

YELLOW BRICK ROAD

© Tracy Culleton 2006

CHAPTER 1.

As soon as Imelda opened the front door she could hear her mother's voice pitched high in complaint: "It's not good enough Eddie, it just isn't! What on *earth* possessed him to do it?"

Imelda sighed as she closed the door behind her. She could hear the conciliatory-sounding rumble of her father trying to calm Dympna down.

As she walked the short length of brown lino to the kitchen door she could hear her mother insisting, "Oh it's all very well you saying that, but *it is* going to affect us, of course it is."

Imelda took a deep breath and squared her shoulders before opening the door and entering the kitchen.

Dympna turned to see who it was, and behind her, Imelda could see the relief in her father's expression as he relaxed back into his battered brown armchair and picked up the newspaper.

The baton of being Dympna's audience had been passed to Imelda, and Eddie was clearly glad to see it go. Imelda wasn't quite as glad to receive it, but – as ever – took it nonetheless.

"Oh Imelda," Dympna demanded, "have you heard what That Rory Maher has done?" Her narrow face was set in a scowl, and her thin lips were pursed in disapproval.

Imelda *had* heard, of course. The whole of Cilltubber was talking about it, and there hadn't been a single person into the shop that day who hadn't had the story, or some version of it.

But she knew there was no point telling her mother that she did indeed know what Rory Maher had done. Dympna wanted to tell the story, best let her get on with it.

So, injecting some sort of enthusiasm into her voice, she said, "No, Mam, what has he done?"

Her mother glared at her. "I'm surprised you haven't heard, what with you being in the shop all day. Don't you talk to the customers at all?"

Oh, God, I just can't win.

"Tell me what Rory's done, Mam," she said.

Successfully distracted from the topic of Imelda's customer-service skills, Dympna returned to her complaints.

"You won't believe it! Rory's only after going and leasing some of his land to New-Age Travellers. They've put up mobile-homes and they're going to be *living there!*" she finished in something approaching a screech.

Imelda was on the verge of saying something placatory and mollifying, (there might even have been a bit of shoulder-patting involved) but instead she heard herself say – goaded on by a devil which had unexpectedly appeared on her shoulder – "Well then, they're not New-Age Travellers, are they, Mam? They'd be New-Age Stayers."

Dympna glared at her, but didn't break stride in her monologue.

"I mean, what *is* the place coming to? Bad enough having all those English and Germans moving in all over West Cork in search of a so-called simpler life, and to be over-run with tourists for half of the year. Never mind those," her voice dropped to a half-whisper, "*other* immigrants."

Dympna was referring, Imelda knew, to recent immigrants of African and Eastern European origin, but was aware enough that it would be too racist to mention them specifically, no matter how racist towards English and Germans she was being.

“I mean,” Dympna finished truculently, “you’d hardly hear a good, honest, Cork accent at all these days.”

This last was one of Dympna’s favourite complaints.

The devil whispered to Imelda, *Go on, remind her.*

So she said ultra-casually, “But Mam, didn’t Father Finnegan say in his sermon only a couple of weeks ago, how lucky we were to have these various immigrants, how they enrich the community?”

“Well, yes,” her mother was forced to acknowledge. She had been *very* annoyed with Father Finnegan over that sermon, but as a good Catholic, had had to accept and agree. The internal conflict was still coming between her and her rest.

“And,” went on Imelda, “doesn’t half our business come from the tourists, especially the self-catering ones?”

“Well, yes,” said her mother again. You couldn’t argue with the bank account. But she rallied quickly.

“But all that’s got nothing to do with what I’m talking about,” she squeaked. “I’m talking about That Rory Maher leasing his land to a New-Age cult. Yes, *cult*, that’s the only proper word. God knows what they’ll be getting up to there. Naked dancing, no doubt, and sacrificing hens, and ... and ...” she was spluttering now, “... heathens the lot of them. Not a Mass-goer to be seen among them. Something Should Be Done.”

Imelda took pity on her.

“Now, Mam, don’t be getting over-excited. It isn’t a New-Age cult. It isn’t a cult of any description from what I’ve heard. It’s just that Rory has donated some of his land to his cousin and her husband, and they’re setting up an eco-village.”

“A what-village?” demanded her mother.

“An eco-village. You know, where they try to live lightly on the land, not to use too much of the earth’s resources. Solar-energy, growing their own vegetables, recycling waste – that sort of thing.”

Imelda tossed these words out as fluently as if she’d been talking about such things for years, even though her own knowledge of the phrases was only hours-old and her understanding of them minimal.

“Hmph,” said Dympna. Her stock answer when she had no answer. But: “Hang on a second, Imelda, did you say, *donated*?”

“Yes, Mam.”

Her father cringed lower in his chair.

“Ah no, Imelda, I heard the land was leased. *Donated* means that they have it forever. You must be coddling me.”

“Well, it was Rory Maher himself who told me, and he said it was donated.”

“Oh God,” said her mother, “that means there’s no getting them out.”

“But Mam, they might be an asset to the town, you never know.”

“Hmph.”

Just then the kitchen door opened again, and her mother turned towards it.

“Oh Laura, you’re home. Did you *ever* hear the like, wait till I tell you.”

Imelda’s eyes met Laura’s, and Laura’s said, *Of course I heard! You don’t get to be receptionist in Cilltubber’s one hotel and not hear all the news.*

But she said cheerfully enough, “No Mam, what’s that?”

Imelda gratefully handed the baton of audience-ship over to her sister, and Laura bravely took it.

Claire hovered, unsure of the choice between the red polka-dot mini skirt and the yellow frilled one. She shrugged, impatient with her indecisiveness, and placed them both into her suitcase.

Over dinner, while their father was concentrating on eating, Imelda and Laura took turns tossing, *Yes, Mams* and *Is that so, Mam?*s at Dympna while she complained about That Rory Maher donating the land to Those People.

"I'm not the only one who thinks this way either," she assured them, "Mary O'Connor and Florrie O'Toole were onto me about it too, you know. And Maureen Hourihan. They all think the same as I do!" she finished triumphantly – clearly of the opinion that this proved her argument beyond fear of contradiction.

Imelda and Laura exchanged a wry covert glance, recalling Claire's conviction that their mother's coterie existed primarily as a mutual opinion-reinforcing and indignation-sharing body.

"Those people needn't think that they can just walk into Cilltubber and be welcomed with open arms," Dympna warned her captive audience.

"No Mam. I'm sure they don't."

Dympna sighed deeply at it all. But then she drew a deep breath and headed off onto a new topic.

"Claire's going off on her holiday tomorrow."

"That's right, Mam."

"I don't know, people pay good money to come to Cilltubber for their holidays, thousands of them every year," (this was now a virtue, but nobody was silly enough to point out her inconsistency), "but Claire has to pay equally good money to leave the place."

"Yes, Mam."

"You'd think that a beautiful place like Cilltubber, in the most beautiful county on God's earth, would be enough for her, but no."

"No, Mam, I mean, yes, Mam."

"And," she took a big, sorrowful sigh, and Imelda and Laura exchanged another clandestine glance. They knew what was coming. It was an oft-repeated theme. "I really don't know what she's doing in that flat all by herself. I mean, when she had a perfectly good home here and all. Why live alone when she could have had her family around her? It just doesn't make sense."

"No, Mam."

Imelda, wearied by the incessant carping and criticising, was surprised to find herself thinking, *If only I had the money to buy my own place ...*

And Laura was thinking, *As soon as Derek and I are married I'll have my own house ...*

It wasn't possible to determine what their father was thinking, as he bent over his dinner with concentration.

But nobody could have been in any doubt what Dympna was thinking as she continued, a proud fondness now in her voice, "At least she has the money to go on holidays, and buy that flat. She's making such a success of her practice! We always knew she was clever, didn't we Eddie?"

Their father started a little and said, “What?”

“I *said*,” Dympna repeated with a slight edge in her voice, “that we always knew Claire was clever.”

“Oh yes, yes indeed. Very clever.” His own pride was clear as he spoke.

“Oh, don’t worry, you two,” Dympna reassured them. “Laura, you well know that you’re our beauty, there’s nobody to touch you, in the whole of Cilltubber – in the whole county of Cork, even – for looks. You don’t need to be clever at all, with looks like yours. Not to mention of course, that you’ll be settled yourself now that you’re engaged to such a decent, steady man as Derek. We’ll have to set a date soon, dear, for the wedding I mean.”

“Yes Mam,” said Laura.

“Imelda,” Dympna said, turning towards her, “you know that you’re our rock, the centre of the family, the one who keeps us going. Oh, from the moment you were born you were no trouble, never caused us a moment’s worry. And here you are now, helping out in the shop.”

Helping?! thought Imelda. She said, striving for a light tone, “I thought I was supposed to be the manager, now that you and Dad want to go into semi-retirement.”

“Well, of course!” said Dympna, flustered. “You are the manager now, of course you are. And it’ll all be yours one day along with this house, don’t forget that. And Laura’ll be married to Derek, and then you’ll all be well settled then, all three of you.”

She beamed with pride all around the table before adding with heavy satisfaction, “And then the whole town will have to take back all those comments they whispered behind my back all these years.”

Claire had finished her packing, had done the obligatory sitting-on-the-suitcase-to-make-it-close bit, had repeated like a mantra, “Tickets, passport, money,” as she placed them all in her wallet, and had cast a last loving glance around her navy-and-silver bedroom, before going into her equally-loved kitchenette (50s pink retro) for a Pot Noodle.

[If you'd like to read the rest of this story, you can get it here.](#) (Just scroll down to the bottom of the page)