a fair few of them for us. I was just there actually, to take away any unsold ones. You were the last address on their list. And I said I would drop this one off to you on my way home. Save them the bother of coming out in this traffic. Tom's the name. Tom Lavery.'

'And I'm Ruby. Ruby O'Neill.'

'Yes, I know. You were on the list.'

'Oh, of course I was . . .'

Tom reached out his hand and Ruby quickly checked her own for telltale drips of red wine. But it seemed clean enough. They shook hands firmly. Ruby noticed that although the air outside was freezing cold Tom Lavery's handshake was warm and friendly. They exchanged a brief glance and then pulled their hands apart again.

'Right, thanks very much, Tom. So I've got myself a posh tree this year then?' Ruby said, eager to get the netting snipped off and the fat, fragrant tree fully decorated. She had 120 red berry lights and a box of papier-mâché Santa figures and angels by the designer Gisela Graham to hang on it.

'Oh, there's my buzzer,' she said, hearing her oven timer ping. 'I'd better turn the oven off.'

'Yes, okay, I won't keep you,' Tom said, turning to leave. 'Bye now.'

'Thanks, Tom, safe home,' Ruby said brightly, waving him down the path and then softly closing the front door behind him.

*

Sitting in his Land Rover, Tom Lavery turned the heating up and rubbed his arms to get his circulation going again. For some reason he'd suddenly gone all weird and shivery. He knew he would have to take a minute to catch his breath before he could drive away anyway. His heart was pounding in his chest like a sledgehammer. Thumping so hard he was sure he'd have a heart attack.

'What am I like?' he scolded himself. 'God help me, I'm no better than a teenager with a hopeless crush. Where the hell did that come from?'

It'd been years since he'd felt like this. Four long years since he'd felt anything apart from impotent anger and endless grief. And regret for all the things they'd never got around to doing before Kate died. And the soul-destroying loneliness that had haunted him since losing her.

'Stop it,' he said aloud. 'Get a grip! Pull yourself together, man.'

He turned his head towards Ruby O'Neill's three-storey Georgian house. The lights in the front room were suddenly snapped on and the rose-patterned walls were brightly illuminated by a beautiful vintage-looking chandelier with glass droplets. The room was full of white-painted furniture and two huge white sofas that were piled high with pink and white cushions.

'Nice room,' he said to himself. 'If you like pink!'

He shouldn't have stayed there looking at this beautiful woman he had just met, but he couldn't help it. Because even though his pulse was racing along at what must have been a dangerous level he was still filled with curiosity.

'Curiosity killed the cat,' he murmured softly.

As Tom watched, Ruby dragged the huge tree into the

bay window and fitted the stand on to the base of the trunk. Then she stood the whole thing upright, quickly tore off the net, fluffed out the branches and looked at the tree from several angles to find the best one.

‘Clever move,’ Tom said softly. ‘Not so easy to put up a tree that size all by yourself.’

Kneeling down, Ruby inched the Christmas tree into the perfect position and then left the room, coming back two minutes later with a glass of red wine and a large hatbox from which she began to pull decorations. Tom noted how her glossy bob was as sleek and shiny as a raven’s wing. She was quite tall with an hourglass figure but it was her stillness and grace that he was fascinated by. She seemed to possess an inner peace that Tom would have given anything for.

‘Ruby O’Neill, who are you?’ he whispered.

As Ruby stood gazing at the tree and holding up various large and spindly decorations against its luxurious blue-green branches, Tom finally shook himself out of his daydream, started up the Land Rover and pulled slowly out into the rush-hour traffic.

‘Ah, would you wise up! What’s the use in looking?’ he sighed. ‘She’s married. It was her husband who’d ordered the tree, obviously. And even if she weren’t spoken for, a beautiful woman like that would never be interested in a man like me in a million years. And anyway I can’t be over Kate. Not yet. I’ll never be over Kate. God, what am I going to do? How am I going to get through another blasted Christmas on my own?’

And then he sighed and forced himself to stop being so defeatist. He wasn’t really on his own. Not really. For he had Noah his faithful black Labrador to talk to and to take

out for walks. Noah had been Kate's dog. She'd bought him as a puppy and named him Noir. But over the years the name had somehow morphed into Noah and the new name seemed to suit the dog much better. So Noah it became. Now if it wasn't for Noah and the gardens at Camberwell to look after he really would be close to the edge tonight.

It's a good thing I have Noah to take care of. And all the work I have to do at that place, Tom thought as he inched his way towards Saintfield Road. As he drove he made a mental list of all the things he had to do that night. He had to pick up dog food from the supermarket. Then call Kate's parents in Hillsborough and wish them a Merry Christmas. Then drop off the three unsold trees at a YMCA near Camberwell. They'd said they'd be grateful for any donations this year, no matter how late, for they were having a big party on New Year's Eve. Then he had to water the eight Christmas trees in Camberwell House and check the greenhouses for frost. And he mustn't forget to put the garden-centre money in the safe. And then if he was feeling up to it he might go for a pint or two in his local pub. But only if he felt in the mood for a chat. It was hard to be alone on Christmas Eve sometimes. But then again sometimes it was even harder to be with people who didn't understand what he was going through.

They mean well, he reminded himself. I mustn't get irritable with them when they tell me that time is a great healer. I know I just have to bite my tongue and nod and say thanks for the advice.

But sometimes Tom Lavery just wanted to stand in the middle of nowhere and roar his head off.

*

When Tom got back to Camberwell, Noah ran out of the gates to greet him. And Tom slowed right down so the dog wouldn't get giddy and run under the wheels.

'Steady, boy, steady,' he warned, through the driver's open window. He parked the Land Rover at the back of the house and went hurrying into the kitchen to see if there was any supper going spare. Occasionally the cook at Camberwell House, Mrs Kenny, would leave a dish of lamb stew or a bowl of chicken salad for him in the staff fridge. Luckily tonight there was a tasty selection: a big bowl of chicken soup, three buttery rolls filled with cheddar cheese and cold ham, and six mince pies wrapped in tin foil.

'You're a gem, Mrs Kenny,' Tom said happily to the empty kitchen, cheering up for the first time that day.

Back at Ravenhill Road Ruby was also eating a solitary supper. She helped herself to a second bowl of beef casserole and shook her head as she sprinkled salt and pepper on it.

I hope the traffic isn't too bad, she thought. I bet it'll take ages to get to Ballynahinch and back in this freezing cold weather. Jonathan should have used a courier to deliver those papers instead of going himself. He's far too conscientious sometimes. Just because it's his firm, and there's a recession on, and he doesn't want to lose business or ask any of the other accountants or office staff to go. There might be ice on the roads by now! Black ice maybe! Or a stupid lorry broken down and it's blocking the whole road. The police will be out directing traffic if it gets any worse. People will be stuck for ages and getting hypothermia.

And then she scurried over to switch on the small

portable telly and lose herself in *EastEnders*. At least on the soaps folks were usually guaranteed to be having a worse time than you, Ruby thought sagely. As the programme began, the familiar figure of soap matriarch Pat Butcher went racing across the street, her face set in a grim mask of anger, obviously on an urgent mission of some kind.

No point in moping about like this and worrying myself sick, Ruby told herself sternly. That soft-hearted husband of mine is just chatting to that poor guy who's gone bankrupt or something. Trying to cheer him up for Christmas. Or maybe he's stopped off to buy some more wine or chocolates or maybe the new *Radio Times*? But then again that would only add ten minutes to the journey . . . For heaven's sake, Ruby O'Neill, would you listen to yourself! You'll turn into your own mother one of these days if you're not careful. Always expecting disaster round every corner. Too afraid to enjoy yourself in case life leaps up and bites you on the bum!

Ruby poured out another small glass of wine and sat down to watch the portable TV in the kitchen. Somehow she thought Jonathan would make it home sooner if she waited for him there. It was silly of her, but she felt it would feel lonely to go and curl up on the sofa in the good room. Anyway the kitchen was nice and warm because the oven had been on.

'Right, come on then, what are you up to, Pat Butcher?' Ruby said, determined not to fret any longer. Jonathan would surely be coming in the door any second and hopefully he would be so hungry he wouldn't even notice that she'd been getting a bit fed up waiting for him. And if he didn't hurry up she'd go ahead and decorate the tree on her

own, so she would! And if he said anything whatsoever to her about their precious tradition she'd give him a good stern lecture on how he was becoming a complete workaholic these days. Top accountant or not! Christmas Eve or no Christmas Eve! Men could be so damn stubborn sometimes!

'May God be good to you and your big earrings, Pat Butcher!' Ruby said then. Poor old Pat has had more than her fair share of heartaches over the years, she thought. I bet it won't be two minutes before it all kicks off *again* in the Queen Vic . . .