

SILVERTOWN

Sweets and Dora

Jenny Fulcher lives in a two bedroom flat in Ullin Street in the East End. She is one of six and her father works as a ship's carpenter in the Thames Ironworks. The year is 1914.

All the children of school age living in Ullin Street go to the same school, just a few roads away in Bright Street. The Bright Street School is big and red-bricked, between a terrace of houses and a lot of pubs. The Fulcher children walk to school. They take the route via Zetland Street, although it's not strictly on the way. Zetland Street is where Mrs Selina Folkman's confectionary store is. To Jenny, the store is a sugar palace. In the window are bricks of pink and white coconut ice sitting on a paving of cream fudge with cherry-spotted nougat arches.

'Get a move on Jenny, you can't have none,' says Rosie her elder sister. But it's no good. Jenny can think of nothing else. Bit by bit the sugar palace consumes her. Rowntree's Treacle Toffee, Fry's Chocolate Crème, McIntyre's Toffee Tablet, Maynard's Rum 'n' Raisin.

Just after Jenny turns eleven, a dirty-skinned, yellow-haired girl appears in her class. This isn't much of an event in itself. Children come and go and a bitter winter is enough to take off one or two. But there is something about this particular girl which attracts Jenny. Perhaps it is her confidence. Perhaps it is the faint smell of violets she gives off, reminding her of violet crèmes and violet dragees and violet lozenges.

At the end of the second day the yellow-haired girl is waiting for Jenny at the school gates.

'Who's this then?' Her sister Rosie asks.

'Guess,' says the yellow-haired girl.

'Can't, won't and shan't,' says Rosie pulling Jenny out into the street.

The yellow-haired girl follows them across Bright Street and out into St Leonard's Road, singing: 'Poplar is popular but Wapping is topping.'

At the crossroads Jenny turns and says, 'So why pick on us to tell?'

Pretty soon they reach Ullin Street and the girl says 'How's about we play ginger?'

In ginger you tie the one doorknob to its neighbour, ring the doorbells and run off as quickly as possible to a place where you can watch what happens.

'My mum says ginger is common,' says Jenny.

'Please yerself,' says the girl, her yellow hair falling across her face like sunlight 'I don't care anyway.'

And that, over the years, is what Jenny Fulcher finds most appealing about her friend Dora Trelling. Dora Trelling really doesn't care.

Jenny begins meeting Dora (the yellow-haired girl) after school. They walk together to Mrs Folkman's confectionary store on Zetland Street and discuss the relative merits of sweets they have never tasted.

'Cough candy, now, there's a nice little tablet,' says Jenny,

They fall silent for a moment, imagining the crust of sugar on the outside, and then the welcoming interior.

'Dor, wha's your all-time favourite sweet?'

They scan the rainbow piles in the shop window.

‘I ain’t never had none of ‘em. Wha’s yours?’ says Dora

‘Lemme see,’ says Jenny running her mind across imaginary tastes. Trying to think what might be her favourite since she has never tasted most of them. ‘Liquorice comfits or montelimar? Fruit gems or marshmallow? Tell the truth, Dor, I’m a little bit partial to the lot but all considered I think montelimar gets it.’

‘Liar, liar,’ says Dora ‘Liar, liar, pants on fire.’

Until the day she died the two things Jenny loved the most in the world were the East End and..... sweets.