Lovereading4kids.co.uk

Helping you choose books for children

0-5 5-7 7-9 9-12 12+

Opening extract from

The Wish List

Written by

Eoin Colder

Published by

Penguin

All text is copyright of the author and illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.

CONTENTS

Chapter 1:	Double Act	1
Chapter 2:	Dead as Doornails	14
Chapter 3:	Unhappy Endings	24
Chapter 4:	Unwelcome Visitors	33
Chapter 5:	Makeover	54
Chapter 6:	Kissy Sissy	72
Chapter 7:	Football Crazy	90
Chapter 8:	The Equalizer	105
Chapter 9:	The Sad Bit	124
Chapter 10:	Burst Ball	139
Chapter 11:	A Spare Wish	147
Chapter 12:	Double Revenge	159
Chapter 13:	From a Great Height	175
Chapter 14:	Here and Thereafter	196

CHAPTER 1: DOUBLE ACT

MEG and Belch were doing a job. Meg and Belch. Sounded like some sort of comedy double act. But it wasn't. There was nothing funny about breaking into a pensioner's flat.

Raptor was slobbering on Meg's boots.

'Do we really need the mutt?' she hissed, wiping her dripping boot in the flowerbed.

Belch turned away from the window. Piggy eyes glared out from under gelled spikes of hair.

'Listen, Finn,' he whispered. 'Raptor is no mutt. He is a pure breed, from a long line.'

Meg rolled her eyes.

Belch returned to window-jimmying, worming the blade of the screwdriver between the frame and the sill.

For the thousandth time, Meg Finn wondered what she was doing here. How had she sunk this far – skulking around the granny flats with a lowlife like Belch Brennan? Her reflection glared accusingly from the window pane. For a second she saw the ghost of her mother in that face. The same wide blue eyes, the same braided blonde hair, even the same frown wrinkles between her eyebrows. What would Mam

think of this latest escapade? Meg's involuntary blush answered the question for her.

Something split in the window frame.

'We're in,' grunted Belch. 'Let's go.'

Raptor scrabbled up the wall into the dark interior. He was the point-dog, sent in to check for hostiles. His orders were simple. Bite everything. If it screamed, it was hostile.

The pit bull was not what you'd call a stealth canine and managed to barge into every stick of furniture on the ground floor.

'Why don't we just ring the bell?' groaned Meg.

'Oh stop your whining, Finn,' snorted Belch. 'Old Lowrie is deaf as a post anyway. You could set off fireworks in there and he wouldn't stop snoring.'

Belch hoisted his considerable bulk over the sill, exposing a drooping belly in the process. Meg shuddered. Disgusting.

Her partner's face appeared from the darkness.

'Are you coming, Finn?'

Meg paused. This was it. The line between bold and bad. The decision was hers.

'Well? You're not chickening out on me, are you?'

Meg bristled. 'I'm not afraid of anything, Belch Brennan!'

Belch chuckled nastily. 'Prove it.'

He was manipulating her, and she knew it. But Meg Finn could never resist a dare. Placing her palms on the ledge, she vaulted nimbly into the room.

'That's how to break and enter, you big clod,' she said primly.

That remark could cost her later. But even Belch wouldn't waste time wrestling when there was robbing to be done. Luckily, he had the memory span of a particularly thick goldfish, so with any luck he'd have forgotten all

about the comment by the time they'd completed their mission.

The room was musty, with a medicinal smell. Meg recognized it from the night she'd spent on the couch outside her mother's hospital room. The odours made what she was doing seem all the more terrible. How *could* she? Steal from a helpless pensioner?

She could because she needed the money to run away. Escape from Franco once and for all. Get on the ferry to Fishguard and never come back.

Think about the ferry, she told herself. Think about escaping. Get the money any way you can.

There was old-man stuff all over the room. Tins of pills and tubs of Vicks. Worthless. Belch pocketed them anyway.

'They could be heart pills, Belch,' whispered Meg. 'Your man could have a fit when he realizes he's been robbed. That'd make you a murderer.'

Belch shrugged. 'So what? One less crusty in the world. Oh the pain of it. Anyway, I don't know what you're whining about. Seein' as you're an accessory and all.'

Meg opened her mouth to object, but couldn't. It *was* true. She was an accessory to whatever happened here tonight.

'So give up yer moaning and go through the dresser. This old coot's got cash somewhere. All crusties do. So's they can leave it to someone!'

Another gem of wisdom from Belch. Her hand hovered over the knob on an ancient dresser. Open it, she told herself. Open it and face the consequences. Her fingers trembled, rigid with fear and shame. Ancient photographs lined the shelves. Yellowed eyes accused her from behind smoky glass. It was no use. Meg Finn might be bold, but she wasn't bad.

Belch elbowed her out of the way.

'Chicken,' he muttered in disgust.

That was when the light came on. Old Lowrie McCall stood on the stairs, brandishing an ancient shotgun. Obviously not as deaf as Belch had thought.

'What are you two at?' he rasped, his voice gravelly with sleep. It was a dopey sort of question really. Two intruders. Middle of the night. Up to their elbows in his stuff. What did he think they were doing?

Lowrie cocked the antique gun with his thumb. 'Well? I asked you a question.'

Belch belched casually, hence the name. 'We're robbin' the place, crusty. What does it look like?'

The old man descended the stairs, frowning. 'Actually, tubby, that's exactly what it looks like. Now get your paws out of my dresser before I ventilate your spotty head.'

Meg blinked. This was like something on the telly. One of those American cop shows where everyone had ponytails. If they were going to follow the script, then Belch would do something stupid, and the old chap would be forced to shoot the pair of them.

That's not what happened at all. What happened was that Raptor recognized the enemy and aimed for a bare leg hanging from the hem of a dressing gown.

The pit bull opened its jaws until the tendons cracked and gnashed down on Lowrie McCall's calf. The old man howled lustily, battering the dog with the shotgun's wooden stock. But he might as well have been bashing a cement block. Once Raptor had a hold on something, he wouldn't relinquish it until Belch told him – or it was dead.

Meg danced around frantically. 'Tell him to let go, Belch! Tell him!'

'No hurry. He needs to be taught a lesson after pointing a gun at me.'

'Get Raptor off him, Belch!' Meg screamed, and she snatched the gun from between Lowrie McCall's fingers.

Belch blinked. The stupid girl was crying! Blubbering away like a little fairy. And she had the gun pointed at Raptor.

'Ah here now, Finn!' It was funny, really. Didn't she know anything about shotguns?

'Call him off! I'm warning you.'

Belch spoke slowly, as one would to a toddler. 'That's a shotgun, eejit. You shoot from there and you'll splatter the old coot as well.'

Meg wavered for a moment. 'I don't care. At least he'll die quick. I'm giving you to three, Brennan. Seeing as you can't count to five.'

Belch mulled it over. He wasn't used to thinking so fast.

'One ...'

Would Meg really do it? Not likely. Too soft.

'Two ...'

Then again, after what she'd done to her stepda Franco. And she *was* a girl. Who knew with women?

'Thr–'

'OK, OK!' Best not to risk it. There'd be plenty of time for revenge later. 'Raptor! Heel, boy.'

The dog snarled, reluctant to release its wriggling prize.

'I SAID, HEEL!'

Instantly cowed, the pit bull spat out the remains of Lowrie McCall's calf and trotted to its master's side.

Meg ran to Lowrie McCall. He was spasming weakly on the lino, blood pumping from his open wound. There was

a pale gleam in the crimson. To her horror Meg realized that it was bone.

'What have we done?' she sobbed. 'What have we done?'

Belch was unaffected by the crisis. 'So, a wrinkly kicks the bucket a few days early. So what?'

Meg brushed the tears from her eyes. 'We have to call an ambulance, Belch! Right now!'

Belch shook his head. 'No can do, Finn. There's no turning back now.'

McCall's eyes were losing focus. 'Please,' he rasped.

Meg pointed the gun at Belch. 'Get out! Go on.'

'Forget it, Meg.'

'I'll take the blame. You just go!'

Belch snorted. 'Sure. Just tell the guards you bit his leg. They'll definitely believe that.'

It was true. Every guard in town knew Belch Brennan and his mutt. There was no way out of this one. For the first time in her life, Meg Finn wasn't going to be able to smartmouth her way out of trouble.

Then things got worse. Belch took advantage of his partner's consternation and snatched the gun. A yellow-toothed grin pasted itself across his features.

'Point a gun at me will you?'

Meg felt tears bubbling over her lids. 'He's bleeding bad, Belch. Dying, maybe!'

Belch shrugged. 'So what?' He raised his gaze to Meg. 'And now I've got you to deal with.'

'Belch! Call an –'

'My reputation is at stake. If any of the lads ever found out a girl pointed a gun at me and lived ...'

Meg knew Belch. He was going to make a big speech like he thought hard men were supposed to. By the end of it,

he'd be so worked up you wouldn't know what he'd do. Meg decided not to wait around long enough to find out. Without a word, she turned and flung herself through the still-open window.

Belch nodded at his eager pit bull. 'Hunt, boy. Run her down.'

Raptor licked his teeth and was off. His master took his time. There was no hurry now. No one ever escaped Raptor. He knelt beside the pale pensioner.

'Don't go anywhere, Lowrie. I'll be back in a minute.'

The old man didn't answer.

Meg had a plan when she made her bid for freedom. She would run to the first house with a light on, and hammer on the door. She knew now that she would rather face the police than let old Lowrie die. Meg made only one mistake. One fatal mistake. In all the confusion and darkness, she turned right instead of left. Left led into a central courtyard, overlooked by practically every one of the granny flats. Salvation. Right led into the maintenance area. The central aerial and gas tank. Dead end.

Raptor skidded around the corner. Invisible but for gleaming teeth and snorts of steam billowing from his nostrils. He stood his ground, blocking the alley back from the maintenance area.

'Shoo!' said Meg hopefully. 'Home, boy.'

If the dog could have chuckled derisively, he would have. There was no way the girl was getting past.

Belch's shadow fell across the confined space. 'You're a rubbish criminal, Finn. Running straight down a cul-de-sac.' The twin gun barrels poked from the shadows, like black eyes.

'Belch. For God's sake. Call an ambulance – it's not too late.'

''Fraid it is. For you, anyway.'

The curve of the gas tank was cold against Meg's back. The line of the weld rubbed along her spine. Nowhere to go. The gun barrels swivelled and aimed at her.

'Come on, Belch. This isn't funny.'

'I'm not laughing, Finn.'

It was true. He wasn't.

'You're not going to shoot me. So just give me the few punches and get it over with.'

Belch shrugged. 'I've no choice, really. It's all right for you. You're only a kid, but I'm sixteen. Responsible for my own actions. This'll mean prison. And I think you'd squeal.'

Just yesterday Meg would've said: You *think*, Belcher? Pull the other one. But not now. This was a different Belch. This was how he was in the dark.

'I won't squeal, Belch, sure I'm an accessory.'

'True. Still ...'

Belch let the sentence hang. Meg knew the onus was on her to prove her loyalty. She had to say what he wanted to hear.

'Who cares?' she mumbled, the words grating like broken glass in her throat. 'Who cares if another wrinkly dies? Not me, that's for sure.'

Belch studied her face, looking for the lie. Apparently he found it.

'Sorry,' he said, cocking the shotgun. 'I don't believe you.'

Then came the big mistake. The one that made all others on this night of bungling seem like minor errors. It was the last Belch would ever make.

Meg was right, Belch didn't intend to shoot her, just scare her a bit. Due to his hooligan ways, Belch Brennan was

familiar with shotguns and their scatter patterns. He was perfectly aware that firing at this range would probably ignite the gas tank, and blow them both to hell. But a little warning shot, over her head – that was a different matter. Belch pointed the barrels almost vertical and leaned on the trigger.

Meg saw it in his eyes. Saw exactly what he was going to do. Was he mad?

'No, Belch – don't!'

But it was too late. His finger was halfway through the motion. No time to change his mind. Not that Belch wanted to. His mouth was already grinning at the thought of Meg's expression.

The boom was tremendous, filling the confined space and pulsing through the alleyway. It rattled around Meg and Belch's heads, bursting their eardrums. But they didn't care, because by that time they were both dead.

One little pellet did it. One tiny ball-bearing with a nick on its curves. The nick acted like a fin, sending it spiralling off its intended course. It hissed downwards, superheating the air in a nanosecond. A new gas tank would have stopped it, and this one should have been replaced a decade ago. The rusted metal collapsed under the minuscule onslaught, allowing the white-hot sphere access to highly flammable gas – BOOM!

A blackened chunk of metal smashed into Meg Finn, knocking her soul clean out of her skin.

The first few moments as a spirit are very disconcerting. The mind still thinks everything is the way it used to be, and tries to force physics on to the spirit world. How can I be flying down a vast tunnel *and* looking at myself spread-

eagled across a ruptured gas tank? Obviously impossible. Conclusion: I'm dreaming.

So, Meg Finn told herself, I'm dreaming. A nice dream, for a change. No stepfathers with axes, or big lumps of guards trying to stuff her into the back of a police van. She decided to relax and enjoy it.

The tunnel was so huge as to appear boundless. The illusion was shattered by rings of blue light that pulsated along its length like the heartbeat of some fantastic creature. Other dots floated in the slightly liquid air. Meg realized these motes were, in fact, people.

People floating in a tunnel? Hadn't she heard something about that before? Something about a tunnel and a light.

So, Meg Finn told herself: I'm dead. She waited for the revelation to have some tremendous impact on her. Nothing. No convulsions. No screaming or hitching sobs. It was as though the tunnel itself had anaesthetized her mind. Not that her life had been any great shakes in the first place. She was probably better off out of it. Maybe she'd even get to see Mam again. Although her mother was probably in heaven, and Meg doubted that she was headed that way.

Maybe she could con Saint Peter with the sociology thing. It wasn't my fault. Society is to blame, blah di blah di blah. Always worked in juvenile court. There wasn't a dry eye in the place when Meg milked the story of her Mam's accident. Heaven might be a harder nut to crack.

Someone was calling her name. Must be an angel sent to talk her down the celestial landing strip. Still though, a bit woofy for an angel. You imagined them playing harps, with voices as sweet as ... well ... angels. Whatever this was, it sounded like it was chewing on a potful of tarmacadam.

Meg turned slowly. She wasn't the only person floating

on this particular current. Someone, or something, was spinning along beside her. One minute it was a dog, the next a boy. Canine features bubbled under a human skin, poking through like computer effects. It was horrible. Grotesque. Yet strangely familiar.

'Belch?' said Meg uncertainly. 'Is that you?'

Her voice sounded strange. Like there were holes in it. The thing that had been Belch could only howl in Scoobeydoo fashion. But it was her partner all right, unmistakably so. And it looked like the gas tank had done a real job on the boy and his mutt. Belch and Raptor, all mixed up like they'd been dumped in a blender. Oddly enough, the new mix suited Belch. As though it had been inside him all the time.

'Belch? Get a grip, will you?'

The dog-boy could only stare in horror as his fingers morphed from stubby digits to pit-bull claws. Tears and slobber rolled down his face, dripping in large gobbets from a furry chin.

Oh no, thought Meg. First I get saddled with him on Earth, now I have to put up with him for all eternity!

'Meg! Help me.'

Belch was giving her the puppy eyes. Pathetic.

'Get stuffed, Belch! You tried to kill me!'

She blinked. Belch *had* killed her! He'd killed them all!

'Murderer!' shouted Meg.

The old Belch would have retaliated. But not the new thing. He just ... *it* just whined pathetically.

'This is all your fault, Belch!' screamed Meg. 'I told you not to shoot! I told you!'

They hurtled around a bend. Up ahead the tunnel split in two. That didn't take a whole lot of figuring. Up and down.

Good and bad. Heaven and hell. Meg swallowed. This was it. Payback for all the cruelty she'd inflicted on the people of Newford.

The currents bore them along at a terrific speed. There was no friction. No winds whipping at their clothes or ballooning their cheeks. Just an increasing heat-blast from the lower branch of the tunnel. As they drew closer, Meg could make out cinder-blackened figures with pitchforks dislodging stragglers clinging to the wall. Hurrying them along on their way to hell.

This wasn't real. It couldn't be happening to her. Fourteen-year-olds didn't die; they went through a troublesome phase and grew out of it.

Meg could see details now. The red demon-eye glow of the tunnel creatures. The silvery glint of their prongs. The job satisfaction in their grins.

Belch whined in dumb terror, pinwheeling his arms in the heavy air, as if that could save him. Meg steeled herself.

The gate to hell loomed before them. It seemed as large as the sun, and almost as hot. Meg balled her fists. She wasn't going down easy.

Then her course changed. Just a nudge to starboard, but enough to steer her away from the lower passage. A relieved sigh exploded from her lungs. Purgatory, limbo, reincarnation – she didn't care. Anything was better than whatever waited at the end of the red tunnel.

The Belch-Raptor combo wasn't so lucky. In a second the fiery current had him and he was gone, spinning into the inferno.

Meg had no time to worry about the fate of her associate. Whatever power had been guiding her suddenly vanished, leaving her careering with the force of her own momentum.

The tunnel wall reared before her. It looked soft. Soft and blue. Please let it be soft ...

No such luck. Meg smashed into a unforgiving surface with an Earth speed of four hundred miles per hour. Not that speed makes any actual difference on the spiritual plain where kinetics are out the window. That's not to say that it didn't hurt.