Lovereading4kids.co.uk

Helping you choose books for children

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

opening extract from

Solace of the Road

written by

Siobhan Dowd

published by

David Fickling Books,

a division of Random House Children's Books

All text is copyright © 2009 The Literary Estate of Siobhan Dowd

please print off and read at your leisure.

One

Fishguard

I breezed down the line of cars, so cool you'd never have known I was looking for a way to board the boat.

I strolled along easy, blonde, the wig catching the light. Then I spotted it. A shiny navy four-by-four, seven-seater and no kids. The owners, grey-haired coat-flappers, had just got out, leaving the front doors wide open. They were metres away, looking out to sea, talking to somebody further up the queue.

They were mogits, one hundred per cent. Mogit's the word Trim, Grace and I made up in Templeton House and it stands for Miserable Old Git.

I glanced in. Coats, magazines, newspapers. A child seat, but no child. Untidy. Perfect. I got in through the passenger door and squeezed into the back.

It smelled of dog hair and plastic, all mixed up. I curled up on the floor and covered myself over with the coats. It was quiet, dark and still. I couldn't hear the wind.

I was off to Ireland under my own steam.

I waited. My skin prickled. My nose twitched. Jeez, agony. *What the hell am I doing here?* It was like I'd jolted awake in the middle of a dream to find I was in the same place and the dream was real. I nearly got up and dashed out but the owners came back. I froze. They got in and the four-by-four shook. That's when the wig slipped. I felt it topple off the side of my head and I couldn't do a thing. I scrunched up my eyes and clenched my teeth. The owners started talking. The car doors banged shut and the engine started.

'About time,' Mr Mogit grumbled. 'We've been hanging around all morning.'

'Your decision to leave at the crack of dawn. Not mine.' (Mrs Mogit.)

'It was my contingency time.'

'You and your contingencies.'

'What about the time the tyre blew?'

'What *about* the time the tyre blew?'

'You were glad we left early then.'

'That was years ago. Before the grandchildren. Before the *children*!'

'So. We're due another contingency any minute.'

'Saints preserve us. Stop gurning. Your man's waving us on.'

I didn't know what they were on about. Con-ten-gin-sea. It sounded like a weirdo cocktail, the kind you'd get at the Clone Zone. They had odd accents, these mogits, not like the other Irish people I knew. Not like Mammy or Denny, the nightmare man. Certainly not like Miko. But I was glad they were arguing, because they didn't turn round. Mr Mogit

revved the engine. We crept forward. We must have got to the ticket kiosk because I could hear the ferry officer checking their tickets. Would he spot the bulge on the floor at the back? I felt my luck tiptoeing away. Without the wig on, Solace was gone. I was plain old Holly Hogan again, the girl nobody wanted. But no. A miracle. The car banged over the ramp and there was a boomerang echo. Then voices, doors slamming, metal drumming. And somewhere the ship's engine, deep and hot, turning. Even though I was under the coats, I could feel a strange heat rising and the pipes and the low-slung ceiling looming overhead, like somebody pinning me down the way they did when they locked me in at the secure unit.

I held my breath.

'Don't forget the food,' Mr Mogit called. His voice felt close now we were inside the boat's belly.

'I've got it here at my feet.'

'Great. Parma ham with cheese.'

'Ach, shut it.'

'Can't take a joke.'

'Not after six hours cooped up in here. This journey's been as long as a wet week. Let's get out.'

'Shall we take the coats?'

That's it. Caught.

'It's broiling. It's sunscreen we need.'

Mr Mogit laughed. 'You're something else. Pass the bag over.'

I heard shuffling. The four-by-four shuddered as they got out.

‘It’s the bowels of hell down here,’ Mrs Mogit said. ‘Let’s go straight up on deck.’

Now or never. They’ll give the car a once-over and see me, or they won’t.

The front doors slammed shut at the same time. Then something happened that I hadn’t bargained for.

KRAAACRUUUNKK.

They’d locked the doors all at once with me inside. Oh, God. I could hear a muffle of voices drifting away.

When you’re in a car and somebody’s locked it from the outside, can you get out?

If you can’t get out, can you open the window?

If you can’t open the window, how long can you breathe the air that’s in the car? Does it last a crossing of the Irish Sea?

If it runs out before you get to the other side, do you die?

The questions fizzed in my brain like angry bees. I stayed rigid. Doors slammed. People walked by. Once the four-by-four rocked when somebody bumped into it. Then the noises of the cars and people went away. All I could hear was the big hot sound of the boat.

I pushed the coats back from my face and found myself staring up at cream and green flecks on the car ceiling. Then the flecks dissolved and instead I saw the sky house. The sky house is the last place I lived with Mam, way back. The clouds pressed up against the windows. Mammy and Denny were arguing, then they were laughing and the ice in Mam’s see-through drink

was clicking and I was holding out an empty tube of toothpaste. *No. Not that.* I scrubbed the scene out like chalk from a blackboard. Mam was sitting at the mirror again, in her black dress, the one with the slinky halter-neck. The wind was in her hair even though she was indoors. And I was brushing her hair. *That's better. Don't stop brushing, Holly, for love nor money.*

But I was here alone with the cream and green flecks. I felt a hot tear roll down my face. They'd come and gone, the good guys, the bad, the ones who cared and the most who didn't. There was only me left and the hollow *boom-boom* of the ship. I saw my dream of Ireland winking at me, but how can you sail into a dream? Dreams are like mirrors. You walk towards them and a cold pane of glass stops you.

Ireland. Green grass, moving.

Mam singing, *Sweet dreams are made of this.*

Cows going over the hill.

Freedom.

Where dogs laugh, showing their bellies.

And Mam smiles. *Welcome home, love.*

I sat up on the seat, stroking the wig on my lap. The seat leather was grey and soft. My cheeks burned. I breathed. *Calm down, Holl.* I tried the door.

Locked.

I pressed the buttons to scroll down the window. Nothing.

Stay cool, girl.

I peered out. Dim lighting, car on car, lines of bumpers, empty glass, drab colours. Then a lurch and roll. We were moving.

Jeez. Mrs Mogit was right. It was the bowels of hell down here. My stomach tilted, a half-beat behind the rest of me. I banged the windows. I hollered like a trumpet but the swaying didn't stop. The airless heat will pass me out, I thought. *Mammy*, I thought. *You're out there somewhere. On the other side of the glass. Come and get me.*

Let me out. Please. Somebody. Anybody.

Let.

Me.

Out.

The boat rolled. I screamed. I pounded the glass.

The darkness came down like a blanket in my brain. Underneath, the sea yawned. But nobody came.

Two

The Placement Prospect

In the darkness, I was falling backwards to where I'd started my journey. The road I'd taken disappeared from under my feet, the mountains and castles and hills and tarmac crumbled and I was at the beginning again, back to how I left the Home. And that was down to Miko.

'Miko,' I said out loud. 'Miko? Where've you gone?' And there he was, in my mind, smiling at me. Tall as a door, with a mean whisper of hair. He was looking down at me from the top of a hill, his guitar slung over his back. *Hurry, hurry, Holly Hogan*, he sang. It was the tune he made up for me, the time we all went to Devon. *Before the road disappears beneath your feet.* Then he shook his head and turned away and vanished.

Miko was my key worker at Templeton House. That meant I was his special concern. His name was short for Michael and pronounced My-co. He had a unicorn tattoo on his forearm and he could juggle anything: slices of toast, a jam jar and a bunch of keys.

Miko taught me to upend my mattress against the wall and kick it until all the nail-bomb bits in my brain stopped blowing. And though he didn't have an accent, Miko was Irish originally, just like me and just like my mam. I liked him fine. He was on my side.

I was fourteen. I'd been in Templeton House longer than anyone, counting Miko. I'd seen them come and go, the staff and the care-babes both, but I liked it best now Miko was around. Miko helped me paint my room green and white. Over the window he'd hung the gold curtains my friend Grace and I'd found down the indoor market. So my room was green, white and gold, the colours of Ireland, and Ireland was in my room.

My room had all my best things. Drew from Storm Alert, my favourite band, smouldered down with his brown eyes from the wall posters. On the bed was Rosabel, the fluffy toy dog I'd had for ever. Rosabel followed me everywhere when I was little. I fed her bits of dinner and they'd pile up between her paws and go off. Then when Miko came he said, 'Holly, it's getting old.' I was twelve. So I put Rosabel at the foot of the bed and there she stayed, warming my feet, and I stopped pretending she was real.

Most precious of all was Mam's amber ring in my shell box on the shelf.

Templeton House was for six kids – three boys, three girls. The boys slept in the annexe at the back and the girls slept in rooms upstairs. Grace was my favourite girl and Trim my favourite boy. They were a year older than me. Trim's second name was Trouble

and Grace's was Gorgeous. Grace, Trim and me went out cruising the tubes most Sundays and sometimes school days too. We were the hairy-scary care-babes and the younger ones stayed out of our way.

Miko said in his reports how I was sliding. I needed to stop letting others lead me off the rails. By 'others', he meant Grace and Trim but he never said so.

Then one day he came into the lounge and said, 'Holly, I've news for you.'

We were watching the *Titanic* sink for the fiftieth time. It was lashing down rain outside and there was nothing else to do. There I was, sprawled on the bean-bag with Grace leaning against my legs so I could sort through her beauty braids. I could hardly keep my eyes open, the rain made me so dreamy. I was imagining I was back in Ireland where it rains all the time. I hadn't been there since I was small but I could see it still. I thought myself onto a green hill with Mam on the top. She was wearing her black halter-neck and her hair was rippling and shining in the wind. And the rain was so soft it was like walking through silk.

We'd got to the bit where Kate W runs to get the axe.

'Shut the fuck up,' Trim raved at Miko. *Titanic* was Trim's all-time favourite film. Munching a crisp was enough to wind Trim up when *Titanic* was playing.

'Yeah, what news, Miko?' I asked, not really interested, and Trim smashed his fist to within an inch of my nose.

Miko jerked his head, meaning 'outside'. So I left Kate W running down the ship's corridor and followed Miko out to the little staff office with all the files. The files were lined up in grey boxes and each person's name was on at least one box, and the longer they'd been in Templeton House the more boxes they had. I had six boxes, more than anyone.

Miko sat on the swivel chair. I sat on a wooden fold-up chair by the window and rested my trainers on the edge of the litterbin. You could see the garden from there and it was grey and brown and dripping, which was fine. I was smiling, thinking how if I was Kate W with the axe I'd have gone for the creepy man who wants to marry her.

'Holly,' Miko said.

'Yeah. What?'

'Do you want to know what's new or not?'

'Whatever.'

'It's a placement prospect, Holly.'

I shrugged. I'd heard that one before. It never came to anything.

'It's just what you wanted. Nice-sounding couple. No kids.'

He was grinning ear to ear like I'd won the lottery. I reached over and got a scrunched-up ball of paper out of the bin and dropped it from one hand into the other.

'You're in *serious* luck, this time,' Miko said.

'Oh, yeah?'

'Honestly. I've chatted it over with Rachel.' Rachel is my social worker, which is different from a key

worker. A key worker lives part-time in the Home with you and the social worker just works nine to five in an office, same as anyone.

'She's met them and she thinks they're really good people,' Miko was going.

Good people. I put a finger in my mouth, down my throat.

'OK. *Nice* people. They have a very pretty house. Victorian and all done up. You'd have a room all your own. And like I said, no kids.'

'Are they Irish?' I said.

'Hey?'

'Grace only has black placements. So I only want Irish.'

'C'mon, Holly. Their name's Aldridge. Which isn't very Irish. But most English people have a bit of Irish somewhere – it's a fact.'

'Huh.'

'So?'

'So what?'

'What d'you *think*, Holly?'

I threw the paper ball right at Miko but instead of it hitting him in the nose like I'd intended, he caught it real fast.

'That's what I think,' I said. 'Crap-ville.'

Miko threw the paper ball right back at me and I hit it back and we volleyed it around some and then he headed it straight back into the litterbin.

'Aw, Holly,' he said.

'Aw, Miko,' I said. I couldn't help smiling. Miko was the best footballer I knew not signed up

professional. 'I don't want a placement,' I said. 'I like it fine here.'

'But school, Holly. You never go. With the Aldridges you'd start fresh at a new school. A better school.'

I looked as if to say *Throw me another lemon.*

'Holly.' Miko's voice went quiet.

'Yeah?'

'Don't pass this placement up on my account. Will you?'

I got the zipper of my sweatshirt and gave it a yank. 'Ha ha. As if.'

'Because, Holly, there's something I want you to know.'

'Yeah, what?'

'I'm leaving here.'

There was a long silence. I turned back to the window and watched the raindrops cruising down like ants on a doomed mission. 'Leaving?' My voice felt small. 'What d'you mean, leaving?'

'I'm applying for a new job. It's time.'

The rules said that when you and your key worker parted company, that was the end of all contact. For ever.

'But what about our summer plans, Miko? We're going back to Devon again, right? You promised. You're gonna teach us surfing, right? What about those plans, Miko?'

He didn't answer.

'What d'you mean it's time?' I could feel myself losing it.

Then Miko's hand was on my shoulder. 'Oh, Holly.'

'You're my key worker, Miko. You and me. We're a team. You said.'

'It's hard, really hard to explain. See . . .'

I bit my lip.

'I've got to go, Holly. There's nothing much I can do here any more. You're on a slide. Like I keep saying. You need a real home. You deserve a real home. And the Aldridges have one. Just waiting for you. Trust me, Holly.'

I got up from the chair and gripped the hard edge. I didn't want Miko to see my face so I turned back to the window and stared out at the dismal trees.

'And I've got to go for another reason, Holly. It's the shift work. It's ruining my relationship.' He was talking about his girlfriend, Yvette. Up to then I'd never even thought she was real, with a name like that.

' 'S wet out there,' I said.

'Just agree to meet them. Then see how you feel, Holly. Go on. Please.'

I stared at the dead leaves stuck on the lawn. 'Soaking.'

'Is that a yes, Holly?'

I didn't answer.

'Just a yes to meeting them, no strings attached?'

I waved a hand at him. 'Yeah, Miko. Whatever you want. I'm going back to watch all those Irish people in third class get freed.'

And I drifted back to the lounge and the *Titanic* was half in and half out of the water at a bad angle.

Grace was hunched on the floor, starting to paint her toenails a weird colour that the bottle said was called XTC. The room stank like bad deodorant. The room always stank like bad deodorant. Trim was sitting up on the sofa's back and punching the air as the ship went down.

I sat next to Grace. 'Pass the bottle over, Grace. I'll do the rest for you.'

But instead I splattered a load of polish down on the oatmeal carpet like violet sick.

'What d'you do that for, cow-witch?' Grace screeched.

'Shut the fuck up,' Trim raved.

Placement prospect? More like pass the bloody parcel.

Templeton House without Miko? I'd rather have a ticket on the *Titanic* any day.