



### If You Live in a Lane...

FRANK McCOURT

IT is a great misfortune in Limerick, or anywhere else, to be born in a lane or to live in one. The lane is just above the Poor House in the scheme of things; it is lowest of all in the hierarchy of addresses. If you live in a lane

you are poor  
you have a flat accent  
you wipe your nose on your sleeve  
your mother throws the slops out the front door into the gutter  
your father gets drunk every Friday or Saturday night or both  
you'll leave school when you're fourteen and become some kind of messenger boy or scullion  
you have one shirt without a back if you're a boy  
you have one skirt and a blouse if you're a girl  
and  
you'll be off to England any day now

with  
the help of God and His Blessed Mother.

If you don't want people to know you live in a lane you will call it a "place." This means

you are still poor  
you wipe your nose with a rag  
your mother throws the slops out the back door instead of the front  
you have a shirt with a back to it and

you might be going to America instead of England  
because  
your mother has a cousin in New York.

WHEN you apply for your first job at fourteen, there is no use trying to tell people you live on a street or a road. The mark of the lane is on you for generations. Only people from lanes allow their children to work at fourteen. Decent people wait till they're fifteen.

Stand here at the top of the lane now and look down. 'Tis narrow, isn't it? You can see, first, the row of seven small houses on each side and then the three big ones, two-storied, gaunt, falling down. The whole lane is falling down but big houses age faster. Twenty houses we have in all, but don't ask me how many people live in them. I've lost count.

Look at the small houses. Their fronts are like mouthless faces, the doors squat square noses; the little windows are eyes, the rain chute at the edge of the roof hangs down like a long black eyebrow.

If you stand there in the lane with your arms extended, you can almost touch the houses on either side.

But be careful when you walk.

That gutter down the middle of the lane carries the slops of twenty houses. You can't know when a door will open and a bucketful of greasy soapy water will come flying out. No, the women don't bother to come out. It's just as easy to let it go from inside the door.

Now if you walk down to the end of the lane, you'll come to an open space in front of the stable where Mr. Gabbett keeps the two great Flemish horses that draw the floats for Gabbett's coal yard. On your right there, that little shed the size of a sentry box, that little hut that leans against the ash tree, is the lavatory. No, not for that house. For six houses. For the six big houses. They all use that lavatory. I don't know why the small houses have lavatories of their own and the big houses have to share one, but who are we to question the great people who plan things and build things?

One thing the people in the lane wonder about is: Does the ash tree hold up the lavatory or does the lavatory hold up the ash tree? Pa Keating in No. 14 says the lavatory needs the ash tree for support and the ash tree needs the lavatory for nourishment.

#### THE RENT MAN

Monday was a quiet day in the lane. It was rent day. Children were told to go far away to play, to other lanes, or else to come inside and play in whispers. Doors were closed, and the few families that had curtains drew them. The rest used newspapers.

Mr. Gould, the rent man, shuffled into the lane, notebook in left hand held against chest, fountain pen poised in right. From under the bowler hat, red rat eyes looked for life in the silent lane. Flicker, flicker went the eyes. Mr. Gould wore a wing collar, stiff and yellow, and a blue-and-white striped shirt. His tie was gray or white or both; it was hard to say. It might have been green once. His suit too might have been brown in olden times. Now it was nondescript with a stripe. Waistcoat and trousers could not meet because of the stomach that went before him like a complaint.

"Rent, please," he squeaked. "Rent, please." With his umbrella

he poked at all the doors. "I know ye're there. I know ye're there. Oh, the perfidy, oh, the perfidy." He glared at the doors, his chin sunk against his neck. He poked, he jabbed, but collected only from the rich ones with pensions like Nellie Collins.

"I'll have to put ye out. That's what I'll have to do. I'll have to put ye out. Pay yer rent an' give every man his due."

Then he shuffled away, back up the lane, still squeaking dolefully, "Rent, please," as if practicing for the next lane.

But one week he shocked everyone. It was a Wednesday. The children were playing happily in the muck of the gutter, women sat outside talking of this and that, men sat inside looking at the paper or the wall, and who should come shuffling and squeaking around the corner but Mr. Gould. Down the lane he came behind the arrogant little paunch, rat's eyes afflicker, squeaking shrilly, "Rent, please, Rent, please. I have ye, I have ye red-handed. Eh? Eh?" The terror if it!

"Oh, me side," gasped Mrs. Kenihan.

"Oh, me heart," gasped Mrs. Egan.

"Oh, he took me breath," said Mrs. McCourt.

Mr. Gould held his fountain pen like a dart. He peered at the women. "Eh, there you are, Mrs. McCourt. Eh, no rent? Nine weeks of it, Mrs. McCourt." The little eyes flickered with delight. The ferret had the rabbit. The voice was a menace, a hiss. "I'll be puttin' ye out, Mrs. McCourt, Evictin', that's what I'll be doin' with ye. Ye'll be on the side of the road. The side of the road with the tinkers, the gypsies."

**T**HE WOMEN said they didn't have the rent. The men had no work and Thursday was the day for the dole. They'd have the rent on Thursday.

"I'll be back," he squealed. "I'll be back tomorrow. I have me job to keep too. They're not goin' to put up with it below in the office. Oh, no. I'll be back tomorrow. Oh, the perfidy. The perfidy of it."

He went from house to house. Some women who didn't know he was in the lane nearly collapsed

when they opened their doors and saw him. He collected nothing. "Be Christ," said Mrs. Lyons, who feared no one and had a terrible tongue, "if I don't have it for you of a Monday, I'm bloody well not goin' to have it for you of a Wednesday when we're scratchin' our bellies from the hunger. Go 'way ower that before I give you a good fong in the arse for yourself." Mr. Gould drew another nought in his little rent book, and squeaked something about the perfidy of it. Frightened by Mrs. Lyons and discouraged by his failure to collect any money at all, he turned to shuffle back up the lane. It was then he met his Waterloo.

Josie Madden never gave anyone a bit of trouble. She cleaned her house morning, noon, and night. She paid her rent every Monday and had a great devotion to St. Anne,



the mother of the Blessed Virgin. She often said she felt sorry for poor Mr. Gould, he had such a hard job of it trying to collect money where there wasn't any. Her pity for him was not shared. On this Wednesday, while Mr. Gould tormented the laners for their rent, Josie was scrubbing her kitchen. Just as Mr. Gould passed her door, Josie emptied her bucket into the gutter. Out the door she flung her slops, yowling "gardylloo!" She always yelled like that for some reason but it was too late for Mr. Gould. He was drenched. The water dripped from his bowler hat, the little rent book was sodden. Still the fountain pen was poised, but silent was the squeak.

"Jesus," said Josie, and slammed the door.

Mr. Gould, dull of eye and meek of paunch, shuffled away. He never came to the lane again on a day that wasn't a Monday.

## THE INSURANCE MAN

"Insurance is a lovely thing to have," said the women in the lane. If you had insurance you were sure of a funeral with the bit of dignity and decency and you could hold your head up knowing you were under obligation to no one.

"'Tis very important to hould your head up under the ground," said my Uncle Pa, "an' next to being under the ground, the worst thing is to be under an obligation. Funerals, my arse. Ye don't have a copper to fart on an' ye're worryin' about graves an' coffins."

You couldn't pay much attention to Uncle Pa; it was well known he'd make a joke of anything. He laughed out loud when my grandmother said, "I'd die of the shame if I died without insurance."

Like most families in the lane, we had insurance once. After losing her twin boys, Mam wanted to be on the safe side. She could afford the weekly sixpence when my father worked as a watchman over in Lady's Lane. When he was laid off because he was found taken with drink, there was no money for insurance. Empty young bellies care nothing for graves.

Mr. Gould, the rent man, was feared in the lane. He could threaten, he could evict, he could have you put on the side of the road. But the fear of him was nothing to the fear of Mr. Higgins, the insurance man.

Thursdays brought Mr. Higgins to the lane. Thursdays meant that families on the dole had a little money and Mr. Higgins knew it. He came always at the same time and, like Mr. Gould, to closed doors and silenced children. But where Mr. Gould shuffled, Mr. Higgins strode. Where Mr. Gould squeaked, Mr. Higgins shouted. Mr. Higgins was tall, gaunt, and fierce of eye. Some women in the lane so feared him they denied themselves just to be able to pay him. They had given up sugar, cigarettes, going to the pictures.

"He's worse than Lent," they complained. "You have to give up the few bits o' comfort whether you like it or not."

Up and down the lane marched Mr. Higgins, now on this side of

the gutter, now on that, rapping on unresponsive doors with the great knob of his walking stick. "Insurance!" he yelled. "In-bloody-surance. A bargain is a bargain. Ye signed, so ye did."

The lane sat silent against him. He shouted more and waved the stick around his head. "Insurance, in-bloody-surance! The grave gapes before ye."

MAM gasped. She had called us into the back room upstairs to avoid the terrible man. She had barely enough money for bread and here he was rapping on the door trying to take it from her.

"I know you're in there, Mrs. McCourt. I know bloody well you're in there."

Mam whispered to me, "Go to the windy an' tell him I'm out."

I stuck my head out the window. "Me mother said she's out."

"Out, is she?" roared Mr. Higgins. "Is that what she says? Out, now are you. Well, 'twill be a sorrowful day when ye dies. That's all I can say. A sorrowful bloody day. What are ye goin' to do without yeer insurance? Ask your mother—that's-out that."

I shook my head. "I dunno, sir."

"Do ye want to be thrun into the bog like oul' dogs an' cats, ah?"

My mother hissed at me from the back room. "What's he sayin'? What's he sayin'?"

Over my shoulder I told her. "He said do we want to be thrun into a bog like dogs an' cats."

Mr. Higgins shouted again. "Or is it in unconsecrated ground ye want to be buried?"

I repeated the question for Mam. She looked worried.

"Or is it thrun in with pauper Protestants ye want to be?"

Mam scurried suddenly to the window. "All right, all right," she called down to her tormentor. "Here, here's sixpence. I'll give you the rest next week."

Mr. Higgins caught the coin. "You won't be sorry. The day you're dead you'll get down on your two knees an' thank God you did this. Whatever else, you'll get a decent an' holy Catholic burial."

And away he marched up the lane, triumphant, walking stick briskly tapping the ground.



## Messiaen on Records

ROLAND GELATT

FOR TWENTY-FIVE YEARS Olivier Messiaen has been the *éminence grise* of French music—a figure of import and authority in the musical life of his country. As a theorist and inspirer, Messiaen has an influence beyond dispute. His scores, his books, his precepts and principles have been widely discussed and widely heeded. Yet even in France he can hardly be accounted a concert-hall favorite. He is one of those composers whose music has been more often talked about than performed.

Now, however, there seems to be some evidence that Messiaen's popularity may be catching up with his reputation. On records, at least, a minor Messiaen boom is in the making. New recordings of several of his major works have appeared during recent months, and taken together they provide an opportunity for getting a fresh fix on his talents.

MESSIAEN was born in Avignon sixty years ago. He distinguished himself as a prize-winning student at the Paris Conservatoire, and achieved modest celebrity in prewar Paris as an organist and composer of mildly unconventional church music. Mobilized in 1939, he was captured by the Germans in 1940 and imprisoned in Silesia. His first important work, the *Quartet for the End of Time*, was composed in a Nazi stalag.

On his repatriation in 1942 he was appointed a professor at the Conservatoire and thereafter entered upon the most prolific period of his career. The innovatory aspects of

Messiaen's music were by then sharply defined, and these characteristics—notably his use of modal scales, of stylized bird songs, and of complex Hindu rhythms—found expression in a series of ambitious compositions, in a long theoretical treatise, and in his classes at the Conservatoire. During the immediate postwar years those classes became a breeding ground for musical radicalism. Beginning with Pierre Boulez and Karlheinz Stockhausen, almost every one of Europe's avant-garde composers fell under the influence of Messiaen's teaching at one time or another.

The odd thing is that Messiaen's music itself is not particularly radical, at least not on a superficial level. His modal language, his use of bird song, his experimentation with unusual timbres may be exotic, but they are not hard to assimilate. Nor do his unconventional rhythmic structures pose an undue burden on the listener's comprehension. Yet if the music per se seems relatively conservative, the principles underlying it are not. Particularly in his approach to rhythm, Messiaen struck out on a new path. He has been called western music's first great theoretician of rhythm. "We are indebted to him," Boulez affirms, "for having created a conscious technique of duration, based upon his thorough studies of plainchant, Hindu rhythm, and the music of Stravinsky . . . an important contribution, since—aside from the bootless habit of trying to reconstitute Greek meter that crops up now and again—one must go back as far as