

First prize Winner:

Joan Power, Rathcoole, Co Dublin

The Joy of Chocolate

'Oh, I tell you, the Mother knows her chocolate, so she does. No cheap stuff for Mother, and woe betide the bucko who thinks he can fool her.' Martin Gannon occupied his usual chair by the fire. He looked around the company, smiling maniacally, daring anyone to contradict him. No one ever did. The little table beside him held a neat arrangement of things. There was his brown notebook and biro, a dish of Werthers' Originals, his library book, and the newspaper, folded neatly at the crossword. His reading spectacles hung on a tarnished chain, resting against the knitted sleeveless cardigan.

Mother, whose knowledge of chocolate was indeed legendary, would simper and laugh, with a girlish toss of her head. Then, covering her mouth, she would acknowledge that, yes; Daddy was right, as usual. She did know her chocolate.

These conversations often took place on a Sunday after lunch, when some of Martin and Maura Gannon's four children were likely to call. They did not visit every Sunday, but there was always some mix of the family present. In his brown notebook, their father noted who had visited, on what date and how long they stayed. The duration of an absence was drawn down to them on the next visit.

'Well Cathal, it's fierce busy you are then, but Mother had Una and Frank. And we always have Ruairi, the babog.'

At the approach of Christmas, Easter or birthdays, ponderous hints were dropped by Martin.

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‘Now don’t mind your mother, she’ll ask for nothing. But she knows a good present and she deserves it. Spend freely on her.’

But himself now, he didn’t need any fripperies or fuss made of him, ah no. A little token would do grand. All the little tokens were recorded in the brown notebook.

As Easter approached, the minefield of Mother’s egg beckoned. Maura Shields had been working as a confectioner and chocolate-taster in the big sweet factory of Rubin Brothers, when Martin had first met her in nineteen seventy. He had been a Toffee Boiler in the same firm. He had watched her for months. At three o’clock every Friday afternoon a solemn procession of white-coated people made their way to the Tasting Laboratory. This room had a large glass panel which overlooked the Toffee Boiling Room. Maura had worked her way up from the shop floor to the laboratory within a few years. She held her position with great pride. It was known that there was something special about Maura’s palette and her ability to distinguish minute variations in many recipes. Nature had relented in giving her this gift, for she was not easy on the eye, being a sallow, bony creature.

She would sit unblinking behind the glass wall, licking, sucking, biting, nibbling and munching her way through huge quantities of chocolate. Unerringly, she picked out the recipe which had the best combination of ingredients. She would record it silently on her Report Sheet. Ten different chocolates, ten different gradings, checked every week. Her employers were delighted with her. She kept them ahead of the competition. She never put on an ounce of weight. It was as if the sensuous cocoa solids refused to reside in such barren territory.

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She had given it all up to marry Martin. Of their children, three had married, only Ruairi, the youngest, remained single. Secretly this delighted Maura. (Although Ruairi was twenty eight, she didn't want to lose him to another girl.) That's how she phrased it to herself, another girl. He still lived at home and seemed content. Oh, he'd travelled and worked away for long stretches and he had an active social life. But he'd always come back. At Easter, it was Ruairi's egg that outshone all the others for Maura. He had a knack of finding the exceptional, the expensive.

'Aha, number one again Ruairi,' Martin would cackle as he made the entry in his book.

'Belgian chocolate definitely, and hand-made,' Maura would decide, slowly rolling the chocolate round and round with her tongue. It had to be done with the mouth open, she told them. Air sharpened the taste buds. She would smack her lips together repeatedly at the end, making a mwaw, mwaw sound. Then she cocked her head, put a hand on her hip, with one finger dimpling her cheek.

'Mau-wwa is the bestest chocolate taster, ain't I, Daddy?' she would say, pouting her lips at Martin.

'Oh, you never lost it girl, ha ha, never lost it.'

Cathal, their second boy, would jump up in agitation.

'Who's for tea, I'll put the kettle on.'

In Martin's brown notebook, the number of visits after Cathal's name was the lowest. His Easter offering to his mother was usually a Lidl or Aldi egg. She would sniff at it, turning it over in her hand.

'Imported, mixed-blend chocolate, very low on cocoa beans,' she would say. 'Goes down very greasy. But thank you, Cathal.' She would lay it

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carefully to one side. It would sit prominently on the dresser for weeks until some neighbour's grandchild was given it to take home.

In the run up to Easter this year, Ruairi seemed to be very busy.

'I hope that young fella is not planning one of his peculiar trips again.'

Martin said to Maura one Sunday evening. They hadn't seen Ruairi all weekend. He had rung on Friday to say he was going down to a friend in Wexford and would see them on Monday.

'Ah no, I doubt it,' said Maura. 'Sure, isn't he after getting that promotion in work. The boss is thrilled with him, he tells me. I think he's very settled now. I don't see the old restlessness as much. We had one of our little sessions last week. He's such a comedian, he keeps me in stitches.'

'Yes, I heard ye alright,' said Martin. 'You were mighty late coming up to bed and I may replenish that bottle of Jameson. I'll make a note of it now.'

'What's seldom is wonderful, and sure what harm? Amn't I the lucky woman can still talk with my son like that?'

'Oh, lucky is it. There's neither of you will replace the Jameson though. It's a pity that McConnell girl didn't stay around.'

'A pity? Are you mad? There's better out there for our Ruairi than that McConnell one. It's time we were in bed.'

Late on Monday night, as she lay sleepless, Maura heard Ruairi's car in the driveway. She felt a wave of relief. Getting up she went to look out the window. He was taking something out of the boot. She watched him make two trips into the house, and then she got back into bed. Smiling to herself in the darkness, she thought: 'My Easter egg, the pet.'

Next morning, with Martin and Ruairi gone to work, Maura took her spare key and went into her son's bedroom. She regularly did this and knew

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where he kept everything. She could ransack the room and leave no trace.

The bottom of the wardrobe yielded its secret to her. Carefully she unshrouded the Easter egg and gasped aloud. It was magnificent. The best yet. The size of a newborn baby, its crazy-paved surface was covered in little roses of pink and white icing. Green petals and long stems formed a delicate edible garden. The egg nestled in a beautiful wicker basket of creamy straw. Tucked snugly around the base were a dozen little eggs wrapped in gold paper. The cellophane which encased it was tied professionally with a huge gold bow. But best of all, there was a label, a French label. Black and gold expensive lettering. Perfection.

Maura hummed as she made a beef goulash for dinner that night. It was Ruairi's favourite. The whole week in the run up to Easter, she made all of his favourite meals.

'Ma, you're spoiling me! But hey, don't stop,' he said.

'As if I would, son,' she said.

When Maura opened Ruairi's egg on Easter Sunday, she had trouble focusing. She blinked and shook her head. It was a lovely egg, a good expensive egg, hand-made Irish chocolate. But it wasn't the egg from the wardrobe. As she sat in a daze the doorbell rang.

'I'll get that,' said Ruriai, picking his way through the debris of the family's Easter offerings.

Seconds later he brought a girl into the cramped sitting room.

'Hey everybody, y'all remember Celine McConnell?'

'How'yis. Happy Easter Mrs. Gannon, Mr. Gannon.' She peeped from behind Ruairi.

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Yellow boots competed for attention with a blue metallic mini-dress. Celine's hair and lipstick were black, her teeth dazzling white. She was a kingfisher amongst starlings, perched on the chocolate-coloured sofa.

'Welcome Celine,' said Cathal. 'Was the Easter Bunny good to you, then?'

'Omigod, you should see the egg Ru-ru got me, French it is. In a basket an' all. I'll bring yis all a piece to taste. I hear you've a bit of a sweet tooth yourself, Mrs. Gannon.'

Justine Carberry, Blackrock, Co Dublin

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The sky was sharp, washed with an azure blue, the sun strong and unsettling. The men, weary from travelling through unfamiliar territory, gazed at the city ahead and thought, not for the first time, of their loved ones back home.

The journey from Veracruz had been arduous, the stifling heat unusual for November. Water supplies were short, fresh food elusive. The villages they passed through were parched and wretched, the houses little more than stony hovels. Dark eyes watched with dull distrust as they descended like a plague of locusts. The captured slaves had long since given up trying to escape, the burning heat draining them of energy. Even hatred of the *conquistadores* required too much effort. They trudged along in sweaty huddles, sometimes gazing at the sky, pinning their hopes on distant wisps of cloud that vanished as if in a dream.

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Cortes saw the heat, the dust, the misery but felt none of it. His eyes swept appreciatively over the city ahead:

Tenochtitlan – the wondrous capital of the Aztec empire.

“This requires skill and cunning,” he mused, “Montezuma was no mere Mayan peasant, but rather the revered and ambitious leader of the Aztec Triple Alliance.” Cortez glanced back at the army behind him, lining up in splendid rows, the armour-clad horses shining in the front, the sun glinting dangerously on the crossbows and swords, behind but hidden the weary captives. A vein throbbed in Cortes’ forehead and for a second he felt the strain of the previous months hit him like a boulder; the endless battles, the victory parades, the debilitating heat, the struggle to feed his substantial army and the effort to keep morale high. He flicked impatiently at a mosquito and thought for a moment. He motioned to a lone figure, astride a chestnut mare. Malinche rode forward, her darting black eyes focusing intently on Cortes face. He smiled warmly.

“What do you think?” She looked from him to the city ahead, then replied thoughtfully.

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“Montezuma will want to impress you, not provoke.

Approach slowly and wait for him to make the first move.”

Cortes nodded approvingly, then with a wave dispatched her to the back.

“Raise the flags and let us advance,” he intoned, nudging his own steed forward and thus the solemn procession approached the causeway to the city. Temples rose above the sturdy walls. Grand houses of sandy brick loomed high on the hill. Cortes had heard about this place and this man and wondered if Montezuma had heard about him too.

Inside the cool palace Montezuma studied the detailed maps in front of him. The empire was in flux, growing and expanding, requiring constant monitoring. He called for his cup, a carved jade goblet and drank deeply. Fortified, he resumed his deliberations. Suddenly the door flew open and a man hurried towards him, bowing and apologising for the suddenness of his arrival.

“An army approaches, mighty king,” he stuttered breathlessly.

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“Who is it?” Montezuma demanded, whilst indicating that he wanted his chiefs and lords to assemble.

“We do not recognise the flags, nor the leader, a light skinned man all dressed in black,” Montezuma blanched momentarily, Was this Quetzalcoatl, the great god who left Mexico many years before on a raft of snakes, vowing to return? If so, he must be greeted as a god. He hesitated. He shivered and felt the moment stand still. Then just as quick he gathered himself together and swept out of the room, ready for what was to come.

Cortes stood his ground and kept his steely gaze on the city walls. He felt a trickle of sweat slide uncomfortably down his side – all eyes were on him, both before him and behind. He sensed the rising curiosity and excitement and laboured to quell the same in himself. He looked behind and caught her eye. She had served him well, guiding, advising, translating, soothing. She understood. She knew what he was trying to do. She knew he was carving his name in the annals of history and hers too. She nodded imperceptibly and seemed to say, “This

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is your day. Take it. Feel each moment, see it hear it, it is yours.”

A great clamour arose from the ranks, the gates had opened. Throngs of Aztec nobles lined the streets. A horn sounded and they all fell back. A hush hung in the air.

Montezuma strode down to the gate, flanked by his brother and his uncle. Cortes watched transfixed and descended slowly almost mechanically from his horse. He approached the king, arms outstretched as if to embrace him, but was gently held off.

Montezuma knelt and kissed the ground, then took Cortes hand and led him down the broad open street. Not a sound could be heard. All eyes watched the two men. Above in the cloudless sky brown kites hovered like bits of plastic caught on the wind.

They stopped at a house four storeys tall. Montezuma turned, issuing instructions for Cortes people to be welcomed and fed. Together they entered the wide hallway. Cortes tried to hide his mounting admiration as he glanced around. The two men entered a long, cool room and Montezuma pointed to a row of cushions. From an elaborate pouch Cortes extracted a

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gift. He placed around Montezuma's neck a necklace of glass beads strung on a cord scented with musk.

Montezuma quietly called a servant to his side, issuing careful instructions. The air smelled cool and sweet.

Montezuma rose and took a tray from an approaching servant and returned. On the tray was his favoured cup, the bejewelled jade goblet. In it was a dark frothy mixture, which Cortes regarded with mild suspicion. Montezuma gestured and Cortes drank. A strange sensation assaulted his senses. It smelt of spices, forests and earth, the taste bitter, warm, exotic, dark.

"My gift to you, more powerful than wine, more valuable than gold, it sharpens the senses, impresses the ladies and strengthens the body. These cocoa beans are a gift from the gods and my gift to you." Cortes drank again and smiled. He had discovered the joy of chocolate.

Third Prize Winner

Joseph Murphy, Dunlaoghaire, Co Dublin

Hi! I'm Ashling and I'm the manager of a very expensive chocolate shop - Siobhan's Luxury Handmade Chocolates - to be precise. Well, being luxurious and handmade you'd expect them to cost the earth wouldn't you? Anyway, take my word for it, they are absolutely gorgeous. They're worth it.

On Ash Wednesday morning my first customer appeared early. I was arranging a display of rum truffles when I looked up and there he was. He stood in the centre of the shop, gazing around, absorbing all the wonderfully expensive sights and smells, like a man in heaven.

"Can I help you sir?"

"Yes," he said, "but first, tell me, do you make forty six different varieties of chocolate?"

Before I had time to answer he continued,

"Let me explain. Rosa, my Spanish girlfriend absolutely adores chocolates and when we talked about doing something really difficult for Lent she decided to give them up until Easter Sunday."

"Now that's what's call a real sacrifice," I said.

He missed the irony.

"Yes indeed. Now my idea for her Easter present is a box of forty-six different chocolates, one for each day of Lent, What do you think?"

What could I say?

"It's a great idea sir. I'm sure she'll be absolutely delighted. Would you like me to help you choose?"

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“That would be terrific,” he said. He held out his hand. “By the way, my name’s Aidan. What’s yours?”

I introduced myself and we shook hands.

Then he asked, “Can you hold the chocolates for me until Easter Saturday?”

“No problem Aidan.”

He smiled, “Ah! But there’s more. You see Rosa’s studying in Madrid. She won’t be back in Dublin until Easter Saturday. I’d like to make this collection very special by choosing one chocolate each day between now and the end of Lent. I know it’s a lot to ask but do you think you could manage that? I’ll pay extra.”

I could see problems straight away. Finding the space in a shop, where every square centimetre is extremely valuable, would be difficult enough but how would I explain it to my colleagues? He saw the refusal in my eyes.

“Please don’t say no right now,” he pleaded. “Think about it and I’ll come in again tomorrow morning for your answer. OK?”

Two things are guaranteed to melt my heart. The first is romance and this was definitely romance with a capital R. The other is being asked for a favour by a handsome man with deep blue eyes. I wavered.

Carol and Deirdre, my colleagues arrived. No way was I about to call him Aidan within earshot of that pair. “I’ll see what I can do sir and I’ll let you know tomorrow.”

After a long brainstorming session I came up with my *Big Idea*. I would turn his romantic story into a promotion - *Lovers Choice – The Joy of*

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Chocolate. I would arrange a prominent display and organise things so that a new chocolate would be added to the collection each day at eleven o'clock.

Our senior copywriter would write a heartbreaking tale of parted lovers in which the man keeps his love at fever pitch by means of his daily chocolate

choice. The story would be on a glossy handout at each counter and would be continued in the descriptions of individual chocolates. The promotion would start on next Monday with the first six choices and customers would be able to pre order for Easter Saturday.

Aidan was reluctant at first saying, "You've reduced the whole thing to a cheap commercial stunt." That hurt. However I don't give up easily and after an intense fifteen minutes, my considerable powers of persuasion won him over.

It was full steam ahead. On Monday at eleven o'clock I ceremoniously placed six chocolates in the box. The first was a dark *Strawberry Liquid Cream* with a red rose on top under the caption *Soft and warm, the start of a love affair*. This was followed by *Orange Marzipan*, *Turkish Delight*, *Almond Praline* and *Nougatine*. The sixth was a *Rum Truffle* with the invitation, *Break the chocolate shell and as the filling melts so will your heart*.

By the end of that week the promotion had taken off. Carol and Deirdre showed surprising enthusiasm. On Saturday we had an audience of six customers as the eleventh choice was placed in the box – a mouth watering dark *Cherry Liqueur* carrying the message *Enjoy love's intense and bitter sweetness*. Among the other selections were, *Truffle Surprise* and *Raspberry Fondant*.

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The great news was that I had five orders for *Lovers Choice* at eighty-eight euro each, a very nice price. In Chinese eighty-eight means lucky in love.

Aidan turned up every morning before the shop opened to make his choice. We became good friends. We talked about everything, from music and films to eating out, art, and his career in architecture.

Of course Carol and Deirdre insisted on meeting the mystery man. Deirdre was bowled over “He’s yummy,” she commented. “It’s a pity he’s spoken for.”

My thoughts exactly.

By the end of the fourth week twenty-six chocolates were safely tucked into their paper cocoons. There were creams and truffles, liquors, and chocolate cups with melting toffee centres. The love story continued. Number seventeen was *Cerise au Kirsch -Chocolate’s secret heart, beguiling and sensuous*. Number twenty-six was *Noir de Noir - Dark and sinfully tempting*.

And so we progressed. Aidan kept us up to date on his courtship. He showed us pictures of Rosa. Another Penelope Cruz. She would be. She was sticking faithfully to her resolution. She had joined a gym and taken up swimming. Her studies were going well. She couldn’t wait to see him on Easter Saturday.

The box filled up with dark chocolates, milk chocolates and white chocolates. The messages continued. Number thirty-five was *Aphrodite - a Passion Fruit Fondant-* with the message, *Indulge your longing*. Number forty,

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a *Baileys Cream Truffle* advised, *Consummate your desire*. I loved number forty-four *Casanova*, a *Vodka and Cranberry Truffle - Surrender to Love's overwhelming pleasures*.

My wish exactly.

On Easter Saturday when I placed the last chocolate in the box there was a burst of applause from both customers and staff. It was a *Champagne Truffle* with the caption *Everlasting Love*. I had an incredible twenty-five orders.

Sadly, all good things come to an end and so I said good-bye to Aidan and wished him a wonderful Easter. He promised to come in again on the following Tuesday and tell us all the details.

As I opened the shop on that Tuesday morning I thought about my own weekend. Sunday lunch at Mum and Dad's with my sister Grainne, her husband Cormac and my favourite niece Louise. On Monday I went to the races at Fairyhouse with my brother Derek and his wife Cecelia. I ended the day winning two hundred and fifty euro. Not bad at all. I also had a text from my ex suggesting that we get together again. It was with a great sense of freedom that I told him no, forget it.

The CLOSED sign was in place. I started to restock the shelves. There was a knock on the door. *Can't people read?* I thought. I opened up. He stood there, unsmiling, holding his box of *Lovers Choice* against his chest.

"Aidan," I exclaimed, "Come in. What's wrong"?

He set the box down on the counter.

"The whole thing was a disaster"

"How? Why? Did Rosa not turn up?"

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“Oh yes, she arrived on Saturday afternoon and we had a great reunion. She looked absolutely fabulous. Like a model”

“So, what happened?”

“On Sunday when I showed her my present she looked kind of shocked. When I told her the story of my daily choices she became very quiet.

She didn't look happy. Finally she told me that, after her no chocolate diet, her workouts and her swimming, she had lost six kilos and she felt really fit. She said that, even though she still loved them, she just couldn't go back to eating chocolates. Oh! she was full of appreciation for my love and my thoughtfulness. For the rest of our time together we did our best and things went reasonably well but something was lost.” He paused, “Our parting last night was a little restrained.”

He looked very crestfallen so I said, “What you need now is a really big hug.” So we stood with our arms around each other in the middle of the shop. It felt marvellous. He broke off the embrace.

“I want to go before the others arrive. I can't face them. I want you to have the chocolates because you're a real chocolate lover.”

I said, “OK I'll take them but on one condition only.”

“What's that?” he asked

“That you'll share them with me.”

Fourth prize Winner:

Dominic O'Neill

THE JOY OF CHOCOLATE.

I really don't know why someone hasn't done a reality-charity-shop-TV-show: all human life is there: staff, customers, shop-lifters even - I was thinking about this as the charity shop manageress launched a tirade against shop-lifters, and thieves in general. And people do steal the most extraordinary things: stealing chocolate I understand but for instance, who on earth would steal a false-leg, or an incomplete set of 'The Encyclopaedia Britannica?

Josie, manager of the charity shop, flatters me: 'Hallo young gentleman', outrageous flattery - works everytime. But today she was giving out about chocolate-thieves ... people really do steal chocolate from charity shops.

'Imagine, stealing from a charity shop.'

When it comes to chocolate, the most fantastical things are true: Nigella Lawson and, for instance - who could invent her? ; Switzerland has a chocolate industry, but no chocolate trees, whatever - none of the raw ingredients. (Josie looks askance at this geography book.) A whole implausible world is conjured up by in Shaw's disparaging phrase 'chocolate

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solder' (from Shaw's 'Arms and the Man,' I tell Josie.) But then, so much about chocolate is implausible to the nth degree; to take two more local examples, the bank robbers, my gran, and the chocolate cakes; and the fact that people would steal chocolate from the charity shop in Rathmines.

Josie was incensed - but secretly glad to get rid of the encyclopaedias and the false-leg and the banjo. (I forgot to mention the banjo.) She trenchantly denounced shop-lifters. 'They steal everything. Everything. The only reason they don't steal shoes is because we only put out one of them.' She glowered at me as if I had stolen the banjo, left-hand-high-heeled-shoes, chocolate etcetera.

I had in my hand Nigella Lawson's book, 'How to be a Domestic Goddess'. Somehow, I don't know why, I felt oddly sheepish. Guilty. Nigella does make it seem that cooking - especially with gooey chocolate - is something that should only be done in private. Between consenting adults, and, even then, only with the lights turned off. I blushed. 'For my wife,' I said, limply, and unconvincingly, as if I'd been caught reading the blurb of a Mills & Boon: 'Dark chocolate - a dark secret - a guilty pleasure.'

Josie raised her eyebrows eloquently, implying my interest in Nigella was more than purely culinary: that - while my wife watched the cooking, I watched Nigella. Josie said: 'She is very easy on the eye: she is glorious - very polished - just like one of her cakes: you want it. Whether you'd make anything out of her book, I wouldn't actually be sure.'

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One of the most charming things about Josie - apart from her outrageous flattery - is she listens so well - and occasionally corrects me. A woman listening, and occasionally correcting you, implies they haven't given up on you altogether.

"The fact that your chocolate is stolen is an oblique complement,' I said. 'Fair-trade-chocolate, if it is very very good, appeals equally not only to the very very good, but also to the very very bad". Josie remained unconvinced

But then, some things are implausible but true: people do steal from charity shops. And thankfully Nigella really does exist, you couldn't make her up.

Now for the bank robbers and the cake-shop, you see there have always been thieves, so I told Josie the story of how robbers broke into my gran's to break into the cake shop.

'They broke into the cake-shop to break into the bank.'

'And what, may I ask, has that to do with chocolate?'

'They were very discriminating thieves.'

'They only stole the chocolate cakes en-route to the bank? A real robbery?'

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'A childhood recollection.'

'A conversation with you, I never know where it is going to go.'

'Some cakes they tasted but they only finished the best quality chocolate cakes. My gran lived in 36 Leinster Square.'

'Josie said "Did she? Sure that is nothing my dear. I lived in number one Leinster Square. Bedsits. Very nice to have a pot of tea on the grand granite steps on a hot summers day, yes, very la-di-da, don't you know. So you remember the cake shop? Scrumptious, my dear, truly scrumptious."

'How could I forget it? Sure didn't I save my bus-fair and walk the whole way home from school so I could have one of their chocolate cakes. My mother gave me enough to buy short bread - which was good enough - but if I walked home from school, I'd save on the bus fare, and get florentines, which were even better.'

'Nice. I wonder why they were called "florentines"?''

'After the large Florentine coins, called the "florin".'

'Aren't you young the clever clogs?'

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'I'm not just a pretty face, you know. The florentines were crunchy and tasty: chocolate, maraschino cherries ... almonds, nuts, and raisins. All sort of good things.'

'Yes'

The cake shop was beside the bank, a building in luscious pink stone, the colour reminiscent of dusky rose petals, 'a rose red city, half as old as time'. (A more non-descript bank is diagonally opposite, of such forgettable architecture, that most people forget it is there.) But the rose pink - salmon pink stone work of the bank - '

'There are dogs and things there - on the pink bank , with its carved greyhounds - is much more flamboyant, rococo, plush and ornate. Very VictorianWas your Gran "Dolly"?''

'Yes. She had a silver cigarette case, saying 'Dolly'. My dad used to bring her dolly mixtures. She'd say 'Have some'. My dad would say, 'Have one!.'

'She had a sweet tooth. But her dinner she slipped to the cat. Clever cat called Orlando: used to take the bus into the fish market on Fridays. Orlando would catch mice, and to encourage it, my Gran would murmur, 'Good cat,' - and scratch it under the chin. But Gran didn't want to touch the mice. And I didn't either. The cat would eat the middle, leaving just the head

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and the tail, joined by what looked like teeny-tiny sardine bones - its spine. I didn't want to touch it, but my Gran would pay me a whole penny to bin it.

' Gran was a social butterfly, and her education was to be totally ornamental. She sat on committees and played accompaniment. Fun.

'When she died, the house passed to my father. It had bells - a pedal you can tap with your foot - so the servants could hear, downstairs. '

' "Lawks a missie",' said Josie, all mock-Victorian-underservant:
'Servants and all, right posh, vanished days, I'm telling ye!' But secretly Josie has a soft spot for Rathmines, its gentrified flat-land with a cosmopolitan air. She always liked it, she once told me: it was very cosmopolitan, you never felt lonely, even when you weren't alone. It wasn't just families. It doesn't really have a class.

Josephine pish-tushes Rathmines the slightly bogus glamour, but she is not immune from it. 'These old houses are going, gone,' says she. 'Those times have gone away, those people and their manners. You know where the servant used to be. Bedsitters now.'

I said, 'But with Gran gone life went out of the house. The back garden was suddenly dismal and dank, crowded in by surrounding buildings. Like living at the bottom of canyon. Dingy. The dank basement - with no one it - became mouldy and musty, and grew the most fantastic mushrooms and fungi. The house almost fell into disrepair, it couldn't be let. It was deserted.

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'On the long bank holiday weekend - thieves broke into the deserted house - to break into the back of the cake shop - left whopping big hole, and a trail of cement dust everywhere, and rubble, and half eaten cakes - cakes with one bite out of them. You could see the teeth marks and this made it frighteningly real to me as a child.

'They polished off all the best chocolate cakes,' I say. 'The weakness for chocolate shone through - some thing we have in common.'

'The police would have their teeth marks - have ye thought of that? Today,' says Josie, 'forensic catches people by their teeth marks. There was a case in Northern Ireland.'

She, quite rightly, wraps Nigella's book in a brown-paper-bag. (The sinfully-good-recipe for chocolate florentines is on page two-o-three.)

Josie says the story is more about talking about chocolate than about chocolate itself: 'More words than chocolate': true enough, but as she herself says, 'If you want to stay thin it is better to hear about chocolate than eat it.'