**Ireland is Here** *by Noel King*

He forces his wife to beg on Westmoreland Street while he sits at home, watching illegal TV coming from his home country, drinking special tea,

smoking incessant fags smuggled over by his brothers and nephews.

If she doesn’t bring enough money home to the flat he slaps her

hard on the face, tells her she must keep Raisa in from school:

*Raisa is pretty, show Raisa’s pretty face and then they give money*.

The mother wants Raisa to *get clever, a real job*, marry *whom she wants*.

Secretly she is putting money in an old biscuit tin under a floor board.

This will be Raisa’s running away money, if one day she would need it,

then she might pick herself a new name, any name she likes.

On Westmoreland Street meanwhile, the wife continues holding her bowl out

but only till 12 noon cos in the afternoon she spreads her legs

for men of all ages in the massage parlour, spreads her legs

so that Raisa – the very one born from between hers – won’t have to do so.

In the Finglas schoolyard the other girls don’t play with Raisa.

Other girls have tried but the fact is Raisa just can’t mix.

She can study, is well able to follow the teachers,

but sits all on her own, head down in the playground.

PE is torture for her: she won’t change her clothes in front of the other girls. At home in the bath Raisa folds her legs over,

when her mother comes in with another kettle of hot water,

is ashamed her mother will see the hairs starting to grow ‘down there’.

On the Dodder Walkway, to the rear of the Aviva Stadium

Raisa sometimes accompanies her older brother in dog walking.

He earns pocket money dog walking for well-off fellas who work long

hours in Google. Sometimes, with quieter dogs he lets Raisa hold the leads.

The family in the flat over the wall don’t have it so good,

the man there lets other men have sex with his wife,

they don’t give him money but let him do the same to theirs.

They shout and fight and bang things a lot at night, keeping Raisa awake.

The girl in the flat over the wall is fourteen, used to hang around with Raisa, but is too sophisticated now, is already having intercourse,

in secret, with a Protestant Irish boy of fifteen going on sixteen,

whose father franchises a Spar somewhere on the Southside.

The mother knows her sister in Tralee will take Raisa in

if Raisa needs to run one day, her mother keeps a secret

Irish Rail Dublin Hueston/Tralee timetable in the tin with the money

and a bag with essentials and even more in a trusted neighbours flat.

On Friday’s after school Raisa goes with her mother

to the open laundry under the canopy at Centra,

they put the family’s weekly wash into the large drum,

drop in the 4 x €2 coins and wait for the cycle to end.

And if the father one day asks the mother where Raisa is,

her mother will simply shrug one of her shoulders

and say: *Gone*. He can beat her

all he likes then.