

## New Council House

Sugarpaws swatted at the paper jiggling in Dora's shaking hand.

'Ee, I can't believe it,' she said aloud, voice a-quiver with emotion, pinny rising and falling in conjunction with her heaving chest, brain revolving like an out-of-control kaleidoscope. 'A' hev t' sit down.'

She was still sitting twenty minutes later when Wendy popped her head round the door.

'Mam, A's jist gaan t' Co-op. Does tha want owt?'

The lack of reply threw Wendy. Her mother never went out leaving the door unlocked. She walked through the scullery into the kitchen. 'Mam, what fettle? You alright? What's up? What's happened?'

'Ee lass, it's a letter frae t' council. I's getting a shift to them new prefabs; it'll be grand. A' can't believe it. Nay, lass I's champion and I diven't need owt frae t'co-op. Thou gan on pet.'

Wendy alerted her brothers to the news and asked them to meet her for a chat in the Welfare club after tea - but before bingo.

Dora and Tom had met one wet summer evening on the allotments where she was seeing to her father's pigeons. She'd tripped over an errant pail and Tom had helped her up. After their wedding he moved into number 90 to help care for her father, auld Nick, an erstwhile argumentative, boozy old Irishman. Theirs was the end house on the fronts - a double terrace of colliery houses, each with a scullery with shallow wooden sink and cold tap, parlour, kitchen/sitting room with black lead range for cooking on. Upstairs there were three bedrooms and an attic. The toilet was in the backyard along with the coalhouse. There was no bathroom - the scullery had to suffice - and a tin bath in front of the fire once a week. There were baths at the pithead for the miners coming off shift. The even numbered houses on the fronts faced west towards the distant Isle of Man; the backs faced Dent Hill, part of the distant Lake District, and Moresby pit where most of the men spent their lives, in-bye, thigh high in water, bent double, pick axe in hand, hewing the coal which kept industry going and the country's economy in the black.

Tom was a clever man, but without much formal education. While helping one of the younger lads with his spelling, he had come to the notice of the pit deputy who put him forward for underground timekeeper, a position of great responsibility.

'Dora Quinn has fallen on her feet, marrying that Tom Crellin from Lowca, even though he is twenty year older than her,' said Father Flynn. 'It's a pity he's not one of us. Happen she'll convert him.' She never did and never tried. They respected each other's religions and he was happy to let the children be brought up Catholic. Unlike most Irish families there were only three children from the union – Wendy, Joe and Paddy. Dora was a grand cook and the children rushed home from school, sniffing the air like hungry puppies, salivating at the thought of the scones, bread and stews that would be ready for tea. Tom's snap was always tasty too – meat and tatie pie or biskies with juicy home boiled ham and chutney and apple turnovers for afters.

When auld Nick died there was enough money to convert the parlour into a sweet and tobacconist shop that Dora managed as efficiently as she did her domestic duties. Tom retired from the pit but like so many in those days he seemed to give up - just sat in the old, creaky, green cane chair, watching the miners, through milky cataracts, coming off shift, and listening to Gigli on his gramophone. When he did die Dora was left alone in number 90, her arthritic knees aching and complaining when she climbed the stairs or went to the outside lavvie. She shut up the shop and asked Father Flynn's advice.

'Put in for a move, Mrs Crellin, somewhere easier to manage. I'll write to the council in support of your application and I'll make sure Willie John does too. God bless you Dora.'

The pit manager, Willie John Eelbeck, did as Father Flynn requested.

Three months later Dora's answer came. The keys for No 1 Walkmill Bungalows would be hers from 15 April. Dora's first thought was for Sugarpaws the great big, ginger tom that ruled the house and who still missed Tom. What if he refused to move? The lads would have to put butter on his paws!

Wendy and her brothers were as excited as their mother.

'Can't wait to see it; she'll need a new bed but the parlour furniture will be fine,' Wendy said.

'Don't worry about carpets. My marra'll see us reet. He's got a lal furniture business in Whitehaven and mam can make even more rag rugs,' added Joe.

'And our lass'll run up some curtains on that fancy sewing machine,' joined in Paddy. 'I'll speak to Jonno. He wuks in t' council offices and can git room sizes for us.'

Dora wondered what her family was doing, rushing around, too busy to talk to her about the forthcoming flit. She sifted through all the drawers and cupboards in number 90 and disposed of loads of jumble just keeping a few of Tom's things for the memories; he had been a good husband. Father Flynn was delighted to have the cast-offs for the missions.

Come the 14<sup>th</sup>, Dora got the keys but there would be no electricity until the great unveiling the next morning. She and Wendy walked down to see the houses which had just been erected the previous week. They were beautiful – a crescent of white prefabs each with its own front and back door and tiny bit of grass out front. Jayne-Agnes hove into view: she was getting number 12, across the street and Mary-Ellen and Willie-John were having one two doors down. The women, who had grown up together, were nervous of entering.

Dora heard their excited shrieks, but not feeling comfortable or entitled to go in by the front door, she went round to the back, and just stood there, overwhelmed. She ran her finger tentatively over the shiny, smooth sink, gawped at the electric cooker and was gobsmacked to find a built-in fridge .. and a blue and yellow kitchen cabinet with drop down front; all those cupboards and drawers and even lino on the floor! It was like something out of a magazine. There was even a window with a view of the fells and ... space for a table! She sniffed the air wondering about the strange smell. Then she realised – no old coal dust, no mould, no sweaty bodies, no unemptied chamber pots. She felt like she had died and gone to heaven. How Tom would have loved it! The living room even had a proper coal fire with a hearth for Sugarpaws to lie on. Not sure which way to turn she ended up in the bathroom and, overwhelmed, burst into tears. It was all too much. A bath, a wash-basin, both with two taps... and a shiny white lav. No more getting up at night and feeling under the bed for the po!

She planned where to put the furniture. Tom's old gramophone would take pride of place in the hall, effectively blocking the front door. The bedrooms each had hanging cupboards and – a space heater. Feeling wobbly at her sadness at not being able to share such munificence with Tom, she went out, round the back to be alone, past the coalhouse, already full of coal, and the wash house with electric boiler, tub with a wringer, dolly posher and pulley. No more drying wet sheets and clothes in front of the fire. Dora felt doubly blessed and put up a prayer of gratitude.

'I bet t'Queen hesn't got owt like this down in that London spot,' she said to Sugarpaws who had followed her. 'What a champion way to spend our last few years!'

Sue Robertson April 2022