

## Childhood

“Loretta, will you take the roll-book to Sister Anthony?”

“Sister Ignatius may Regina Burke come to help me?” she asked.

“Of course, my dear.”

We all watched longingly as Loretta and Regina left the class. Every single day Loretta was sent out on a message for Sister Ignatius. She, and the friend she picked to go with her could skip and run along the corridor, while we had to sit as still as statues in our seats.

Loretta Fitzgerald was the *peata* of the nuns. Us other children knew we couldn't push or call her names, just like we would never push or call Sister Ignatius names. We treated Loretta the way we treated grownups, even though she was small like us. Everyone loved her, even my mammy said she looked like Shirley Temple with her head of bouncy curls. She wore beautiful shop-bought dresses, angora boleros and white ankle-socks with patent shoes.

Anyone big who came into our class always saw her and asked Sr Ignatius if that adorable, little girl was the bishop's niece. Each time the priest came into our class for

catechism, he always walked down to where Loretta was sitting and spoke to her.

“Child, when I see His Grace, I must tell him what a great little niece he has.”

The day the black form glided into our class and made a fuss of Loretta, we knew for sure that Loretta was special. The shape frightened everyone, even Sr Ignatius who got all jittery, twitching her shoulders and nearly tripping as she walked backwards in front of the dark thing. Loretta wasn’t afraid or shaking. She smiled up at the figure, dressed in a long dress like Sr Ignatius, only the veil was a bit different because two pieces of black cloth were poking out of the sides like horns on a cow.

“Children, stand up and say good morning to the Reverend Mother.”

We did as we were told, shouting out, “Good morning, Reverend Mother!” in the same sing-song tone we used when the priest visited. The stomach of the mother moved and then fingers crawled out sideways from the middle of the dark dress. They made a downwards gesture. We knew we had to sit. The big mother then floated to the desk where Loretta was, and beamed a smile from the face fenced by white and black. Our eyes widened as we watched what happened next.

“Loretta, let me see if there is any *duais* in my pocket,” she said, rooting deep in a slit that swallowed her hand. As the arm disappeared into the black material, the folds in the long skirt swayed, making the giant metal crucifix and

rosary beads, hanging from a leather belt around her waist, rattle. With a squeak of surprise, she produced a sweet, holding it up, so all us others could see the pink and white striped candy, smelling of cloves. She bent from on-high and offered it to the bishop's niece. As we gawped hungrily at the sweet, Loretta smiled and thanked the mother who had frightened our nun and the rest of us.

The next time the Reverend Mother came into our class, I crossed my fingers and wished with all my might she would give me a sweet. I mustn't have crossed my fingers tight enough because the treat was only for Loretta and the girls she wanted to share it with, like Regina Burke or Noeleen Pitt. In the yard at playtime, all Loretta's friends would buzz around her. She held the sugary, colourful circle on the palm of her hand, until she decided which one of her pals could suck some sweetness from it.

In our back garden, in the hot weather the bees flew around and landed on flowers, sticking their face into the centre and rubbing their thin, black arms together. Daddy told me they were gathering the pollen to make honey for the queen bee. When I saw Loretta's pals lowering their heads to lick and suck the sweet, I thought it was the flower and they were the bees. I wished I had a giant jar-jam, because I knew how to catch bees when they are twiddling on the flowers. You stand still by the flower and wait until the bee is busy rubbing its legs together. Then you slip the jar over the flower and screw on the lid on real quick before the bee can fly off.

I wanted to do the same to Loretta and her swarm. If they were locked in the glass jar, I could have the sweet for myself and lick it until my tongue was red. At home Mammy would see my mouth and think I was palsy-walsy with the bishop's niece, as she asked me the same question that she asked me every day.

"What did you and the bishop's niece do today?"

"We went to the yard and played."

"Good girl, when is she coming here to play with you?"

"One day, Mammy."

"If ye are palsy-walsy, she'll want you to go to her house."

Loretta's house was in the street near the chapel. It was a big, big house, high up to the sky where a giant could live. It had trees in the garden instead of flowers. One day in the summertime when there was no class, Mammy and me were out walking near the big, big house. The gate opened and a woman with a fox came out.

"Mammy, look! The woman has a fox around her neck."

Mammy got cross. "Sssh Mary, that is Mrs Fitzgerald, the bishop's sister."

"But Mammy, tell her the fox will bite her," I said in a panic looking up at Mammy.

"Mary, it's only a fur collar," she said, catching my hand and walking real fast so that I was dragged alongside her.

"Mammy, my legs are sore," I said pulling back to make her stop walking so quickly.

“Mary, you are such a baby. I don’t know how you’ll manage when you go back to school and are in the big class.”

The first day of class, Mammy was sick in bed, so Daddy got me ready for school.

“Arlene, today you’ll go into a different class.”

“Amn’t I with Sister Paul?” I asked Daddy.

“Sister Paul is in High Babies with the wee ones. You are big now, Arlene.”

“Daddy, I’m not big, I’m only up to your knees,” I said hugging Daddy around his legs.

He bent down and lifted me up over his head and he said, “Arlene, you are getting so tall, you’ll touch the ceiling one of these days.”

“Will Sr Paul come with us to the new class, Daddy?”

“No, you’ll be with a nun called Sr Ignatius.”

“That’s a funny name, Daddy. I won’t be able to say it.”

“You say ‘Yes Sister’ or ‘No Sister’ until you learn how to say her name.”

Daddy said I was going into first class and the new nun would teach me sums and writing. Mammy called down from her room upstairs.

“William, Mary will have Catechism too. She’s making her First Communion this year.”

We went to school on Daddy’s bike. He came to the door of the new class and spoke for a second to the nun with the funny name. She smiled at him and then closed

the door and put me in a line of children standing by the wall at the side of the room. The nun had a long book in her hands. She said it was the roll-book and we had to say '*Anseo!*' when she called our names. The first name she called was Mary Loretta Fitzgerald. A small girl, wearing a beautiful pink dress with a ribbon of white lace showing out from underneath the hem, said, "*Anseo*". The nun asked her to sit in the desk, at the front of the class near the nun's table.

Then after calling out the names of plenty more girls and boys, who sat down at the desks she pointed to, she said, "Mary Blake."

I replied, "*Anseo*."

The girl with the lovely, pink frock, started to laugh and said, "Sister, that girl said, 'On suck!' instead of *Anseo*."

The nun looked cross and said pointing at me and then at the desk behind Mary Loretta's, "You, sit there."

I went to the wooden desk. I pushed myself into it. My legs touched a plank at the bottom, near the floor. It was for putting your feet on, but my knees hit the top part of the desk and instead of putting my feet on top of the wooden board, I pushed them under it. The curly haired girl with the short, white, fluffy cardigan turned around and stuck her tongue out at me. I stuck mine back out at her.

"Sister, that girl is making faces at me," she said.

The nun charged down. "Stand up, you bold girl."

I didn't budge because I was trying to get my feet out from under the plank. I managed to slip one out, but the

other foot was still trapped underneath. A tapping sound made me look up. I saw the nun looming at my side, a vexed look on her face and a cane in her hand.

“Are you deaf? Does your mother not wash your ears?”

“My Mammy washed my ears and I’m not deaf, but my leg is stuck under the desk.”

Her eyes and mouth went round and big like the time Daddy went into the sea at Trafada. Mammy told him the water was cold, but Daddy didn’t care. He took off his shoes and socks and rolled his trousers up as far as his knees and ran in. He made such a funny face that we started to laugh. Mammy said, “William, no one in their right mind would go into the Atlantic in the middle of March!”

The nun’s eyes were popping out of her head too, so I was laughing like Mammy did with Daddy. Her face quivered like the lid on the kettle when the water inside is starting to boil. I thought steam would come of her nose but instead she grabbed hold of the top of my cardigan, near my shoulder, and dragged me out of the desk. My foot came out of my shoe and the shoe stayed under the plank. I tried to bend down to get it. The nun pulled me towards the door. Everyone was looking at me, so I ducked my head down and let her take me where she wanted to. She flung open the door and told me to go outside into the hall until I learned a bit of manners. I was limping like Mick the Sticks, a man in town, who has only one leg.

As soon as I heard the door close, I stooped down and untied my lacers and took my shoe off. I held it by

the lacers and started to move it from side to side, like the swing Daddy made for me in the garden. My Daddy showed me how to do up my shoes, so I knew I could put it back on again if I heard the door opening and the nun coming out.

When I got tired of playing swings with my shoe, I went over to the line of pegs along the wall. They were for hanging our coats up on. There was a row up high for the big people and one near my head for the small children. There were no coats hanging on the wall. I put my hands around a peg, then I lifted my legs off the floor. I was hanging on the wall like a coat. After a bit I moved one hand to the next peg and moved along from one peg to the next. It was great fun swinging along the wall. When I got to the end, I raised up one hand and grabbed the peg for the big people. Then I brought up my leg and placed it on the one for the small children's coats.

I was thinking I'd tell Daddy what a topper I was, because he was always saying I was wiry and had the makings of an athlete in me, when the door opened. Before I could jump down, the nun caught me under the arms and dumped me on the floor. While she was lowering me to the floor, she was shaking me and squeezing her hands in really hard under my oxters.

"A monkey? Is that what we have here. Well, all I can say is that a monkey would know how to behave better."

She pushed me into the classroom. All the heads of the children who were now sitting at their desks, were turned



looking at the nun and me. I limped over to my desk but before I could sit down, she said, "Where are you off to, you little monkey?"

"I want my shoe."

"Loretta, would you teach this girl how to ask for things?"

"May I get my shoe, please Sr Ignatius?"

"Repeat what Mary Loretta said."

I got tongue-tied with the word Ignatius and said 'Egg-nose-uss', which made the nun cross and Mary Loretta laugh. I ducked under my desk and pulled my shoe out but when I straightened up, the nun was standing behind me. She pointed to a desk in the first row on the other side of the class.

"You sit there with the rest of the dunces," the nun said pointing to the desk at the front of the other side of the class.

I did what she told me, trying to walk without limping, knowing all the others were gawping at me.

"Hurry up. I can't be here all day watching to see if you do what you are told," the nun said. At that moment, the other door beside the big, long window full of small squares of glass opened.

A line of boys and girls came in. They had their heads bowed down like when the big people go up to the altar to receive Baby Jesus in their mouths. They didn't have their hands joined in front of them but stuck onto their sides as though they were glued. They only moved their

legs, shuffling them along the floor, making a soft rubbing sound.

They reminded me of Mr Delaney's two scrawny dogs. Mr Delaney is a friend of my Daddy's, but I don't like him because I saw him kicking the dogs with his big hobnail boots. His dogs move with their heads and shoulders falling towards the ground, and don't bark, run or jump about.

I turned around and looked at the children with their eyes looking down to the floor. When there was only a boy and a tall girl left standing, the nun said, "Úna McNulty stand up."

The girl called Úna McNulty had thick-glass glasses in a wiry frame stuck onto her nose, orange spiky hair and teeth that were too long to fit in her mouth. The nun told the toothy girl to sit in the desk behind me. I felt the desk behind shift as the girl with the carrot-hair sat down. I half turned around to look at her. The nun was pointing to where Úna McNulty had been sitting to the new girl and the boy. The girl, a long string, tall like me but narrow like a knitting-needle, and the boy, small and skinny, sat down.

The nun asked Mary Loretta to hand out the slates and the chalk to the children on the good side and told Úna McNulty to do the same on the dunce's side. When the girl with the pretty dress and shiny black shoes went up for the slates, she whispered something to the nun.

"Children, I want you to know this girl's name is Loretta, not Mary Loretta."

I wanted to stand up and said my name was Arlene, not Mary Arlene. But I did not because Mammy told me to be good and to remember children are to be seen, not heard.

The nun told us to copy down the numbers she was writing on the blackboard. Una McNulty behind me whispered, "Move a bit. Your back is not letting me see." The nun saw her and hurried down to look at our slates. The girl with the glasses had the numbers wrong and the nun called her a dunce. My numbers were right, and the nun put me back on the good side sitting beside Loretta. I leaned over her arm and saw the first number, which is like a stick, was done right but the little duck and the wiggly one was just scribbles.

She saw me looking and said, "Sister, the chalk is heavy. My hand is tired. I didn't want to write anymore."

"Of course dear, giving out the slates has you tired. Come up here to help me." The nun got the long cane from the desk and helped Loretta move the cane down the line of numbers and told us to say – one, two, three, four, five.

After a while, she put the cane back on the desk and clapped her hands. It meant we had to make a line go into the yard and wait for our mammies and daddies. The children with no names stayed in the classroom.