

Claire Keegan
Small things like these

The book is set in the run-up to Christmas, when Bill Furlong is busy delivering the fuel people are going to need, and meeting many of his customers.

The author makes it clear that he is in a vulnerable situation. He runs quite a successful business, but he does not make enough money to have any to spare (he worries about getting his lorry repaired) and he has to work very hard to keep it going. He and his wife have five daughters who have to be cared for and raised as well. The town where he lives is not very prosperous, and there are many small-minded, superstitious people who frown if you step out of line, and to whom the convent is all-powerful.

Bill has "come from nothing", and although he was lucky to be looked after by Mrs. Wilson and Ned after his unmarried mother died, he always wonders who his father was. The answer to his problem is skilfully woven into the plot: a casual remark about his likeness to Ned makes him think about the past, then he has a quiet time in the queue at the barber's for further reflection. All the "small things" which Ned did for him come to his mind: of course! Why had he not seen it? Ned must have been his father. He understands that he owes his position in life to the kindness he received in the past.

He has been feeling dissatisfied with his life: what is all this relentless work really for? He has had encounters before with some of the neglected-looking girls at the convent, but he is shocked to find Sarah locked in the coal shed when he goes to deliver the convent's Christmas fuel. When he takes her in, we have one of the scenes which sticks most in my mind. The Mother Superior makes a great show of being concerned for Sarah and looking after her, and she then goes on to threaten Bill: there might not be places at the school for his other daughters. The hidden message is, keep your nose clean!

We must all worry about the outcome of Bill's final decision to rescue Sara. He is salving his own conscience, but at what cost to the family he already has? What will Eileen's reaction be? His daughters are unlikely to welcome her into their midst. How will the townspeople react? They are afraid of the power of the nuns: will they stop buying from Bill?