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THE LONELY LIFE OF BIDDY WEIR

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‘This is **a touching story** of the effects of bullying and how it can change a person’s view of themselves’

The Whispering of the Pages

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Lesley Allen

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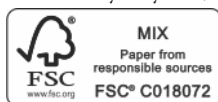
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For Aimee



'It's weird not to be weird'
John Lennon



Prologue

A phone call – Cove Cottage, Ballybrock, July 2000

It was the claws, digging at her chest, pulling her upwards, yanking at her pyjama top, that finally dragged Biddy from her sleep. That and the noise: the steady humming. She thought it was the falcons to begin with, come to rescue her again, lift her up and fly her to safety. But the sound confused her, displaced her. It wasn't their normal *keck*-ing call. She had never heard this sound from a bird before. And then suddenly she was aware of the weight. Something was pressing on her chest, pushing her down while the falcons tried to lift her up. Was it Alison? Was Alison trying to stop them? Would she never leave her alone?

'Go-way,' she mumbled, slightly panicked. 'Go-way. Leave-me-lone.'

The claws plucked again, this time piercing her skin, shocking her into consciousness.

'Bertie!' she squealed at the black, fluffy mass perched on her chest. The startled cat rolled onto the bed beside her as she sat up, rubbing at her eyes. The bedroom sparkled with warm speckled sunlight filtering in through the blue gingham curtains, bouncing off the gleaming white furniture. It was such a contrast from her bedroom at home, dull and heavy even on the brightest summer mornings.

The little blue clock on the bedside table said 10.35 a.m. 'No,' she gasped aloud. She never slept in, ever. Then again, it had



been almost 6 a.m., her normal rising time, before she'd finally climbed back under the duvet after the dream and gone back to sleep. She checked her watch, but yes, the clock was correct. Bertie meowed loudly, obviously irritated at having to wait so long for his breakfast. She wondered how late in the day she would have slept if he hadn't jumped on top of her, demanding to be fed.

As she began to prepare herself for the day ahead, Biddy's mood was buoyant and resolved, but tinged with nervous disquiet. She looked at herself in the bathroom mirror as she brushed her teeth. Although she was becoming more accustomed to her reflection, she still avoided close-up eye contact. But today she brought her face as far up to the mirror as her focus would allow. She noticed with surprise how green her eyes were. They looked exactly the same colour as the green-eyed double-breasted cormorant's. How come, in all her thirty years, she had never noticed that before?

She made herself a bacon and tomato sandwich: it was too late for porridge, but too early for lunch. Brunch, she thought, as she munched it on the patio, I'm having brunch. She thought about Penny Jordan and smiled a great big beaming smile at Bertie, who was sitting on the outdoor table staring at her, waiting patiently for some scraps of bacon.

It was another warm day and the light was perfect. But she wouldn't go down to the beach to paint today as she had previously planned. No, she mustn't tire herself out, or worse, lose track of time. She would still do Terri's painting, but it could wait until tomorrow. Today she had something else to do. Something much more important. So she stayed on the patio and sketched Bertie. He'd fallen asleep after feasting on her leftover bacon,



and was now comfortably curled up on one of the patio chairs, drenched in a shaft of sunlight. There was something irresistible about his easy contentment and the soft curve of his body, and though she'd never drawn a cat before, never drawn any creature other than a bird, Biddy was pleased with the likeness. She'd give this to Terri too. She liked Bertie. He was good company, and he was too old and too fat to chase birds. She decided she wouldn't mind having a cat like him at home. Maybe Terri could help her find one.

Around 3 p.m., Biddy began to feel properly agitated. Butterflies as big as bats flapped ferociously in her stomach, thrashing against her ribcage, soaring into her chest. And a nagging doubt drummed in her head, spawning questions she didn't want to hear and was afraid to answer. What if it all goes wrong? What if they catch you out? What if you mess it up? What if you get into trouble? She tried to ignore the crescendo of *what ifs* and focus on the dream instead. She couldn't let herself give up now. She just couldn't. If she did, then she'd be exactly the same person she had been her whole life long: a worthless weirdo. Better to be a weirdo who had done something, who had stood up for herself at least once in her life, than a weak, pathetic, gutless one, who couldn't even be brave for just one single day.

She decided to write down the words she needed to say, like a script. That would help her to concentrate. When she was finished, she made herself a cup of tea and managed a bite from one of Terri's oatmeal biscuits.

Then she waited.

At ten minutes to five, Biddy went into the living room and sat down on the edge of the red velvet chair. She didn't want

to slouch right back into it as she had yesterday afternoon, as she couldn't be too comfy. She had to stay focused and alert. Maybe the leather sofa would be better? But then she wouldn't see the screen quite as well, and she needed to. Even though she would have to turn the sound down, she absolutely must be able to see the screen. She settled on the chair, flicked onto the right channel and turned down the sound straightaway so that the last few minutes of the previous programme, a children's show, didn't distract her. The notebook she had used to write the script in sat on her lap and she held the telephone in her right hand. Perhaps she should have contacted Terri and asked her permission to use the phone? The call might be expensive. No, she dismissed the thought, Terri wouldn't mind. She was sure of it. Terri was going to be proud of her. And anyway, she'd pay her for the call.

Then another thought triggered a new panic. What if she didn't get through? What if she'd got herself all geared up for this, the bravest, most courageous, most outrageous thing she'd ever done in her whole life, and she didn't get through? She decided to dial the number there and then, before the show had even started. She knew it off by heart. Even though she'd never considered calling before, she'd heard that number repeated so many times that it was etched in her brain.

'Good afternoon and welcome to *Honey's Pot*. My name's Miranda. What can I do for you today?'

Biddy couldn't speak. The shock of actually getting through and hearing someone's voice, a real member of the *Honey's Pot* team who was right there in the studio, somewhere in the background, almost made her hang up.

'Hello? Hi? Hello? Anyone there?'

Biddy managed a noise. It wasn't decipherable, but it was enough to stop Miranda from hanging up.

'Are you calling about today's show?' Miranda asked softly. She sounded kind, thought Biddy. Sincere.

'Uh-huh.'

'Please don't be shy. I know it's a tricky subject today, one of the most difficult issues we've covered actually, but we all feel it's really important. Do you have personal experience?'

'Uh-huh.'

'Would you like to tell me about it?'

Biddy was sweating so much now that she was worried the phone might slip out of her hand. She didn't know what to do next. She hadn't rehearsed this bit in her script, hadn't really thought about this part of the procedure. She took a deep breath.

'Uh-huh.'

On the other end of the line, Miranda Moore waited patiently. She hoped to be in front of the camera herself someday and was using her researcher job to learn how to talk to people, how to coax them into telling her their problems and reveal their secrets, just like the show's famous host did. But unlike her boss, she definitely wasn't going to be a bitch to her team off camera.

'Listen, why don't I ask you a couple of questions,' she said gently, 'and if you feel like answering them, fine, and if you don't, fine. And we'll take it from there. Will that do?'

'Yes,' Biddy managed a whisper this time. 'Fine.'

'Good. Great. OK. Now then, first of all, can you tell me your name?'

Biddy panicked again. Her name! Of course they would want her name. Now what was she going to do?



‘It doesn’t have to be your real name,’ Miranda had guessed her dilemma. She was used to it. ‘You can use any name you like, really. It’s your story, your experience we’re interested in anyway, not your name.’

‘Bridget,’ Biddy said quickly, remembering the first day she had met Terri and she’d asked if that was her real name. ‘Bridget . . .’ she hesitated, what surname would she give? ‘Just Bridget.’

‘OK, Bridget. That’s fine. Great. And where do you live? Again, you don’t have to say the exact location, just the area, really, is all we need.’

‘Erm, Northern Ireland.’

‘Thought so,’ Miranda sounded almost delighted. ‘Love your accent. So, Bridget, were you bullied yourself?’

Biddy swallowed hard. What on earth was she doing? She hadn’t thought this through at all. Who the hell did she think she was?

‘Bridget?’ Miranda’s voice was low, concerned. ‘Please don’t be frightened. Maybe if you told your story it would help, you know. Kind of get rid of your demons, so to speak.’

Biddy let out a half gasp, half laugh. Get rid of your demons, this Miranda with the kind voice had just said. Face your demons, Terri had said. This was a sign. Surely, this was a sign that she was doing the right thing after all.

‘Bridget, are you still there? Are you OK? Look, there’s no pressure. You don’t have to do this, rea—’

‘No,’ Biddy interrupted. ‘No, I do. I do. I want to. I have to.’

‘OK,’ said Miranda, ‘OK. Well, we’ll take it slowly, and any time you want to stop, that’s fine. So, Bridget from Northern Ireland, what happened to you, then? You were bullied, right?’

‘Yes.’





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'At school? Or work? Or somewhere else, perhaps?'

'School. At school.'

'And how long did it last, Bridget?'

'Seven years,' Biddy swallowed.

So did Miranda.

'Seven years! Right.' She hadn't expected that. She had assumed people were only bullied for a little while. A year or two at most. And then someone would stop it. She hadn't thought this through either. 'So, what did they do to you, Bridget, these bullies?'

'Things,' said Biddy tentatively, realising it would take all day to tell Miranda her full story. She saw from the TV screen that the programme had already started. She had to move quickly now, as other people would now be phoning in. 'Lots of things.'

'Was it physical, or psychological?' Miranda was aware that she needed to get a move on too. Between her and the other operators, Michael and Holly, they needed to select three callers and she had a hunch that Bridget would be a good one.

'Mostly psychological,' replied Biddy. 'But the main one, Al . . .' she hesitated, 'the main one, she shoved me a few times. And it was because of her I hurt myself.'

'You self-harmed?' Miranda was even more certain now that this caller would be excellent live, if she could just boost her confidence a little. She fitted the criteria exactly.

'Uh . . .' Biddy's voice trailed off. That wasn't exactly what she meant; she'd been referring to the fall on the mountain, but now she realised with a jolt that yes, the pins and the biting were indeed harmful and not the comfort mechanisms she'd believed them to be for years.





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Miranda asked another couple of questions. Were the bullies ever reprimanded? Did she still see any of them? Did what happened still affect her? As Miranda talked, Biddy's breathing regulated and the thumping noise in her chest eased. She managed to give clear, if brief, replies to each query.

'OK, Bridget. I think you've been very brave calling us today, and I think we'll be asking you to speak live on the programme in a little while. Do you think you can do that?'

Biddy breathed in deeply.

'Yes,' she exhaled.

'Great. Fab. You'll be great. Now, just two more questions, Bridget, and then we'll get your number and phone you back in a minute or two. OK?'

'OK.'

'Great. I think you're very brave, Bridget, I really do, as I sense how difficult this is for you, and I'm so sorry to have to ask this, but can you tell me one really bad thing that this girl did to you? The main one you mentioned earlier. Or something really terrible that happened because of her?'

Biddy swallowed hard and ran her tongue over her dry lips.

'Well . . .' she paused and breathed in again. 'Well, I suppose I nearly died because of her.'





Part 1: the birth (and near death) of a weirdo

Ballybrock, November 1979

1.

Biddy Weir was two months shy of her tenth birthday when she discovered she was a bloody weirdo. The awful revelation was a shock, to her at any rate, and from that fateful day Biddy's life was defined not by her religion, the colour of her skin, or her sex; nor by what school she went to, her political persuasion or even which side of town she lived in: but by her oddness, by the undeniable, irrevocable fact that she was a weirdo, and a bloody one at that.

As far as Biddy knew, she was the only weirdo who lived in Ballybrock, a small quiet seaside town with church spires and hilly streets and seven fish and chip shops. And lots and lots of seagulls. There were others, of course, like the old lady with wispy pink hair and bright red lipstick who pushed her pet poodles around in a scruffy old Silver Cross pram. And the tall young man with the long wild beard who called himself The Poet. He walked up and down Ballybrock High Street fifty-one times each morning before going into Josie's corner shop to buy a quarter of midget gems and a packet of Rizlas. Josie always wondered where he bought his tobacco, but she never dared to ask. Then there were Billy and Ella, Ballybrock's resident drunks, who loved each other with a passion often openly displayed in





public and lived for half of the year in the town's decaying bandstand. Nobody knew where they went for the other half.

But Biddy didn't *know* that these people were weirdos, for no one ever told her. They probably didn't even know themselves. For although the people of Ballybrock would snigger and whisper and look at each other knowingly when they passed them in the street, recoiling and pulling faces and talking about how 'bloody weird' they were, nobody actually called any one of them a bloody weirdo to their face. Not once.

But Biddy knew that she was one, for Biddy had been told.

Ballybrock was a nice enough kind of a place, not picture-postcard pretty, but generally pleasing. There was a rough pebble beach which ran the whole way along one end of the town and was shaded by a big stone wall. People would sit on the wall in summertime, eating their chips from crumpled old newspapers or licking their ice creams, shooing away the hordes of greedy gulls. Further along the promenade stood the bandstand where Billy and Ella lived, and a big old cannon sat proudly on the end of the pier. Right in the centre of Ballybrock was a small park with swings and a pond with a little island in the middle where peacocks and caged coloured birds lived.

There were never any bombs or shootings in Ballybrock, not like lots of other places in the Northern Ireland at that particular time. In Ballybrock 'The Troubles' rarely troubled anyone. The people were mostly friendly and, on the surface anyway, didn't seem to care if their neighbour was a Catholic or a Protestant. They looked out for one another and smiled and nodded as they passed each other on the street. And each year on the 12th July, regardless of what church they did or didn't go to, most of the





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residents of Ballybrock lined the High Street to watch the bands parade in all their finery.

Most folk who passed through Ballybrock concluded that it must be a pleasant place to live. And all things considered, it was. Just as long as you weren't a bloody weirdo like Biddy Weir.

Biddy had always known that she was different from the other girls at school. Her appearance, for a start, was a bit of a giveaway. Throughout her years at school, her uniform was either far too big or much too small. Regardless of her age, there never seemed to be a time when it was just the right fit. Her socks, which were supposed to be beige, were generally a strange colour of puce, and sometimes didn't even match. And her scruffy shoes were often laced with scraps of coloured wool from her grandmother's needlework box, which had sat on the sideboard since the old lady's death. But it was Biddy's hair that really made her look, shall we say, unusual. She was the only girl in her class who didn't have long glossy plaits or swishing pigtails tied at the top with shiny blue bows. Biddy's hair was copper and curly, neither long nor short, and it stuck out in every direction. But Biddy wasn't interested in pigtails or plaits. Looking pretty as a concept, or even an objective, never crossed her mind.

Biddy didn't have a proper school bag either, just an old string shopper with broken handles, which she tried to patch together with wool or thread, or even Sellotape.

And then there was her name. Her real name, that is, not the one she would become known by when she was almost ten years old. All of the other girls in her class had nice, sensible names like Julia or Jacqueline or Georgina. But Biddy's young mother, Gracie, who had not really been ready to have a child of her





own when her daughter was born, named her after a cat who had adopted her family when Gracie was eight. There had been many Flynn family cats over the years, they came and went with regular ease. But Old Biddy was special. She stayed far longer than any of the other cats and had only died the week before Gracie went into labour.

‘I’m not bloody well naming her after your mother,’ Gracie had screamed hysterically at Biddy’s father on his first visit to the hospital to meet his baby daughter, when he had tentatively suggested that Margaret might be a much more suitable name. ‘And just be thankful it wasn’t a boy.’ He didn’t dare ask what the boy’s name might have been.

As it turned out, Gracie Weir had swiftly realised that she wasn’t ready to be a mother and, in actual fact, had never really intended to become a wife. So, when Biddy was just six months old, Gracie ran away to join a travelling fair. The family never heard from her again.

So, that left Biddy, her middle-aged father and his elderly mother. Mrs Weir senior helped to rear the child as best she could while her darling son continued to work as a bookkeeper at Morrison’s, the local hardware store. She cursed the day that Gracie, ‘that little harlot’, had come to work at the store. At fifty, her boy Howard was much too old to leave home, and Mrs Weir had assumed that she’d succeeded in her life’s ambition – to keep him all to herself. The shame of the whole affair with Gracie and the child had nearly killed her.

‘But you’re more than twice her age,’ old Mrs Weir had gasped when Howard sat her down in their dark parlour to break the news, thrusting a cup of sweet tea and two Marie biscuits into her hands. ‘It’s disgusting. Filthy. How could you let



this happen, Howard? How could you do this to me?' It was even worse than when her late husband, Harold, had been hit by the train and killed.

Mrs Weir had consoled herself by believing that Gracie Flynn was nothing more than a shameless opportunist who had seduced her darling Howard for financial security and a roof over her head. None of this was Howard's doing, of course. Helen, the nice young secretary at Morrison's (not nice enough for her son, mind you), told her that Gracie had recently moved into one of those new council housing estates on the outskirts of town with her family – all ten of them. Nobody seemed to know where the Flynns had come from, but word was, they had a bit of a reputation for trouble. In Mrs Weir's mind, that explained everything. After all, Howard couldn't possibly have done the seducing himself as, quite frankly, he wouldn't have known where to start. She suspected that Gracie and her abundant family were really gypsies who'd been forced to live 'normal lives' by the powers that be. When she put her theory to Helen, it wasn't rebuffed.

'I knew it,' old Mrs Weir thought, pleased with herself, 'I just knew it.'

'Perhaps she got him drunk,' she whispered confidentially to Helen. 'Or perhaps she put one of her gypsy spells on him. He mustn't have realised what was happening.'

Helen, delighted with this exciting turn of events in her normally mundane existence at Morrison's, smiled and nodded. 'Perhaps,' she whispered back.

The truth of the matter was in fact pretty close to Mrs Weir's imagined version. Howard was as shocked as anyone when Gracie fell pregnant after their somewhat brief fumble



in the sand dunes during the Morrison's annual Easter picnic. In almost fifty years, he'd never been drunk and he'd certainly never had sex and now here he was, getting pissed and making someone pregnant in the same afternoon.

As for Gracie, she didn't even fancy Howard. How could she? He was old and odd, and, with his thick brown spectacles, green cardigans and stinking breath, utterly unattractive. But, in her first week at the store, she'd boasted to Helen that she could bed any man she wanted.

'Not Howard, you can't,' laughed Helen, rolling her eyes. 'Not even you could do that.'

'Just you watch,' Gracie had smiled coyly, tossing her copper curls.

Once the damage had been done, so to speak, Howard had no option but to propose. A hasty, modest wedding at the town hall registry office ensued, with two staff drafted in as witnesses and Mrs Weir senior as the only guest. The reception was a cup of tea and a ham sandwich at the Peacock Café in the park. It wasn't quite what Gracie had imagined for her wedding day. But on the whole she was enjoying the drama of this new game, and decided to play along for a while, to see what happened. She could always leave, she reasoned to herself. If she'd learnt anything at all from her family's way of life it was that leaving was easy. And at least there was no need for any further awful sex with Howard. He showed no interest anyway, but even if he had, she wouldn't have hesitated to use the pregnancy as a get-out clause.

For a little while, Gracie almost enjoyed living in the dull but relatively comfortable environment of number 17, Stanley Street. It was quiet, such a change from what she was used to. Indeed, if it hadn't been for Howard's mother, she might have



even found it a pleasurable experience. Until the child was born, that is.

Mrs Weir senior had glowed with relief when Gracie ran away, and was more than happy to resume the cossetting regime that had served her son so perfectly well before his ill-fated marriage. Her only regret was that her daughter-in-law hadn't taken the child with her. 'Perhaps that Flynn family will take her,' she quietly suggested to Helen on a rare trip into Morrison's with the pram. 'After all, there are more of them to help out. It's the least they could do.'

It soon became clear, however, that none of Gracie's relations were the least bit interested in the baby girl. When Gracie had married Howard Weir they may have been shocked by her choice of husband, and annoyed that there wasn't to be a boozy reception, but at least it meant they had one less mouth to feed. Gracie's hasty and mysterious departure was actually a relief to them, eliminating the concern that she would one day land back on their doorstep with the child in tow, as it was obvious the marriage wouldn't work. Marriages never did in the Flynn family. Ever. So, when a postcard from somewhere foreign arrived one day, informing them that Gracie was following her dream and would never return, they hastily made it known to Howard that they had neither the time, nor the inclination, to be involved in Biddy's life. For a short time, Mrs Weir hoped and prayed that the Flynnns would come to their senses, change their minds and reclaim the child. Her prayers were shattered for good, however, when, a few months after Gracie had run away, the rest of her family upped sticks and moved yet again – this time, apparently, to Manchester, though no one really knew. And that was that.



So, Mrs Weir was stuck with Biddy. She didn't know quite what to do with a girl, as, apart from her own darling Howard, she had never really been one for children. Still, she made sure that Biddy was fed and clothed, and once or twice, when they had an unexpected visitor for one reason or another, she even bounced the child on her knee and patted her curls.

Mrs Weir's sudden demise from a massive, violent stroke coincided with the closure of Morrison's and Howard's premature entry to retirement. There really was very little hope of alternative employment for a fifty-three-year-old bookkeeper with a three-year-old daughter and no driving licence. But, as a man who was good with figures, he had made a number of small but canny investments in the past, particularly with the modest sum of money his father had left in trust when he died on Howard's tenth birthday.

Mrs Weir had always suspected that her husband, Harold, was a secret drinker and that his outings to the weekly evening mission meetings at the bandstand often included a trip to the local pub. It was the only time he would ever smell of peppermint – 'for my indigestion, dear,' – and Ralgex – 'my back is playing up today, and I didn't want to miss the meeting.' Her suspicions were confirmed when Harold's mangled body had been found on the railway line which ran directly behind the car park at Crawford's Inn. If Harold had come straight home from the meeting as they would do when they both went on Sundays, his journey would not have taken him anywhere near the Inn, or the railway. Mrs Weir never spoke of her suspicions, as her husband had been known as a good, God-fearing man, but she vowed that not a drop of alcohol would ever pass her son's lips.

And look what happened when it had.



Howard was a clever lad. He did well at school and could have gone to university, made something of his life. But his mother had other plans. Mrs Weir decided that her son should stay at home and get a decent, steady job with no real prospects. She also made sure he had few friends and limited interests, so that he could spend as much time with her as possible. She even stopped taking Howard to the Sunday mission meetings, deciding that, since He hadn't done a very good job with her husband, she couldn't trust God to keep an eye on her son. She'd just have to do it all herself.

When his mother died, Howard cashed in one of the saving policies he had set up with his father's inheritance fund and forgot about the rest. He put the money from the policy into a building society in the High Street. The interest from that, coupled with his meagre pension, would be quite enough for a man and a child with limited needs to live off for the foreseeable future. What point was there in having any more? He'd never been a spender, inheriting a tightness that had been in the Weir family for many generations. They were always keeping their money for a rainy day, but even when those rainy days arrived, they still went out with holes in their umbrellas. That was just the sort of them. And anyway, Ballybrock wasn't exactly the kind of place that required high living. It was more than a little bit backward in coming forward, and when Biddy was a baby, there had been no cinema, leisure complex, or big fancy shopping centre in the town. Even when those 'scourges of modern life', as Mr Weir called them, did start to arrive, he never went near them, so neither did Biddy.

All things considered, however, Mr Weir did the best he could with his daughter. He took her to the park, where they



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would feed stale bread to the ducks. They would walk along the shore and watch the noisy gulls dive for fish and swoop across their heads. He would sometimes read her stories and, for her fourth Christmas, he even withdrew enough money from the building society to buy a portable television so the two of them could sit together for *Watch with Mother*. Gradually, a bond of sorts began to grow between the quiet little girl and her almost silent father. Neither of them realised it was love at the time. But it was. It was just *their* love.



2.

As her school years passed, it gradually dawned on Biddy that she didn't quite fit in. She knew she wasn't pretty like the other girls at school, as during the ritual catchy-kissy sessions which had become customary in the playground, she was the only one in her class from whom the boys would run away, screaming.

'Ugh! She touched me, she touched me,' they would shout, cupping their hands over their mouths, pretending to vomit if one of them even brushed against her accidentally, or ran too close to her, as she wandered round the tarmac doing her daily count of bird poo patches. But Biddy didn't care. She never wanted to join in the game anyway. And she wasn't in the least bit jealous of the other girls, who all looked so similar that she sometimes had difficulty in telling them apart. Biddy wasn't worried about her wild frizzy hair or her badly fitting, grubby uniform. She was much more interested in bird poo.

Biddy had studied bird poo since she was little, after witnessing a seagull poo on another child's head, and over time she had become something of an expert. She knew, for example, that a large splatter of poo dotted with berries or seeds was probably deposited by a big black crow, or a magpie. A big white patch splashed with grey belonged to a seagull. That was the kind she liked best. A small whitish splodge, which could sometimes be mistaken for chewing gum, was the work of a tit or a sparrow. Biddy wasn't interested in dog's dirt or cat shit or rabbit droppings. Just bird poo. She was fascinated by the colours and textures, and loved the fact that birds could shit in mid-flight, hitting an unsuspecting human if they were lucky. She'd



never been struck herself, but she'd seen it happen, often, and she couldn't understand why people always reacted with horror, screeching or wailing or swearing when they were hit. She'd often stand on the beach, perfectly still for minutes and minutes at a time, arms outstretched, staring up at the gulls, willing them to hit her. But the birds never did shit on Biddy.

So Biddy knew that she was different, and that was fine. But she didn't realise that she was actually a weirdo, never mind a bloody one – until, that is, Alison Flemming joined her class.

Alison Flemming was beautiful, smart, sporty and a talented pianist. With her honey-blond hair, smooth skin, deep hazel eyes, and tantalising smile, she wooed people wherever she went. If Alison Flemming had lived in America, she would have been heading for the Prom Queen crown from the day she was born.

And Alison Flemming had another skill: even at the tender age of ten, she was a clever, accomplished and manipulative little bitch. It was a talent she would hone and develop over the years, becoming a master in the process. And like all good bitches, Alison liked to make sure she had a dependable team of devoted followers. Disciples, she liked to call them. It was only when she came to Ballybrock that she recognised her true potential, and fully comprehended the power she could have over others: both those who adored her, and those who did not. There were many hangers-on, but the true believers, the hard-core Alison Flemming fans, were Jackie McKelvey, Georgina Harte and Julia Gamble.

When Alison arrived at Prospect Park in November 1979 – the third month of Primary 6 – she was an instant hit with everyone in the class. Well, everyone except Biddy. At first there



were fleeting feelings of jealousy from Jackie, Georgina and Julia, who until that day had generally been regarded as the collective leaders of the Primary 6 female pack. But the threesome quickly realised that Alison was something special and that, for the sake of their long-term prospects, they should become the new girl's closest allies. So, by the end of break time on Alison's first day, the three girls had cooed and clucked and flirted with sufficient eagerness to be awarded the honour of being regarded as the new girl's new best friends. And that was how it stayed, for years.

Alison knew that she would be adored, as that was all she had ever been used to. Well, apart from when the thing with Selina Burton had happened. But thankfully, that was all behind her now. The thought of moving to a new small town from the big city hadn't fazed Alison in the slightest, as she had had no real emotional attachment to any of her old friends, especially after the incident with Selina. She was looking forward to the challenge of making new people fall for her, and this time she was determined not to mess up. But even she didn't expect it to happen quite so quickly. The swiftness of her positioning as the most popular girl in the class was a pleasant surprise that inflated her already lofty ego to new heights, and gave her a formidable flush of bravado.

So when she noticed the odd-looking girl from her class with the horrible hair and the dirty, ill-fitting uniform, walking around the playground, head bent, hands clasped behind her back, stopping every so often to stare at – what? – her interest was instantly piqued.

The girl was the only female pupil who hadn't clamoured to talk to her, or flash her a toothy smile, or offer to show her where



the cloakroom was, or the canteen, or the gymnasium. In fact, she hadn't even acknowledged her arrival in any way at all. How dare she?

Alison took a closer look. She really was quite repulsive. Her socks were a colour she couldn't put a name to. Her cardigan was missing several buttons. She was certain she smelled of something rotten. She kept glancing at her during the History lesson after break, and the Maths one before lunch, certain the girl would finally look her way, flash her a smile, try to befriend her – which, of course, she would not allow. But she didn't. It appeared that she, Alison Flemming, was entirely invisible to this, this 'thing'. Memories of Selina and the aftermath of the 'incident' flooded her, and she felt an irrational sense of rage. This hideous girl might not have noticed her yet. But she would. Oh, she would.

By the end of lunchtime, Biddy's fate was sealed.

'What's *her* name, then?' Alison asked her new admirers, glancing over at Biddy as they returned to the classroom.

'Oh, *her*,' sniggered Julia, 'that's just Biddy.'

'Biddy?' laughed Alison, almost choking. 'Biddy? What kind of a stupid name is that? Who on earth would call their child Biddy? Bet her parents are as odd as she is.'

'Yeah,' agreed Georgina with vigorous enthusiasm. 'Bet.'

'Actually, her dad's dead old,' said Jackie, keen to provide some juicy information for Alison. 'He looks like her grandpa. Don't think she has a mum.'

'No wonder she looks like that, then,' Alison sneered. 'What's her other name?'

'Weir,' said Georgina, Julia and Jackie in unison, 'Biddy Weir.'





THE LONELY LIFE OF BIDDY WEIR

‘More like Biddy Weir~~do~~,’ laughed Alison, flicking her long golden mane behind her, and her little group of admirers laughed with her.

‘Biddy Weir~~do~~,’ screeched Georgina with glee, crossing her legs, as if she might wet herself. ‘That’s class.’

Alison was pleased with herself. She looked Biddy up and down with undisguised revulsion. ‘*Bloody* Weir~~do~~, actually,’ she ventured, and they all laughed even louder.

Until that point, Biddy had mostly been ignored by the girls in her class, and that was the way she liked it. Jackie, with her perfect snub nose, Georgina, with her brooding dark eyes and Julia, with her glossy blonde hair held back in a shiny Alice band, never included Biddy in the girly games or secret meetings they hosted in the school playground. Yet they didn’t deliberately exclude her either. It was just one of those unspoken, taken-for-granted, shrug-your-shoulders kind of things. They didn’t play with Biddy, and Biddy didn’t play with them. They shared a silent, mutual understanding. Biddy got on with her thing and the other girls got on with theirs. That was just the way it was. But Alison quickly realised there were going to be advantages to having a weirdo like Biddy Weir in her class. Magnificent advantages. Ignoring Biddy, she decided, would not be an option, but neither, of course, was befriending her. She would have to find something else to do with her. As she made her way back to her desk after the lunch break she discreetly kicked a leg of Biddy’s chair. Biddy glanced up from her reading book, a look of concerned confusion on her face.

‘*Bloody* Weir~~do~~,’ hissed Alison, narrowing her eyes and holding Biddy’s gaze for a second, finally making her notice her. Then she flicked her hair in that way of hers, and skipped across the room to take her seat.





Biddy wasn't prone to tears. Even as a baby, she had rarely cried and never had toddler sulks or terrible tantrums. And if she fell over and cut her knee or grazed her elbow, the sight of blood would intrigue her so much that it never occurred to her to cry or seek attention. It wasn't that she totally lacked emotion, for she knew what it was to be excited about birds and bird poo. It was just that because she had always been a bit of a loner, an outsider of sorts, she had developed her own private world, which no one had ever tried to penetrate. But on this day, for the first time ever, she experienced something very strange indeed. When the new blonde girl hissed at her and kicked her chair, she felt a jolt in her chest, like she had a big, sore lump in her throat, which she instinctively knew she had to get rid of. So she opened her mouth to let the lump out. It didn't come out of course – but a loud and rather unpleasant retching noise did.

'Bloody Weirdo,' muttered Alison Flemming again, loud enough for Biddy and some of the other P6 children to hear, but expertly pitched just outside the hearing range of Miss Justin.

A snigger quickly spread throughout the classroom, with some of the children almost peeing their pants at the thought of this great new girl, Alison, swearing and calling Biddy Weir a 'bloody weirdo'. They'd never seen or heard anything like it.

'Class! Class!' yelled Miss Justin. 'QUIET now or you'll all get extra homework!' Silence descended quickly upon the room, as the children looked at their teacher in nervous, wide-eyed apology.

'Now, who is going to tell me what is going on?'

Julia, obviously eager to impress her new best friend, smiled at Alison and raised her hand.

'Please, Miss Justin. It was Biddy, Miss Justin.' She paused, a flicker of panic creasing her face.



‘Well, go on, Julia. What exactly did Biddy do to make you all so excitable?’

‘Well, Miss, she erm, she burped and then she swore. She said b-b-bloody, Miss Justin.’

‘Thank you, Julia. Please sit down now. Everyone, get out your reading books and turn to chapter four.’

Julia sat, smiling again at Alison who grinned back and nodded her obvious approval.

‘Biddy, come to the front please,’ said Miss Justin sharply. She reprimanded Biddy for being rude and disruptive, gave her lines, extra homework and made her sit at the front for the rest of the day. The girl repulsed her. She’d always wanted to punish her for something, and at last Julia Gamble had given her good reason.

Biddy said nothing, for she couldn’t speak. The lump was still there, only now it was bigger. She thought it might burst out of her chest. Her tummy felt sick, her eyes felt hot and it felt like her body was shrinking. She didn’t know what was happening, but she didn’t like it at all and she wanted it to stop. It did stop eventually, but only for a while. Sadly for Biddy, that was just the start of it. That was the day that everything changed. The day that Biddy *Bloody Weir*do was born.