

# Hello

“Are we American?” My twelve-year-old son William says dipping a piece of pita into the hummus.

I finish a mouthful of lamb Vindaloo my wife Wanda scratch made from an Indian cook book we picked up in London years ago. “Yes,” I say nodding, though with the aroma of fried onion, roasted garlic, chilies, and spices making my mouth water, it’s not the Americana I imagined as a kid.

My other two children have also been busy demolishing the chick pea and sesame paste. I can’t resist and scoop up some with a piece of crispy plain poppadum and pop it into my mouth. Wanda’s got it down pat, adding just the right amount of garlic, lemon juice, and olive oil, the way I remember it from Saudi. Not entirely traditional, but when it comes to these things she’s more Ray Bradbury than June Cleaver.

“I thought you were African,” says my daughter.

“No silly,” my youngest son says. “He was born there, but he’s from Ireland. Right, Dad?”

I smile. “I’m a little bit of everything now I think.” I shovel another fork-full of the curry into my mouth, savoring the explosion of flavor. Sweat builds on my brow.

Without a hint of South Carolina drawl Wanda says, “Your Mom would get such a kick out of us right now.”

I chuckle, remembering how I gave Mom fits about onions as a kid, before my parents sent me to boarding school where onions were an everyday nightmare. That didn’t get me to like them, though. Time did, and the desire to change.

I take a sip of chilled sweet red wine, another change for me.

“Hey Dad?” William says happily munching the last of his pita. “Would you ever consider sending us to boarding school?”

When my parents asked me that I thought I’d spit back, “HELL NO!” but replied, “I don’t know” instead. I didn’t worry about why until William was barely a toddler and people would say how he was so much like his uncle Roger.

I catch myself chewing a nail. With brows raised and eyes popping wide in an attempt to make a funny face I lean in and say, “Why? Do you want to go?”

“No!” the three say collectively.

I laugh and it feels good.

The phone rings. I grit my teeth. *Ignore it* I tell myself.

The phone rings again. I should have turned it off. Damn, too late now.

“Who is it?” Wanda asks.

The caller ID says unknown name, but the area code is Florida. I cringe. “Roger.” I’m tempted to pick up but don’t. I’ll let my dinner settle first. *Besides he’ll call back. He always does.* I take a big gulp of wine waiting for the next ring but it doesn’t come.

“Do you not like Uncle Roger?” My youngest says, head cocked, her expression razor serious.

How to answer that? When I was growing up in Maryland and Alaska I was just a normal happy kid really no different from all the other kids I knew at the time. But just before junior high school my parents sent me to boarding school in Ireland with my brother, to keep me from ending up in the same trouble as him. I was thrust into an alien environment and singled out for the one thing that made me normal back home: I was American.

When I came home to the States seven years later I felt disconnected and had a hard time relating to anyone, and I hated that. I put on the brave face just as I’d done at boarding school, all the while believing in the notion that if I smiled then the world would smile with me and eventually people would believe that all was right in the world of Richard P. Nixon and then maybe it would be and I’d be normal again.

I had changed and I hated that, too.

What caused the change? The bullying? The war? Being so alone far from home? All the traveling? For so long I felt like the biggest wuss for not knowing and getting over whatever it was and I couldn’t tell anyone for fear they wouldn’t understand and think I was just weird. Wanda understood, though, the moment when we were making out in my parents’ living room while they were away in Europe and I suddenly pulled her from the couch to the floor and shielded her from the machine gun fire that some disc jockey played on the radio.

“Of course I like your Uncle Roger,” I say. “I just wish...” my voice trails off and I bite my lip and smile as I suddenly remember what Dad used to say about wishes and horses and beggars riding. “It’s a long story.”

# 1 – If Not for Gaddafi

I came into the world September 1, 1964, in Tripoli, Libya, but my life didn't really begin until three years later, after we had fled Libya in the wake of the Arab-Israeli War.

We landed in Bethesda, Maryland. America. Apple-pie, Fourth of July fireworks, Halloween candy, Thanksgiving turkey, Christmas presents beyond my wildest imagination, and Mrs. Alberstadt who one day while I was out exploring the neighborhood unceremoniously dragged me back home and asked my mom, "Did you know your son was wandering around with a plastic bag over his head?" to which Mom replied, "Is that so?"

Once we got settled, Dad began taking us into Washington, D.C. every weekend, it seemed, so I'd appreciate our new country's history. The Smithsonian, the Capitol, the White House. "Ungrateful louts," he called the anti-war protesters gathered around the Washington Monument. He said they were as bad as the Communists and those goddamned Beatles for ruining the country.

I hadn't a clue what he was on about. I didn't know about such things and didn't really pay much attention to other people. Except the dark-as-night man who nearly knocked me down coming out of a Hot Shoppes in D.C. He grinned big as could be and handed me a balloon. "Black is beautiful," he said. He closed his eyes and turned and continued on his way almost dancing, repeating those words as if singing a song.

"Goddamned communist," Dad grumbled.

I especially loved going down to West Potomac Park to fish, look at the cherry blossoms, listen to military band concerts and, most of all, watch the airplanes come and go from National Airport across the river. I knew every type, every airline. One day, I thought, I'd be a pilot and fly all over the world.

What I knew about the world came mostly from my parents stories told around the dinner table, refreshed with rich detail at their cocktail parties. My memory of Libya was the scar on my thigh from a broken Fanta bottle I fell on in the desert. I didn't recall being in Malta, or Holland, and only had the vaguest of memories of Ireland. So I'd listen in as Dad told about facing down the German U-boat commander during the war, the pet monkey that drank gin, and how he ended up in Kuwait; Mom telling of the emergency landing because her perfume leaked in her luggage and her rescuing the elderly Jewish couple from beaten to death by the mob of Arabs.

Fourth of July, 1970. A perfect, warm summer day made extra special because we were trying out the new redwood deck Dad had completed at the side of our new house in Silver Spring. Mom brought out

lettuce and tomato, sliced cheese, buns for the all-American burgers sizzling on the grill, and a fresh can of Schlitz for Dad that I helped myself to a few times while he wasn't looking.

Between bites of the burgers and potato chips, Mom and Dad began talking about sending Roger to something called boarding school in Northern Ireland.

That's where my granny and granda lived, where it rained a lot and made everything green. Best of all it was far, far away, and you could only get there by airplane. "Can I go to boarding school, too?" I said.

"No son, you're too young."

My heart sank.

Mom and Dad's conversation turned to talking about riots and soldiers, and Mom asked would Roger be okay and Dad said sure he would and that he'd be just a few miles from G and G and could visit on weekends. And whatever trouble was going on over there was always being exaggerated by the media anyway and don't worry, it will do him the world of good. "We'll tell him when he comes home from summer camp."

A month later we were at Dulles Airport. While Dad helped Mom and Roger get checked in, Mrs. Alberstadt arrived to see them off, and she brought her son Marc whom I hadn't seen in forever it seemed. He and I sped off to the gift shop where there were lots of airliner models and toys to look at.

After a bit we headed over to a bank of payphones. I sat down and pretended to make a call. A moment later I scooped my finger in the coin return for my prize. We hit phone after phone, and pretty soon my pockets bulged with a fortune in forgotten change.

Suddenly, Mrs. Alberstadt rushed from out of nowhere and grabbed me. "Paul – your mom and brother are about to take off," she said. I broke free, ran to a window overlooking the tarmac, and waved bye-bye at the sleek BOAC VC-10 parked in the distance.

"No no, this way," she said, leading off toward the departure gates.

I stuffed my hands into my pockets loaded down with coins from the telephones to keep them from jangling and followed her. When we arrived at the departure lounge, I had barely enough time for a quick glimpse of Mom and Roger before the doors of the mammoth mobile lounge began closing. I raised my hand to wave.

"I love you," Mom said over the din.

Over the next couple of months I missed Mom, and I missed Roger, I suppose, but Mrs. Matson, the kindly neighbor from across the street, did a fine job of filling me with delicious spaghetti, apple pie, roast chicken – everything a growing boy needed, and more.

Halloween came with Roger still in Northern Ireland, and I wondered who'd take me Trick or Treating. Dad stepped in and brought me around our neighborhood, to each house, making sure I got a good haul, and when we returned home he told me to get another bag and brought me out again, in the car, to a different neighborhood. I ended up with tons of candy and stayed up late dividing the bounty into two piles. One I kept. The other I packed into a box and had Dad mail it to Roger along with a few other items I thought he might like.

When Mom finally returned home, the first words that fell from her mouth were, "What on earth did you feed him?" Referring, of course, to me as I'd ballooned up beyond husky.

"I didn't make him fat. He hardly ate anything here," Dad replied, and that was true, thanks to Mrs. Matson.

The fuss over me soon died down because Dungannon exploded with "The Troubles". Roger had already been complaining about the prefects and masters beating him up every day and how he had to eat awful food. Now he said bullets whizzed through what windows had not been blown out by the bombs. He was going to die!

I was happy and doing well in first grade at Parkside Elementary, but before I knew it, Mom pulled me out of class and jumped on a plane back to Ireland with me in tow. Roger's pleas to be rescued from the bombs, bullets and bullies worked.

For the next few months we lived with my grandparents in Ballygawley, Northern Ireland, near Dungannon where Roger said all "The Troubles" were supposed to be, but I didn't see or feel any sense of what he had complained about. In fact, no one said as much as "boo" to us.

The Irish kids asked curious questions about the cost of bread and did we have a television and the like, and said aye and ach aye a lot, but they were okay and not too different from my American friends. And they liked building fires; huge fires that for a long time I thought they called *bomb* fires, which made perfect sense given what Roger had told me.

On school days, we walked up the town to school, and afterwards often stop into Drugan's newsagent for a Ninety-Nine – soft-serve ice cream topped with raspberry syrup and a flaked chocolate bar – before heading home. Sometimes we'd goof off with the local kids. Once we raided an apple orchard and had the farmer after us brandishing a shotgun.

On weekends, we'd fish in the Ballygawley River just a couple hundred yards down the road. Granda kept a small supply of hooks and sinkers in the cupboard in the living room and a fishing rod in the closet in the front bedroom upstairs. We'd dig a few worms and off we'd go.

In April 1971, police found a massive car bomb outside a bank up the town. Mom took us to live with my Aunt Irene and Uncle John in Portugal. While John showed me a new way to make paper airplanes,

Roger spent every escudo he got from Mom on firecrackers, earning him the nickname “Bangers and Cash”. Only our imagination limited our fun. Portugal was perfect in every way but one. Cousin Helene constantly tattled on us. I finally got fed up and flattened her with a strong right hook. Ah well, it was time to go back home anyway.

We returned to the States in time for me to start second grade at Parkside, and I quickly picked up where I’d left off.

Just before Christmas, Dad left for Iran on business. When he returned a couple of months later, he glared at Roger whose hair had grown below his collar. “Those goddamned Beatles,” he said. “We shouldn’t have taken him out of Dungannon.”

Mom’s face deadened. “I should never have let him go.”

Dad looked poised to counter but didn’t. He relaxed his stance and gave Mom a hug.

At home, Dad gathered us together and said he had brought back something really special.

“Caviar?” Mom said with delight.

“Beluga, my dear!”

I nearly threw up at the mere smell of the stuff. Mom kept smacking her lips as if waiting for the deliciousness to come.

Dad chewed for a bit before saying, “Okay, I think we can cross that off our list.”

Mom burst out laughing when even the dog wouldn’t eat it.

Bright and early the next morning, Dad ordered Roger and me into the car. “I’m taking you both down for haircuts.”

Roger protested, saying all his friends at school were growing their hair.

“That Parkside Elementary is ruining you two,” Dad said. “No discipline and they’re filling you with too much bird watching and nonsense like that.”

I happened to like the class excursions into the woods to look at birds.

That fall I started third grade at a new school, Calvary Lutheran, to “save” me, Dad said, from the clutches of the public schools’ *weird* ideas that had so obviously afflicted my brother. Nothing really changed, though. I still had my friends to play with after school, and home. The only real difference was the colored stars awarded each week for good performance – those who earned enough gold stars were separated from the rest of us at the end of the week. While we played dodge ball or watched a movie, the special group did something else.

One week I exploded with effort and finally earned more than the required number of gold stars and pulsed with excitement when I heard my name called as a special achiever. While the *average* kids headed to the gym for their dodge ball or movie, our little group headed to a small room under the chapel.

Shaking with anticipation, I waited for my special prize.

“Everyone, sit down, open your math books to page forty three and begin at the top,” the teacher said.

“But...?”

I decided I’d never again earn gold stars at Calvary Lutheran, but I needn’t have worried. Before the school year ended, I found out we were moving.

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## 2 – North to the Darkness

Shortly after arriving in Anchorage, Alaska in the summer of '73, I received a letter from my friend Marc. He said he missed me and promised that he'd send some firecrackers in his next letter. He closed asking, "Do you live in an igloo?"

No, we lived in a tiny apartment on Elmendorf Air Force base, the definition of lonely and bleak. I had no friends, nor did I see any kids my age running around having fun that I could join in. There wasn't even a good place to watch the airplanes come and go, which was just as well because I grew bored seeing the same ones all the time.

Just when I thought I might start bawling my eyes out wanting to go back home to Maryland, Roger came in and pulled out the fishing gear. "Come on," he said. "Let's go."

Like a faithful dog I followed him down Government Hill, across the railroad tracks and through a wooded area to a spot beside a bend in a river. "What the..." I began.

"Shhh!" He said. "You'll scare the fish!"

For the rest of summer we went back to that spot and pulled out trout by the bagful. We'd caught trout before, in Ireland, but nothing like this. In my excitement I'd almost always kick in the salmon eggs. Roger didn't get angry with me, not even so much as a cross word. He'd just pack up and say we'd have to get more.

I entered fourth grade that fall at Sunshine Elementary and, almost immediately, got to know one fellow in my class better than I wanted to. He claimed to be sixteen years old and even showed me what he said was a driver's license. How could this pipsqueak half my size be sixteen and in my class? "You are not!" I said, and the more he insisted, the more I argued. A crowd gathered. He shoved me. I shoved him back and before I knew what had happened, we were fighting. Well, not exactly fighting – I stood still while he circled and pummeled me; pow, pow, pow!

A teacher finally stepped between us and asked what we thought we were doing. I explained to her that I had only been defending myself. She said to tell it to the principal.

I did.

The principal reached into a desk drawer and retrieved a paddle about a foot and a half long, its handle taped, its business end flat and riddled with holes. "Grab your ankles," he said. He lit my butt on fire with three licks in quick succession. I squirmed a little but didn't flinch, didn't cry, maybe because I could hear Mr. Tough Guy already sobbing before his turn. Not so tough after all.

Mom said I shouldn't have been punished for defending myself.

Dad tried to cheer me up by telling me about when he was a kid at boarding school in Ireland. “At Cavan Royal if you were out of line just the slightest,” he said. “By God they’d let you have it with the black thorn stick! Whack!”

I jumped when he smacked his hands together.

Roger said, “The next time some guy wants to fight you, take him out with the first punch. Like this,” demonstrating with both fists clasped. “No one,” he added barely above a whisper, “will ever fook with you again.”

In early October, we moved into a house far from Elmendorf. It had a fenced yard so we could finally get Tiger, Roger’s dog from Maryland, out of the kennel. Dad bought a small camper and an aluminum boat that came complete with a three-horse Evinrude outboard motor. He said next summer wasn’t too far off and gushed about how much fun we were going to have.

I thought maybe this year I’d get a bike, too, so I could ride to my new school.

Roger got a brand-new Schwinn ten-speed.

I arrived late my first day at my new school, Woodland Park. Giggles replaced the stares when the teacher introduced me as “Richard Nixon.” She immediately told the class to settle down and asked if I might prefer to go by Paul. I really wanted to try Richard for a change but reluctantly gave in to her weighty glare.

Before long, though, I forgot all about the name thing and settled into the routine. I liked my new school. I liked school, period. I excelled in math and science. English, too. Most important of all, I made friends.

Bobby Coates, the kid from the cul-de-sac behind ours that yelled, “Sure! Come on over!” when I shouted at him from our back balcony, “Can I play?” Timmy Fraser, the little guy from a few houses down who one day came to the door and asked if I wanted to play army. I had a blast running around the neighborhood pointing nothing more than a stick at imaginary enemy soldiers and rat-a-tat-tatting as if shooting them. Billy Irby, the fellow who brought over a small can of gun powder so we could play demolition.

Then there was Mary Graybel. She wasn’t a friend; she was a girl. To get to know her better I told her my dog could beat up her dog, and to prove it I’d go get my dog and meet her near the school in an hour. Of course, I was really going to bring her a present, but she never showed. So I ate the present – a Milky Way or Three Musketeers bar.

By Halloween, I went to school in darkness. Before Christmas, I came home in darkness, too. When the first deep blanket of snow fell, I grabbed a big handful and tried to make a snowball. I might as well have been trying to pack dry sand. I tried letting it melt a little in my bare hands, but all I got were frozen fingers and severe throbbing pain when I tried to thaw them in hot water, though that didn't seem as bad as the poor kid who stuck his tongue to a metal pole on a dare one day during recess. Before anyone could get some water, hot or cold, someone had yanked him away screaming with blood pouring from his mouth. For a couple of weeks after I marveled at the tongue flesh left behind on the pole as a gruesome reminder for all not to be stupid.

When summer came, Dad took us camping at Russian River, about a couple of hours south of Anchorage. The Russian River was unlike anything I'd seen before; w and fast, and lined with fishermen on both sides.

I looked to Roger for encouragement. He smiled as if to say, "Follow my lead." I did, casting out with a Coho fly just like his. I started reeling in, copying Roger as best I could. Suddenly, the rod started pulling in my hands. "I think I've got a big one!" I shouted. I couldn't believe my luck! By the way the other fishermen glared at me they couldn't believe my luck either. I knew why when I reeled in their lines.

At Montana Creek I decided to spare myself embarrassment and didn't put in a line. Roger, though, masterfully landed a King salmon nearly as big as me. "Can you even eat that thing?" I said.

"Of course you can," Roger replied. "But I think I want this on my wall."

When Mom heard the price the taxidermist quoted, she said, "I think we'll be eating salmon for a while."

Within a few weeks, Dad bought a small Mercury outboard motor. At Roger's suggestion, we named the boat Panama Red. A good name, I thought, and by the nods and smiles of approval we received on Finger Lake, most everyone else did, too. But the name on the boat and well-wishes did nothing for our luck. We spent the first day cruising from one perfect-looking cove to another and caught nothing.

"You have to trawl for them, son," Dad said when we came in.

Roger scoffed at the suggestion, but after another day and a half of no bites and with rain pissing down on us against a rolling chorus of thunder claps, Roger said, "Fook it," and reeled in. "This lake is dead." I knew that wasn't true, and I knew he knew, too. We'd both seen the boats at the jetty loaded with fish.

He lit a cigarette and re-rigged with a small Mepps lure.

I re-rigged, too, and cast out just as Roger put the motor in gear.

We'd trawled for maybe thirty or forty seconds when suddenly he leapt up. "Oh fook!" He said, nearly falling into the lake putting the motor into neutral with one hand while wrenching the rod with the other.

Just then my rod jerked, too. "I've got one. I'VE GOT ONE!!" I yelled.

"Well don't just sit there like some dumbshit, Paul. Reel it in!"

We tried trawling at Nancy Lake but caught nothing. Late in the evening we happened to be walking across a railway trestle over a tiny stream that flowed into Nancy when Roger stopped dead. "I see fish," he said.

We ran back to the camper and grabbed the gear. Before long Roger pulled out a lunker. I jumped up and down trying to decide if it was a trout or a salmon and kicked in the salmon eggs.

Roger laughed. It was just after two in the morning with mosquitoes eating us alive in the perpetual twilight of the Alaskan summer. God we had fun.

Fifth grade saw me maintaining A's and B's, getting invited onto the safety patrol, going out with my first girlfriend, Alayne, and losing another fight – to Tammy who flattened me with a fast fist for some silly reason I'm sure.

By early November, Tiger went missing, and Dad and Roger argued more. Dad seemed stuck between angry and removed, cursing Roger one moment and hugging him the next. Often when Roger had a friend over Dad would twist his face in disgust and leave the room. He wouldn't return until the friend had left. Then he'd start poking Roger at dinner with questions like "Who was that lout?"

Sometimes Roger would answer. Sometimes he'd ask for something; the potatoes, ketchup, napkin, and sometimes he'd just stew for a bit, his breathing quickening, then shove off from the table with an abrupt, "I'm done," retreat to his room and put on his Pink Floyd.

One night Mom began to cry. "I can't take this. I have to get out," she said, quickly adding she couldn't stand going to work and coming home in darkness anymore. "I have to get away from all this before I go mad."

Dad suggested a week in Hawaii. A few days before the flight, Mom and Dad told Roger he was going, too. "Happy Birthday, son," they said.

Right up to the moment the doors of the Western Airlines 707 closed I thought Dad would spring a surprise ticket for me, but he didn't. "Don't worry son," he said. "I'll take you to Hawaii someday."

A few months later Dad took me with him to Seattle on one of his business trips. At the end of it he said we had the weekend left and asked if I'd like to spend a couple of days in Canada to meet cousins I'd never even heard of. "Or we could fly out to Hawaii. Your choice."

Going to Canada sounded about as exciting as going to Wasilla. Of course I said Hawaii.

"Just keep in mind that with all the flying, we'll only have Saturday."

I nodded without hesitating.

Saturday morning I slathered on plenty of suntan oil and headed out to the pool. At lunch, Dad said I looked a little pink and asked if I'd remembered the suntan oil. "Of course!" I said. I slathered on more oil before heading out again to spend the entire afternoon swimming in the ocean with some local kids.

Despite Dad's efforts that night and the following morning to keep me comfortably doused with Solarcaine, I howled through the night and flew back to Anchorage looking like a blistered lobster.

At school I tried to walk cool with a "Yeah. I've been to Hawaii" bounce in my step. All the kids looked at me as if to say, "Ouch."

Near the beginning of summer '75, Dad, Roger, and I picked up a brand new twenty-three and a half foot Prowler camping trailer just outside Seattle. Dad had sold the old camper and shipped his '72 Impala from Anchorage with the idea that we'd head to California, but heat turned us around in Southern Oregon.

On the way back to Anchorage we got close to Crater Lake, saw the battleship U.S.S. Missouri, and the cousins I'd missed out on earlier. We also relaxed in some hot springs, found a beautiful fishing river that had no fish except some ugly sucker-mouth "things", and went aboard an old paddle-steamer. Roger and Dad seemed relaxed, content, and were getting along just fine. The only problem, really, was me.

Every time we stopped for gas, Dad reminded us to go to the bathroom. I did. Then I'd get back in the car and suck down a soda. By the time we were well in the middle of nowhere I'd announce, "I gotta go again."

Within a few weeks of me starting sixth grade, Dad left for Japan on business. I came home one day to Roger on hands and knees outside gingerly plucking at something on the ground below his window. I asked what he was doing.

"Pulling weed," he said.

Mom arrived home a little later, smiled, said hello, and asked what we were working on.

"Weeding," Roger said.

"Oh how lovely," she replied. "Good luck."

Roger laughed. He had collected a bundle of plants and, by their leaves, I knew it was pot. Where had they come from? I found out a few days later when Roger was talking on the phone with a girlfriend.

“Yeah, like I threw all the seeds out the window in the winter, and they grew. Can you believe that? Yeah, yeah, it’ll be some sick dope for sure. Alaska makes everything sick, but hey.” Roger took a deep drag from a joint. “I’m smoking some now so it’s not all bad.”

“You’re going to get in trouble, Roger,” I said. I knew Mom was due home in about half an hour.

Roger looked at me with a silly grin and said, “No I’m not.”

I knew he was right.

He asked if I wanted to smoke some of his *homegrown*.

I said sure.

“Just don’t butt-suck the end of it,” he said, holding the joint for me. “What’s that?” He said into the phone. “Oh, I’m getting my little brother stoned.”

I hunkered down, put my lips on the end of the joint and drew the pungent smoke into my mouth, expanding my throat to make room like I was smoking a cigarette. As soon as I tried to inhale I started coughing.

Roger laughed. “No man, you’re wasting it that way. You gotta hold it in, man.”

I tried again, thinking this was so cool.

“What? No man,” he said into the phone again. “I gave him my joint and he’s slobbering all over the end of it. Pretty gross. Yeah, far out. It’s pretty fookin’ funny, too.” Roger paused as if listening intently.

My lungs burned, but I held in the smoke.

“Yeah, okay. Cool,” he said into the phone. “Yeah, I’ll talk to you later. Bye.” Roger clicked the receiver.

I exhaled.

Roger said, “Hey man, you got any ideas how to cut through fiberglass panels like Dad used over the deck?”

Impressed that he’d asked me for help, I thought hard for a moment before suggesting the blowtorch we had bought Dad for Christmas.

Roger lit up. When we tried it out on a leftover panel in the back yard, we produced a lot of choking black smoke and little else.

“I’ll think of something,” he said.

Then Tiger Too, the tiny black pup we’d picked up at University Mall before Christmas who’d grown into a monster dog that could just about walk over the fence, went missing. We’d already lost Cocoa, the six-month old chocolate Labrador that came as the other half of the package deal, but none of us felt bad about her as she’d turned out to be a neurotic bitch and not much of a pet.

After we'd given up hope, Roger found me crying in front of the television. He asked what was wrong, and I told him about how at the end of *The Price is Right* Bob Barker gave some little girl a puppy to replace the dog she'd lost.

The next day when I got home from school, Roger told me to check out the back yard. When I did, a blob of fur ran out from under the deck, jumped into my arms, and started licking my face.

Roger smiled. "Her name's Brandy."

"Where'd this come from?"

"Some chick I know was taking her to the pound. I said I'd take her, and here she is."

"Far out, man, and thanks."

A few days later, Roger burst into the house carrying a tree. "Lock the fookin' door," he shouted, bolting wide-eyed to a window.

"What is that?" I said.

Roger ran to his room and hefted the tree into a large planter he'd set up in advance. "Go get me some water," he said.

I didn't know pot grew into trees.

"Get me some fookin' water," Roger snarled without even a hint of his usual humor.

He babied that plant, everyday giving it just the right amount of love and attention it needed to thrive, and it seemed to love him back, adding new branches and leaves daily.

Mom didn't complain – she actually seemed fascinated as the tree grew fatter, taller, and bushier. "Just as long as it's gone before your father comes home," she said.

Roger chuckled. "Yeah, Mom. I'll make sure of that."

Mom managed quite well without Dad, until one evening when she came in from work shouting, "Call the police! Call the POLICE!"

I came out of the kitchen, mouth stuffed with potato chips, wondering what the fuss was.

"Someone's stolen your father's car," she yelled. "Call the police!"

I took a big slurp of soda and swallowed hard. "It's okay, Mom," I said. "Roger took it."

Mom's face went from panic to anger. She stormed over to the Mulcahys next door. Moments later Mr. Mulcahy took off in his pickup truck. I figured I should try to find Roger before he did.

I'd almost reached the next street when an engine gunned behind me. I turned. Mulcahy skidded to a halt over my foot. He rolled down a window, but not to check that I was all right. "Where's that goddamned brother of yours?"

I shrugged.

Mulcahy grunted and sped off into the dark.

Roger showed up at home around four in the morning to find all his pot plants, including the tree, stuffed into the trash.

Mom said nothing. She'd stayed up waiting for him. I stayed up with her pouring her coffee and watching television.

Roger clawed through the trash like Mom looking for cigarette butts. He shook off most of the coffee grounds and some spaghetti from what he retrieved, plucked the leaves and stuck them in the oven on tin foil. "Jesus fooking Christ. How could you do this?" he screamed.

I thought how could he ask such a stupid question?

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## 3 – The Party is Over

Roger wasn't the only one getting into trouble. Dad had to pay for a window even though it was Kerry Whitley who actually broke it. My rock hit the cross-frame between the panes, exactly where I had been aiming. My friend Timmy Fraser sided with Kerry making it two against one, and I got blamed. Then, there was the time I chased some poor kid, Georgie was his name, from the bus stop literally into the arms of his bewildered mother inside his house just because I could. I got kicked off patrol for that.

"Being on the patrol isn't cool anyway," Terry Lindblade told me in class right after the Principal announced my disgrace to the whole school. After that I started hanging out with Terry and his brother Virgil down at our fort, a junked car in a vacant lot about a block from the school. We'd talk, laugh, and puff away on whatever cigarettes we'd been able to lift from our parents. Terry always made me laugh when he'd start in on his various adventures with girls and how he'd done this to that one and that to this one.

"If ever you're short a rubber, you can use a balloon," he said, struggling to get a tiny one over his pinky.

I may have not gotten that far with Alayne when we played "spin the bottle" at a friend's house, but even I knew a balloon wasn't much use to anyone. I chuckled, though I'd keep his advice to myself. I kept a lot of things to myself.

And there were some times I got into trouble with Roger. Well, not with him but because of him.

Like when Roger asked if I wanted to get the fook out of the house and grab a movie or something.

Sure I did, imagining fresh popcorn dripping with melted butter in one hand and an ice-cold soda in the other while the movie would take me away for a bit.

We walked the several miles to Fireweed Theater, but instead of paying for tickets, Roger led me round back and knocked on the emergency exit door where we froze until someone let us in. "Take what you can get away with," Roger said. I ducked low and slumped into the first seat I could.

Just when I began to relax, someone shined a flashlight in my eyes. "I need to see your ticket."

I looked left and right and realized Roger had abandoned me. "I threw it away," I said.

"You need to come with me."

I faced the manager. Trembling, I begged him not to call my parents. I hadn't even told him my name, let alone given him a number to call.

Roger laughed when he came out and found me waiting for him. "What the fook are you doing out here in the cold?"

"I got caught and they kicked me out," I said. "Because I wouldn't nark."

“You’re such a dweeb,” he said. “Come on.”

I followed behind, once again the faithful dog.

When we got home, I followed Roger into the camper and sat down at the table.

Roger popped open a couple of beers from the fridge and handed me one. “Cheers,” he said. He gave me a cigarette.

I drew in a mouthful of smoke as if I was the coolest person in the world.

“Suck it in,” Roger said, “like this.”

I coughed.

Roger laughed. “You really are a fookin’ dweeb sometimes, you know that?”

I tried again. Before long, I was smoking for real.

“You’re still a dweeb,” Roger said.

Dad returned from Japan a little before Christmas. Mom had already said she wasn’t going to tell him about the pot or the car, so on the way home from the airport I broke the tension with the news that I’d gotten onto the West Anchorage High swim team.

“And would you believe,” I said, “the coach is from Belfast!”

I explained how coach had also shown us pictures of The Troubles and talked about them as if in pain. “Any of yous ever hear of Northern Ireland?” he’d said.

I’d raised my hand and told him I’d been to Northern Ireland and about Dungannon Royal, the Lucky Bags of candy, and bomb fires. He’d looked at me as if to say is that so?

“I’ve some pictures I want to share so people know what’s going on over there in my country.”

He’d had my attention.

“This lad is throwing a petrol bomb,” he’d said, pointing to one of the pictures. “He’s taking such a chance – the British would be shooting at him trying to murder him while he’s running at them. And if that weren’t enough, the rag in the bottle could come out at any time and douse him with flaming petrol - gasoline. That happened to one lad I knew.” He’d shown us some other pictures, but I’d not said anything more.

I already knew about Northern Ireland. It had been quiet in Ballygawley in 1971 but only because we’d been lucky. Since then violence had exploded all over the place there, and people really were getting killed.

Granny sent over the Tyrone Courier regularly detailing the Troubles. Mom would sometimes cry, shake her head, and say things like, “ach now.” She wrote poems about the bombings, the bloodshed, the tearing of the country apart, and from what my swim coach said she exaggerated nothing.

Just as we pulled into our driveway, the living room curtains parted, and Brandy pushed her snout against the glass.

As soon as we got inside, Brandy came bounding, sniffing and barking around Dad excitedly and generally getting in the way.

“Oh my word,” Dad said, reaching down to pet the dog.

Dad took off his heavy wool overcoat.

“Oh, yeah, that black poodle has been getting in the yard again,” I said.

I’d first seen the black poodle in the back yard one day trying to hump Cocoa who simply lied on the snow motionless and looking bored. The poor fellow tried valiantly but was just too small. I laughed when Cocoa eventually stood up, and he began hopping and bouncing trying to launch himself onto, or into, her.

Dad shuddered. “Uh oh.”

Christmas came and went. I’d gotten a lot of stuff I’d asked for. Alayne liked the necklace I’d gotten for her, and everyone seemed happy.

Then came New Year’s Eve. While Mom and Dad entertained their friends upstairs, Roger had a Whole Lotta Love party going in the basement, with my parent’s permission, filling the house with a strange mixture of Lawrence Welk and Led Zeppelin.

Sometime before midnight, Dad came in from the balcony scratching his head. “That’s the damndest thing,” he said. “We’re running low on champagne.”

He told me to go downstairs and send Roger up. “I want to see him right now.”

I hurried into the basement lit only with black lights and vibrant florescence on velvet backgrounds and asked for Roger.

“Uh, he’s busy. In there,” someone replied, pointing a thumb towards my bedroom.

I opened the door and heard huffing and moaning. “Dad wants you,” I said.

Before he could say anything, someone said, “Oh shit.” I turned just as Dad pushed past me and flipped on the lights.

Roger continued thrusting away on top of the Stewart girl for a couple of seconds before looking up.

Dad wagged his finger and said, “I’ll deal with you later.”

Afterwards, Roger laughed about what had happened, saying he thought one of his friends was playing with him, that he didn’t know it was Dad. Even though Dad had wagged his finger and threatened to deal with him later, nothing happened. Roger came and went as he pleased just as before. Sometimes it seemed like he and I spent no time together at all. I might see him at dinner or briefly once I got home from school when he’d pop in to get something.

Other times he surprised me, like when he asked me to go door to door with him with a coffee can wrapped in white paper with a big red cross drawn on it in magic marker between the words, "Earthquake" and "Relief" written in bold above and below. We'd actually collected about twenty bucks "for the poor people of Guatemala," we said, before someone caught on to what we were really doing. It wasn't much but Roger was pleased enough. "Take what you can get away with," he said. He then asked if I wanted to go up to Arctic Valley with him. I didn't even know how to ski but said sure.

As Roger had a blast tearing down the slopes with smiles and energy I hadn't really seen before, I kept myself busy at the bottom. Hard to imagine that snow could transform an otherwise ordinary mountain into a frozen playground where cold was furthest from my mind.

I thought he'd be done when it got dark, but instead he asked if I wanted to go up the mountain, and when I said yes, he talked the chair-lift guy into letting me up for free.

At the top we found a spot to sit and look out over the valley. Roger opened a bottle of Boone's Farm strawberry wine he'd stashed earlier, took a swig and passed me the bottle.

I grinned and took a big gulp. "That was pretty cool how you fooled that asshole earlier," I said. The guy who'd caught onto our little relief scheme had said we were probably cold and offered us a lift home, but Roger seemed to know it was a trick. The guy snarled, "I'll call the police if you ever try to pull this crap again – now that I know where you live," when he stopped to let us out. Roger just grinned, having led the guy to a house two blocks away from where we really lived.

"Yeah, well, that guy just had no sense of humor."

I took another gulp of wine and passed it back. "Like the pizza guy."

He chuckled and said, "Fook yeah, the pizza guy."

We'd crank-called in a big order of pizzas and somehow the guy had found out who we were and threatened to call the cops if we didn't go down and pay, but we had no money. So we hiked into Anchorage loaded down with a bunch of garage-sale crap we thought would suffice.

Roger smiled. "I'd loved to have seen the look on his face seeing all that garage-sale crap you left around his door." He lit a cigarette and offered me one, too. "You know what? Maybe you're not too much of a dweeb."

We arrived back home with police cars and emergency vehicles bathing the McCarty's house across the cul-de-sac in an eerie, flashing glow. We learned from the crowd that Brad's older brother, Doug, had put the barrel of his dad's gun in his mouth and pulled the trigger. "They don't know if it was an accident or on purpose."

"Doesn't fookin' matter now. Does it?" Roger replied under his breath.

I knew the younger McCarty, Brad, from class. I'd not noticed him, really, until he caught me staring at him in the recess line picking stitches out of the long slit on his wrist. He shot me a Cool Hand Luke smile and said, "They were coming out soon anyway."

After the police left, I sneaked over and shone a flashlight through the McCarty's sliding glass door at the back. The beam raked across bits of Doug stuck with crimson glue splattered across what once was a white wall.

I went to the funeral because of Brad. I thought I'd cry when we arrived or when I saw his broken face, but I didn't. I started bawling uncontrollably afterwards, in the car. Mom did her best to comfort me, saying it was okay to cry because that's what people do when they're sad. I cried because of the pain on Brad's face and feared he'd never be Cool Hand Luke ever again. His happiness had been torn away from him all at once and there was nothing I could do to change that.

*What if that had been Roger?*

The sadness didn't last long. Alayne called to ask if I'd be interested in going roller skating. I'd never done that before but from what I'd seen on television it didn't look much different from hockey skating and I wasn't too bad at that, so I said yes.

I couldn't have asked for a better time, but when I arrived home I noticed something just didn't seem right. Walking in the door I felt a sort of invisible prickly sensation, like the air was charged with negativity. Mom asked if I'd had a good time. Yes, I did I said. She said that's nice and sunk back to wherever she was before I came in.

"Dark Side of the Moon" seeped from Roger's room. I knocked and went in. "Hey, man. How's it going," I said.

"Pfft," he said. He opened the window and lit up a cigarette. "Man, you wouldn't believe," he said shaking his head, his words trailing off.

Mom popped her head in.

Roger flicked the cigarette out the window.

Mom looked like she wanted to say something but didn't. She sighed, shook her head and left, easing the door shut behind her.

Roger closed the window and shot me a "that was close" look. He flipped "Dark Side" over and flumped down on his bed.

Seconds later, Dad burst into the room, lunged with his fist raised and smashed Roger in the face, snarling "Goddammit!"

Roger's mouth and nose exploded red, streaming blood onto his shirt, his pants, and the sheets. There were even splatters on the wall.

“It’s not enough that you get high all the time,” Dad said. “But now you’re breaking and entering, too? For a goddamned case of beer?”

Roger winced at the onslaught of words, but I saw rage, not fear, in his eyes, and when dad stepped back, Roger seized the moment, launching himself effing and cursing, fists flying.

Dad retreated out to the other room.

Mom began shrieking, and I heard slapping and thumping and shouting and crying and more cursing mixed with the sound of shattering glass and splintering furniture.

I ran to my room and hid on my bed paralyzed, deathly quiet, eyes wide-open. I winced at every crash and thud. No amount of pressing my fingers into my ears could keep out the screams.

Almost as quickly as it had started, I felt the first wisps of calm. I cracked open the door. Through heavy breathing, Dad said, “What possessed you to steal a case of beer? Do you want to spend the rest of your life in jail?”

“Or worse?” Mom sobbed.

“Like that McCarty kid across the street?”

“No,” Roger replied. “Of course not.”

“Look son, your mother and I love you more than anything, and we’d do anything for you.”

“I know Dad. I love you guys too.”

“Then tell us – please – what can we do to help you?”

For the longest pause all I heard was my own breathing.

“Send me back to Dungannon Royal,” Roger finally said softly. “That’s the only thing I think will save me.”

## 4 - Welcome Backwards to Ireland

At the beginning of August 1976, I stepped off a plane in Shannon Airport, Ireland, filled with a sense of excitement and my bags loaded with countless pairs of socks and underwear personalized by Mom. She'd started with hand-sewn white tags, moved onto iron-on tags, and finally resorted to writing just my name inside with a magic marker the same as she'd done for Roger years before when he went to Dungannon Royal. I'd been prodded and poked with fingers and needles to ensure I wouldn't infect Ireland with some disease or vice versa, and it had all been well worth it.

I couldn't have been happier when Mom and Dad sat me down and explained I'd be going with Roger to boarding school, not Dungannon Royal as he'd suggested, though, because Northern Ireland was too dangerous, but to a school in the Irish Republic. Anything was better than Romig Junior High back home. I'd heard all about the place being a real house of horrors where bullies forced little kids like me to do awful things like push quarters around toilet seats, and if the quarter fell in?

I shuddered.

"Welcome back to Ireland, son," Mom said, interrupting my thought.

I inhaled deeply, savoring the mixed aroma of burned jet fuel, damp, grass, and cow manure.

Mom said I must be starving and took me for a bite to eat at the airport hotel, but it was too late for lunch and too early for dinner, and the restaurant wasn't open. The lady at the front desk said ach not to worry, find yourself a place to sit and we'd be brought a pot of tea with some sandwiches, would ham and cheese be okay? Ham and cheese would be just lovely, thanks. We settled for a cozy spot off from the main lobby.

Soon after the tea arrived with a plate of fancy-looking sandwiches with the crusts cut off. They looked delicious. I eagerly bit into one and felt something cold and greasy in my mouth, but since my rumbling stomach did not reject it, I continued eating.

As another lump of sandwich slid down my throat, the lady hurried up to us and, out of breath, told us we had to clear the hotel immediately. "We've had a threat."

I continued munching away, waiting for Mom's lead.

Mom looked annoyed. "I've never heard such rubbish in my life," she said.

"Please ma'am, you have to go now."

Mom hesitated a moment before getting up and motioning me to follow her.

"Why do we have to get out of the hotel?" I said, grabbing a handful of sandwiches to bring with me.

"For no good reason, I'm sure," she replied.

In a stairwell, a gray-haired woman poured gin into a tea cup and knocked it back. When she noticed me staring at her she paused, her head wobbling. “Hi,” she said with a strong New York accent.

“Oh, hello,” Mom replied in her regal English accent. “You’re American.”

“Goddamn right,” the woman replied. “Come on over and sit down.”

Mom seemed pleased to find someone to talk to, so I left them to chat and went off to do some exploring. After wandering around for a bit, I found a couple of police officers to follow and overheard them talking about a device. Why do you call it that? I asked. Because, wee lad, if there is a device it will be an explosive device or an incendiary device, so either way it would be a device. I supposed that didn’t sound as frightening as a bomb.

After what seemed like a couple of hours, Mom found me and told me she was tired of this rubbish and that she’d called for a taxi.

We ended up in a place called Killaloe, on the River Shannon just outside Limerick. I scouted the town for airplane models, having found none in the airport gift shop except a weird looking British thing. I didn’t find any models at all. I did, however, find a couple of boys fishing from the bridge across the river and asked if they’d had any luck. “Aye, a wee bit,” said one of the boys. “Would you like a go?”

Of course, I did. “What are you using for bait?”

They offered me a paper cup with small whitish-looking things squiggling around in what looked like sawdust. These were definitely not salmon eggs. “We use maggots – they’re great,” said one of the boys.

Not long after, the rod twitched, and I yanked hard wanting to impress my new friends who congratulated me on reeling in a fine perch. “They’re good for eatin’ you know.” I’d have to tell Roger about that.

I took my fish back to the hotel and presented it to the surprised concierge and asked if he could give it to the cook. He smiled and assured me he’d take care of everything. That night I ate the best fried fish I’d ever had.

We arrived in Sligo the next day in time for lunch at the Hotel Silver Swan where Mom would be staying for a couple of days while we, Roger and I, got settled in at the school. By the time Mom was on her fourth cup of tea and second pack of cigarettes, I’d had my fill of greasy sandwiches. I’d asked if I could have some mayonnaise and was brought something called salad cream instead, a yellowish-green nightmare nothing like what I wanted.

Roger suddenly got up from the table and said he was going to check out the action outside, meaning the locals fishing from the bridge. Mom said I could go to, but warned us not to wander off too far.

I hurried after Roger. "They use maggots, you know?" I said, proud of the idea that I might know something he didn't about fishing.

Roger's eyes lit up when a young man pulled a large silver fish from the river. "Might be a bit like Alaska," he said, taking a long drag from a cigarette.

With Mom having had her fill of tea, we faced the inevitable.

I got out of the taxi. Sligo Grammar towered over me, gray and dark and, as far as I could tell, immeasurably old, and for the first time I felt a ripple of fear. Not the kind of scary like Dracula's Castle; something deeper. This wasn't home.

We met with Mr. Blackmore, the Headmaster, for more than an hour. He seemed a likeable fellow, rather agreeable, nodding his head at every few words Mom said. He spoke softly without staring, glaring, or otherwise threatening.

"Well you see, Mrs. Nixon, by Roger's age – he's now fifteen, nearly sixteen. Most schools wouldn't accept him. He's really a bit old to be molded in the proper fashion."

Mom replied with her strong British accent. "Yes, but we're hoping you'll have no trouble with him."

"Well, we'll certainly do our very best, Mrs. Nixon. Don't you worry about a t'ing," Blackmore said.

Then he led us over to the dorms, ominously located next to his house. Mine looked out over the dining hall. Rickety metal beds, each identically made up with a cream-colored blanket and white sheets, lined both long walls. At the foot end of each bed, a colorful rug belonging to its occupant provided the illusion of individualism. Beside each was a small wooden locker for stowing valuables. I noticed these could not be locked. I wondered was this a ward of throwaways from the hospital across the street?

Uneven wooden planks worn with age and glazed over with years of use served as the floor. Fluorescent tubes, hung from bare fixtures, buzzed noisily overhead, casting a cold, white light that somehow highlighted the peeling paint while making the room feel darker than it really was. Here and there, the plaster walls had pockmarks left uncared for.

At the far end of the dorm, a closet for hanging coats, and a doorway that led into the washroom and toilet. No showers or even a bath in there, just three sinks and a single stall with no door. From the bathroom window I could see the rugby pitch that rose sharply at the far corner; beyond it the river I'd seen those giant silver fish - mullet the locals had called them, come out of.

I shivered even though the temperature was not much different to what I'd left behind and, for a moment, I thought back to Alaska, to the night Roger and I had toasted our going to Ireland with a couple of Guinness in the camper.

"A wee taste of Ireland," Roger had said.

I'd sniffed the bottle, taken a sip, and immediately had thought then that I didn't care much for the taste of Ireland – dark, bitter, and harsh.

Mr. Blackmore broke the uneasy silence saying, "Showers are downstairs, in the changing rooms." I later found out what the washroom lacked in showers, the changing rooms lacked in heat.

We walked back towards the head end of the dorm. Mr. Blackmore smiled at me and pointed to the last unassigned bed. "This one," he grunted as he cleared his throat, "is yours."

Mom seemed satisfied, but this was not at all like what I imagined I was getting into. It was one thing to be in boarding school, but sleeping with all those other people in *my* room? *It'll be like camp*, I told myself.

Mom pulled me aside. "Don't worry son, you'll do fine. And don't be afraid to tell if someone touches you."

"Huh?" I said.

"You know, down there," she whispered, motioning with her eyes.

"He'll be okay, Mom. I'll take care of him," Roger said confidently. "No one will mess with him while I'm around."

Yeah, if anyone even says the wrong thing to me, my big brother will pound him, I thought. I smiled at Roger but he didn't notice.

The headmaster gave Mom some paperwork including a list of required items and where to get them.

Armed with the list, we headed to the official school outfitters in down town Sligo, bought what we needed for the uniforms – gray socks, gray trousers, gray shirts, gray sweater, a black blazer – the school's emblem emblazoned on the lapel pocket being the only color, and school tie, plus pajamas, slippers, heavy wool robe, extra underwear, rugby boots, rugby jersey, and the requisite colorful *rug*. I picked blue and green tartan wool - it would help keep me warm at night. When we were done we took a taxi back to the school.

I had almost all my stuff put away when Mr. Blackmore came round to see how we made out.

"Fine," Mom said. "No problem at all." She sighed, turned to him and asked if it would be okay if she took her boys out for the evening.

Blackmore nodded vigorously and smiled. "Of course! Of course!"

So we had dinner in Sligo, and later, Mom took us to a movie – "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest."

Eventually, Mom took us back to the school, and after she left it hit me just how far from home I really was. As most kids around me busily readied for bed, chattering away and laughing here and there and paying me no attention, I debated whether I should take off my underwear before putting on my pajamas. I decided not to, slipped on my pajamas as quickly as I could and joined the line for the washroom, my wash kit in hand.

When I'd finished brushing my teeth and scrubbing behind my ears, I went back to my bed and slid between the starched, clammy white sheets and pulled my rug up tight against the chill. The wool itched against my cheek.

Soon Mr. Blackmore came in, said, "right lads, good night," and flipped off the switch.

At first, the dorm remained deathly quiet and black, but before long the sound of hushed chatter rose as my eyes adapted to the dark, and the fellow in the bed next to mine said, "Who're you, then?"

"My..." I looked up to see who was asking, "I'm Paul. Nixon," I said.

"Well then, Paul. Good to know you. So, where are you from then?"

I hesitated, unsure if I should say from Libya, Ireland, or America. "I came here from Alaska," I said proudly.

"Really? Alaska? So, you're Canadian then?"

As we talked I began to relax and, after a few minutes, I even chuckled at something else he said.

Suddenly, the lights went on. Three older boys burst into the dorm laughing. They ran to the bed opposite mine and stripped the covers. "No, no!" said the young fellow in it. Two of the boys held him, squirming and pleading, while the third pulled his pajamas down. "Get ready," he said, uncapping a tube of something in his hand.

"No, don't! PLEASE!"

Next thing I knew, the third boy pounced. Moments later the young boy leapt from the bed and ran towards the washroom holding his crotch. The older boys moved to the next bed over and did the same, sending that boy flying to the washroom holding his crotch.

I sank lower into my bed terrified, my eyes darting to the door hoping to see my big brother come running in while many around me laughed. Fortunately, the humor had worn thin long before they got to me. "We're just having a wee bit of fun," one of the older boys said. This brought little comfort to those who'd had their balls smeared with toothpaste. I fell asleep that first night at Sligo Grammar School to the sounds of sniffing and muffled whinging.

“Wake up, you little bastards.”

My eyes shot open. Daylight outside.

“Get your lazy arses out of bed before I beat you out of them.”

Suddenly, I was flying through the air. I landed on my butt, my bed upside down on top of me. “Happy birthday,” he said with a grin. Everyone around me laughed. I was awake now.

One of the other boys said, “Don't pay any attention to him. He's a prefect just having a wee bit of fun, yeah know.”

I managed a weak smile and nodded. I'd survived my first night.

At breakfast, I lit up when I saw Tony the Tiger, the first and only reminder of home I'd had since I arrived. Two stacks of bread, one either end of the table, disappeared in a sea of reaching hands. Knives disassembled two blocks of butter, carving away great chunks at a time until none remained.

The prefect at the head of the table ordered one of the boys to go get more. “And bring a loaf of bread, too.”

Despite the frenzy, I got a bowl of Frosted Flakes with milk. I even managed to snag a couple of slices of bread, but the butter tasted like it had been stored with bicycle oil, so I scraped as much of it as I could from my bread and covered the remainder with an extra helping of jam.

On each table, too, was a great big metal tea pot. I'd just started my first cup when Blackmore came up and told me Mom would be picking me up after church.

“Church?” I said. My family had never been huge for church. Way back in Silver Spring we went most Sundays until they changed the preacher, and that was that. I suppose that's why, in Anchorage, we only went to midnight service at Christmas and, once, to an Easter service.

After breakfast, I headed back to the dorm to get ready for church. I washed, put on my new, crisp white shirt and, following the others' lead, set about polishing my shoes. After the first one I wondered if I should have waited to put on my white shirt, but seeing as I managed to get most of the polish onto the shoe and only a little on myself, I decided I was alright and continued on.

I lined up with the others for inspection when told to, and as the dorm prefect went down the line, I couldn't help but wonder if I would pass or what the prefect would do to me if I didn't. “Comb your hair,” the prefect said to one boy. “Straighten that tie,” he said to another. The boy next to me started rubbing the tops of his shoes on the calves of his trousers. I thought what a great idea and did the same. The prefect didn't even look at me, though.

Once we started for the church, the older boys hung back. I dragged my feet as much as I could, trying to put off the inevitable, but eventually I had no choice.

Organ grinding and mustiness met me inside. I sat on an uncomfortable wooden bench and kept quiet. I rose when the other boys rose and sat down when they did. The preacher said it was good to see so many here this beautiful Sunday morning and thanked us for coming as if we'd had a choice.

He called people to pray, which was great as I could close my eyes and think about sleep, but it didn't last before it was time to sing another hymn. The organ blasted, and we rose once more. I protested under my breath. Why did we have to keep standing up? Why couldn't we just sing sitting down? One of the other lads said it was to keep us from falling asleep. No danger of that, I thought. The preacher worked himself up with a flurry of fire and brimstone, and just when he held everyone deathly silent with a dramatic pause to emphasize his point, the short, pudgy lad behind me grunted like someone trying to hack up a chicken bone drawing caustic glares from the pulpit and an assortment of satisfied smiles and chuckles from our section.

When the collection plate came – oh, yes, I was expected to contribute to the church – the preacher narrowed his eyes on us and said, “I don't want to see just copper from you lot.” I put in a half-penny and blew the rest on a can of Fanta, a Club Bar, and a comic book in the wee shop after.

Mom arrived just before lunch and strained to smile. “Hello wee son,” she said.

I ran over and gave her a great big hug. By the puffiness around her eyes I knew she had been crying, and I couldn't help but think this was not the woman who'd confronted the murderous mob of Arabs not ten years before.

“Why don't you get some of your new friends together, and we'll go out for a bit?” she said, “Since you'll not get a proper birthday.”

## 5 – The Church of Michael Shaw

On the first day of classes, I followed everyone else's lead after breakfast, marched down to the "new" teaching block, and waited quietly in the hall, half excited and knowing how proud Dad would be and half scared to death thinking about his stories of teachers and black thorn sticks and beatings. I jumped at a sudden slap-like bang. For a moment, I thought the Irish teacher had arrived unleashing his wrath on some unfortunate kid. But no, someone had simply dropped a book.

When the teacher did arrive, she carried no black thorn or any other type of stick; just a brown leather valise, though for a moment I still imagined it could be large enough to hide a stick of some sort in.

I followed the others piling into the classroom behind teacher and scrambled to a desk not at the back but not too near the front either. I pulled out an orange notebook and waited for Teacher to say something.

Teacher settled in, looked around the class, and made guttural sounds that to me sounded like "fada" this and "fada" that. Guttural sounds erupted around me in response. Teacher made more sounds. Everyone began writing in their orange notebooks. Everyone, that is, except the dumpy fellow who'd kept me entertained in church with his grunting through the sermon.

Teacher caught my attention with a loud ahem. Staring straight at me expectantly, she repeated the sounds.

My heart pounded.

"You've no idea what I'm saying, do you?" she finally said.

Not the slightest.

Teacher looked at some paper on her desk. "What's your name?" she said.

"Paul. Paul Nixon."

"Ah, yes, one of the foreign boys. And is there a Michael Shaw here, too?"

The dumpy fellow from church raised his hand. "Here," he said.

"Right then," Teacher said. "Yous are excused from having to participate, but I warn you - use the time wisely. Understood?"

I spent the rest of class drawing airplanes.

Before long, life at Sligo fell into a routine. Breakfast varied a little. Porridge did a better job than cornflakes of hiding the thin tangy-sweet of the sour milk, but nothing could hide the weird, dirty oil taste of the butter though Roger's percolated coffee certainly helped.

At lunch, which they called dinner, I had no coffee, just plain water. At dinner, I had tea. I thought that's why they called that meal "tea." Everyone described Sligo food as chronic and, in no time, I knew what they meant though few meals hammered that home quite like the "smoked" fish on Fridays.

Every day we had fried or gloppy items for lunch or tea, and always loads of potatoes that some days were better than others. There were two kinds of peas, Army green and mushy. We also had cabbage, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, and turnips boiled until one couldn't tell the difference. They smelled the same and filled the dining hall and surrounding valley with a terrible stench.

On a crisp morning for P.E., our teacher had us go for a run in the country. About half-way along I turned a corner up a country lane and ran into a suffocating wall of stink, and suddenly the worst that reeked from the dining hall didn't seem so awful.

There were even a few meals I looked forward to. Sunday roast beef with roast potatoes was pretty good, as were the ham hocks with boiled potatoes and mystery white sauce that had no flavor and yet seemed to add the final touch. Other meals I could go without and often did.

Roger had his own way of dealing with the chronic food. One night he woke me up, said he was going into town and asked me if I wanted anything.

"Get me a burger and chips," I said, "And a soda of some kind."

"I'll bring you a beer," he said.

I thought I'd been saved for sure. I never got the burger, chips, or even a drink of water, let alone the beer.

That was okay, though. The rugby created hunger enough not only to get the food down but also to remove *unwise* hesitation. Grab what you could get away with was how it seemed to be.

Of course, if I'd had more pocket money I would have been able to get some real food as Roger did. The Wimpy Bar in Sligo sure smelled good every time I passed it, but Mom and Dad only allowed me a single Irish Punt per week, barely enough to buy a comic book or two, a candy bar, a bag of crisps, and a can of soda. Not nearly enough for American-style cheeseburger, fries, and Coke I craved.

Every Saturday after lunch I'd go to the headmaster for my pocket money, and wander into town with lofty ideas of what I might buy. I had all afternoon to decide, too. All I had to do was be back at the school in time for tea.

I found a small model shop beyond the Silver Swan Hotel, but they didn't carry airliners, and nothing American. Just World War Two stuff – British and German tanks and vehicles, a few airplanes, a destroyer. Even if I were interested, I couldn't afford any of it, not without saving up which I never did - not with my need for candy and soda.

Only once did I have a problem in town. I'd gone down with Michael Shaw when some guy stepped out of nowhere and blocked our path. "Give me your money," he said.

I almost burst out laughing at his greasy slicked-back hair, white tee-shirt, denim jacket and jeans that looked like hand-me-ups from a little brother, white socks, and black leather *brogues*. He puffed away at a cigarette trying to be cool but hadn't a clue how.

"I haven't got any," I replied as I tried to go around him.

The fellow blocked my way again and shoved me back. "You want a loaf?" he said, leaning over me.

I looked him square in the eyes and said, "A loaf of what?"

He shoved me harder this time and took a drag from his cigarette. "Don't get fookin' smart now. Give me your money or I'll give you a loaf," he said.

I looked to Michael. He shrugged.

"What are yous, a couple of stupid fookin' Yanks?"

Michael stepped in and puffed out his chest. "Je suis Canadien!" He said in as low a growl as an eleven-year-old boy could muster.

"And I'm from Alaska," I added, trying my best to copy Michael's stance and confusing the fellow even more.

He looked at me, then at Michael. "Get out of here, you fookin' wankers," he said, shoving us. "Before I get mad!"

I decided not to ask him what a wanker was – he probably couldn't have explained it anyway. Michael and I ran off laughing.

Classes, too, had become routine. The masters swished along wearing judges-like robes that flowed behind them as they cleared the path through the halls, and they had nicknames, like "Gorilla", "Dum Dum", "Ay Now", and "Scrag".

Despite the names and the Irish boarding school reputation for being harsh and brutal, I settled in fine. Oh, I'd occasionally break some rule I may or may not have known about and had to do lines, but that usually happened during prep.

Prefects, senior boys put in charge of bossing around the younger ones more than older brothers, loved to give out lines for any little infraction, and I seemed to infract often. Sometimes they gave out essays, too, and I'd have to write a page on the sex life of a ping pong ball or snail or ball-point pen. The subject didn't matter nearly as much as the creativity.

Some prefects were good fun. Like the one who interrupted prep to ask, "Who knows what screwing is?"

Some of the boys didn't have a clue, and some did but were too shy to say anything.

"Come on, anyone?"

I raised my hand nervously. "That's when you stick it in and grind round and round," I said.

The prefect chuckled. "Ach, bejesus that would make you dizzy for sure," he said.

Boys around me laughed.

One or two prefects were assholes - cruel, brutal, and vicious. To them having little kids hold heavy textbooks at arm's length was their idea of fun. When one boy dropped a book, the prefect told him to bend over his desk. He then beat the boy with a wire coat hanger. I felt the sting right through my toes even when it wasn't me being whipped, but that wasn't as bad as what happened to poor old Percy.

I didn't know Percy, a third or fourth former, except, he was constantly getting teased about something called Zubes. "Percy, have some Zubes," or "Percy, you need your Zubes?" I thought this might be Irish for boobs. Later I learned they were cough drops.

I didn't get the joke.

One Saturday while we watched the First XV rugby match, one of the assholes sent Percy tumbling down an embankment, and while Percy screamed in agony at the bottom, the prefect laughed. "How 'bout some Zubes!"

I had to go out for rugby as that's what the boys were expected to do. I said it looked a bit like American football without padding. The other boys teased me, saying only poofs wore pads. I didn't argue. I'd never even played American football but soon longed for its rest breaks every few seconds.

Rugby was non-stop moving. I'd run from the changing rooms onto the field with the other boys. Usually, it would be cold and raining, and sometimes the wind would whip even a drizzle into an onslaught, but the coach made sure we hardly noticed. We'd run around the pitch a few times followed by loads of running drills, and spend the last twenty minutes or so on actually playing. We'd start off in two opposing lines spread across the field. Coach would blow the whistle. Someone would kick the ball and I'd run, following the ball as it was passed down the line. Just when I caught up, someone would kick the ball back the other way.

Occasionally I'd get lucky and latch onto an opponent before he could kick the ball away. Sometimes he'd drop the ball, and there would be a mad scramble to recover it. Other times the fellow wouldn't fall, and there would be a mad scramble to get him turned toward our side to rip the ball from him. Every once in a while, he would fall, usually right on top of my head.

"Bejesus Nixon! Did you not hear anything I said?" The coach bellowed more times than he should have had to. "Keep your head *BEHIND* the legs, so he doesn't break your neck!"

I never heard anyone yelling about Roger - he took to rugby immediately and even made the school team.

Outwardly, I may have seemed well settled, but all the while I wanted to get out and go home. I had been in several fights and wrote home bragging that I had won two out of three of them, and that of the thirteen other boys in my dorm, six were for me, and seven were against me. And I reported I had “slaughtered” a second-year student named David Briton. So there was at least one bright spot in the gloom. I missed home terribly. There was no space I could call my own.

I asked if I could come home for good, but Dad wrote me saying, “No, I cannot take you out of that school because that would be like cutting off your head. There is nothing here only dope, misery, and murder. Be thankful you are where you are.”

Dad did not understand at all. What did I have to be thankful for?

Neither of my parents mentioned the stuff I told them had been stolen from me – my rugby jersey, socks, paper, pens. Three pairs of underwear even went missing. Who the hell steals boy’s underwear?

The mid-term break arrived and couldn’t have come at a better time, though I was surprised to find Mom waiting when I got to Ballygawley. I sensed something didn’t seem right. Mom smiled but it reminded me of when she left me at Sligo.

Roger picked up on it, too, and asked, “What’s happened?”

“Your uncle’s been killed,” she said. I knew from the grown-ups saying things like, “they shot him,” that my uncle had been murdered, but it didn’t hit me right away *who* or *why*. I soon found out, though. “The IRA bastards came into the store,” I heard, “and asked for something behind the counter. They opened up when he had his back turned.”

There were plenty of, “Ach now’s” and “That’s a tarra,” with shaking of heads and clanking of tea cups on saucers.

We drove up to my uncle’s farm in Armagh where I spent most of the time outside with the “wee lads” - cousins I’d not met before. We spent Halloween in Antrim with more relatives. I saw no sign of costumes or candy. Nor did I see any sign of “Do you go trick or treating here?” I asked.

“What’s that?”

I explained about going door to door.

“Ach, don’t be stupid. You’d get shot around here doing that.”

The locals had their own way of celebrating Halloween - the bonfire - to which they’d add cans of deodorant and hair spray that exploded with satisfying booms sending sparks and flames leaping into the air.

When the mid-term break came to an end, I returned to Sligo. Fire had gutted the girls' dorm, The Hermitage. I'd been in that building only once, for some bizarre class that hailed the QE2 as the largest ship on the planet, and I remembered thinking how scary the Hermitage's narrow passageways and staircases were and how glad I felt not to be sleeping there. Thankfully, the fire broke out during the mid-term break, so The Hermitage was empty.

Yet out of the ashes came opportunity: the school converted the gym into a makeshift dorm. While being squeezed together might have been uncomfortable and inconvenient for the girls, there was a spot just above the gym showers from which I and some other boys could watch soapsuds cascading over delicate curves and crevices. That to me had to be the best show on earth until the windows steamed up on both sides, and once again the mysterious would be shrouded in mystery.

That lasted until someone almost got caught and the school covered the windows over.

By now, the weather had turned even colder than before. I looked forward to Christmas vacation. I wrote home asking about my friends. Dad replied with the travel details and said that he had not seen Timmy Fraser or any of my other friends, but that I'd likely see them when I got to Anchorage. He also wrote, "An essential thing is that you get a really good HAIR CUT before leaving Sligo. Please don't come to Alaska looking like some weirdo. I want you to do this small thing for me." I figured if I got a haircut at all, it wouldn't be for Dad.

One frosty Sunday in early December, I'd had enough. On the way to the church, I motioned to Michael to slow down. "Let everyone pass," I said. Suddenly, I pushed him behind some bushes and shushed him in case there were any stragglers, especially prefects who regularly lagged behind.

When it got quiet, I popped my head out and found that the coast was clear. "Come on," I said, pulling Michael out from our hiding place. We sprinted past the church and into town. I laughed when we came to the Wimpy Burger; painted in large, bold letters as tall as the windows themselves read a sign proudly proclaiming, "Now With 4% Real Beef!" It dawned on me that was probably better than what we were getting at the school, and I began to wonder if that odd flavor in the beef wasn't due to silage after all. Maybe what we were getting at school wasn't even beef.

So we were in the middle of Sligo on a Sunday morning when most everything was closed because people were supposed to be in church. Now what? I thought. I had no money to speak of since I'd spent everything the day before, and presumed Michael hadn't any either. But that wasn't really the point. We were free.

Free to freeze our asses off! We eventually ducked into a small café just beyond the model shop for warmth and sat at a table wishing we had some money to get a bite to eat or even a cup of coffee, not put off in the least by the heavy aroma of greasy smoke and disinfectant. Michael suddenly lit up with a brilliant idea.

“Do you still have that five dollars?” he said.

I did – I told him I had been saving it for a special occasion, a rainy-day emergency or something - just like now.

He added a ten pence postage stamp, plus the few pence we had between us that was supposed to be our contribution to the church.

“Wait here. I’ll be back in a minute,” he said. He popped out the door and returned a few moments later, with a couple of punts that we traded in for two cups of coffee and a delicious pastry. More heavenly than church could ever be!

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## 6 – The Birds, Bees, and Total Stupidity

About a week after returning to Sligo, Roger came to me all smiles and holding a small package he'd received in the mail. "It's a cassette," he said, "from Mom and Dad!"

We sat in his dorm for what seemed like hours, listening to that tape twice through at least without stopping and then again, replaying some of the really good parts several times.

*Hello Roger and Paul. How are you? This is the second tape we've made, the first one we made last Sunday night tonight being Tuesday night, and last night we were playing it over and it got all wound around the spool so this is the second time around. We had a lot of information for you on the first tape so I hope we can remember most of what we said then.*

*We started off by telling you how thankful we were to you for calling us from Dublin. I remember mentioning this to you on the way to the airport asking you to call us when you got to Dublin and it was certainly very thoughtful of you to remember this and to give us a call because it did relieve a lot of the tension and we were literally sitting here waiting for that telephone to ring and thanks very much for doing so.*

*I really hope that you had a nice trip over there. I'm sure you were very, very tired because you didn't have any sleep the night before. You really sounded great when you called us from Dublin. You sounded to be – you seemed to be in great spirits so that's good. We're interested to know what happened after that especially in view of the fact that BOAC lost your baggage. I wonder how soon it caught up with you. I hope they sent it on to you from Dublin to Sligo and that you got it all in good order wondering whatever happened to the Alaskan moose sausage – hope it wasn't bad by the time you got it.*

*What happened after you left Dublin airport? Did you get to the railway station okay? Was the train on time and was it a long trip, a long boring trip? And were you extremely tired and what happened when you got to Sligo? Did anyone meet you at the station or did you have to find a taxi to go up to the school and when you got into the school were they expecting you? I certainly hope they were because as I told you on a previous tape I had cabled the headmaster there telling him you were arriving so hope everything went okay for you.*

*I hope you're not feeling too sad. The way your mother and I are feeling right now, well, you're in good hands and you're doing the right thing and you're getting some knowledge into your head which is the most priceless thing that no one can take away from you.*

*Now, something really nice and cheerful to look forward to is the fact that we are trying very hard to arrange a nice Easter vacation for you and this will take place on or about April 9th. Now you get out of school on April 7th and our schedule is for you to leave London April 9th for Los Angeles and your mother will meet you in Los Angeles and we will have some place arranged for you to stay there.*

*Hopefully I will be able to spend at least two weekends in the California area because I am scheduled to a meeting in Dallas, Texas during the particular period when you will have your Easter vacation so fortunately, I think, we'll be able to all get together in that area, have as much of a ball as possible and you'll be able to have some sunshine, possibly some swimming and be able to lie on the beach there and if at all possible we'll try to find a place there for that period which has a swimming pool where you can relax and watch your television and listen to your radio where you won't be bored. At any rate, here's mammy – she'd like to talk to you. She's sitting right across from me.*

*Hello Roger and Paul. Ah, you know it was so good to hear your voice from Dublin. Dad and I didn't know what to do with ourselves when we came home from the airport. He stayed with me a good while because I couldn't bear to be in the house alone. He cleared up the kitchen for me and I don't know, the afternoon passed somehow and then that evening when your telephone call came it was midnight here just on midnight when the phone call came.*

*Dad had said to me, we'll go to bed because those kids (will be so tired and) or maybe the aircraft was late. I mentioned it so briefly to them and just in passing that maybe in all the excitement and all the upheaval they'll have forgotten or maybe they can't get to a telephone box or you know a million things so we'll go to bed and if they haven't called by say midnight we'll go to bed and just hope that they're okay and we were just both so depressed and had just got into bed and the phone rang. Well your father, if somebody had put a bomb under him he wouldn't have moved half as fast. He was out of bed away with the big grin on his face the telephone with me running after him saying, "Ah it's the boys, the boys!" That was just terrific and made all the difference in the world.*

*Anyway we're having – daddy and I are very, very happy, we're having a great time sitting planning. We spend a couple of hours over our dinner here at night just sitting planning what to do about Easter, and you know daddy - going into the schedules, airline schedules, phoning here and writing there going through the brochures of places to rent. We're just having a great time planning that.*

*Of course when I'm down in California – well, big deal. Daddy's birthday is coming up and so is George Washington's. Okay, and we decided, or dad decided, it would be a great idea to do ourselves a little favor and go off on a little trip just the two of us down to California, so he's taking a couple of vacation*

*days plus his birthday plus George Washington's and we're going do to California and we're going to check out the San Francisco area and the Los Angeles area and see what would be a good place for Easter.*

*Also, of course, during this time I will see Mrs. Caplan who is the dean of Student Affairs at Stanford University and we'll get all my papers together and find out what the deal is there and also if I like Stanford and Stanford accepts me, dad is thinking of very, very seriously of buying a small townhouse there for me to live in during the time I am in college and where he can come down and visit and you can come over and visit, well this is something else we're kicking around.*

*You know we're lonely and we miss you, of course, very, very much. We're really glad you're not in Alaska because it's cold and wet - well not really cold, it's pleasantly warm actually but it's wet and it's gray and there would be nothing for you to do and the schools are just completely upside down. I mean all those children and all those young people are having a terrible time trying to learn anything. So we're happy that you are in a school where you will be learning, where you're not bored because you have so much work to do.*

*And Roger, if you get that inter exam then you've got it made. We know it's going to be an enormous amount of work but you're fit for it you've shown it - your reports show - both of you your reports show well you're not stupid, that's for sure and we enjoyed so much having you. We're just sad that there wasn't good skiing weather but that was also general throughout the lower forty-eight. There was very poor skiing everywhere and right now believe it or not Alaska is warmer than the east coast of the United States. They're going through the most terrible freeze-up.*

*And Roger you forgot your dressing gown. I'll put a few stitches in it and send it on and daddy just passed paper over to me tonight's paper says, winter strangles the East. Icy cold is worst in years. The harshest winter in years has kept a freezing grip on the eastern half of the nation today, etc., etc., and Alaska is having a heat wave. Ah this is funny, boys. The next time you look outside remember that it's not really January 18th, it's the end of April, and that dingy looking stuff on the ground isn't bonafide snow, it's the feeble remains of the Alaskan winter. We already had two breakups because everybody knows it's going to get cold, right? Even so the record setting temperature in Anchorage is going to be around for a while, according to the weatherman. So the mud over ice pudding Alaskans are sliding around in might - oh anyway you know how they write these papers over here - they don't know how to write. We're having a heat wave and the rest of the world is freezing to death.*

*Oh yes, Paul, the photographs you took we're very, very pleased with them I think you're really going to enjoy them. Your camera by far is the better camera. My camera, I am so glad Roger that you did not get a camera like mine it is not a very good camera at all. In fact Paul's little \$5 camera is five times better. And Paul we're sending the pictures on to you - you and Roger will enjoy seeing them. The things*

*that you wanted to take that didn't come out too well like some of the animals at the airport and the insides of some of the malls, daddy's going to take his excellent camera and take those pictures that we can see from your photographs that you wanted to have and we're going to take them and send them on to you. It will take some time for them to be developed – taken and developed and so forth, but that's what we're planning to do.*

*Now we want you to write to us – first of all we are looking forward so much to getting that tape that you made on board the airplane we just think that you're fabulous and wonderful for having thought to make a tape on board the aircraft and we're very excited at the thought of getting it and we look forward very, very much to hearing it. We also want you to let us know what you want sent over from here. Roger you left one rugby sock. Roger you left your dressing gown. You seem to have left an awful lot of socks. By the way we went out and bought two more packs of those socks that you found so comfortable and I labeled those with your names and send them on. I'm making up a small package to send to you anyway. But let us know what you want from here within reason, of course. What you need. Things that you may have forgotten and left.*

*Paul, the model you were working on and couldn't get finished, I put it in beside your bed in the desk in your, oh you know that thing beside your bed, and that lovely mountain sort of thing that you made that you had under the bed. I found it today and I'm going to put it nice and carefully beside your bed as well. Brandy still sleeps on your bed, Paul, and goes to the window and looks out when we go out or come in and so forth.*

*Daddy and I were at the British Women's Club annual dinner at the Upper One at the airport the other night and we had a very pleasant time. Mark Agnew and Kay, and, oh, Mrs. Scratton and you know all those people were there everybody asking for you both and just think you're fantastic the way you can make it on your own. If you hear a bit of a jingle it's Brandyball trying to get up on my knee.*

*Roger you left a sheet of paper with the addresses you collected from your friends at Rockwell College and I'm going to send that on to you because I think perhaps you might want to have it.*

*Dad and I are both wondering how your coffee pots are doing and if you are allowed to use it and how good is the coffee. We had a letter from Granny. Granny is very anxious to hear that you're in Sligo again and wants to hear from you so please do write to her and please thank her for the Christmas presents. She's very anxious to know if you liked your underwear and your gloves, so please do write a letter of appreciation to Granny because she went to a lot of trouble to get those.*

*Auntie Irene's doing fine and I want you very much too and thank her for the two five pound notes you got at Christmas and the beautiful big Christmas card we had right across the fireplace which she sent with*

*the two – gave to me to give to you with the two five pound notes. So please do mention these in your letter to Aunti Irene because it means quite a lot.*

*Granny wants to send you a little bit of tuck now and again and just to let you know that they all love you both and of course you will be able to go to Granny's when you have a couple of days off and so forth so just don't feel that you're that you don't have anywhere to go – they do love you very much. They're getting old and they don't have enough patience – fact they have more than I have please write to them. They are rather lonely and it's not too hard to drop a card and you did – they were so thrilled to get your Christmas cards they thought that was wonderful.*

*Paul I bought you a book today I thought you might be interested. It's the history of Dracula and it's a very serious book that was researched for 10 years and it is a factual book. It's actually history book and it's – I'm dying to read it myself but I did buy it for you and I did put your name in it and I don't know if I'll send it over to you or give it to you at Easter which is only a few weeks away anyway but I thought because you like the Dracula movies because you know you really asked many times did he really exist – yes he did he really existed and this is all about Dracula and it's written in part by a doctor English lit who was educated at Oxford University and he is a descendent of Dracula and he wrote it in conjunction with a man called McNally who is a Russian teacher here at Boston College so it's a very, very fine book. I'm not sure I'm going to enjoy the whole gory details of this man but it's certainly interesting to know that he did, in fact, exist. And it brings in a great deal of history of that period which is the 13th century.*

*Oh yes I have a couple of poems that I've written I was going to read to you on this tape I don't think we have enough room on this tape anyway. I was asked to write – submit a couple of poems – contribute rather a couple of poems to Pen Points magazine which is coming out in March and I wrote a couple. That's what I've been working on – ha ha work.*

*The people next door must be feeding Brandyball completely, totally because she never wants to eat a bite. You should see this big plate of food here.*

*Anyway tonight for dinner I turned down Dad's offer to have something special and I opened a tin of your Dinty Moore chicken stew that you and dad all got together and bought for the Alyeska, for whenever we planned to go up there for that week.*

*Hi fellows this is Dad back again. You know it's a funny thing that mammy was talking about the chicken stew that we got for that trip to Alyeska. You know this morning when I was going to work Herb Chandely was making some of his very bright comments and you've heard mammy talk about the weather here and it's really unusually warm for this time of year and Herb Chandelay was saying why bother going*

*to Hawaii when you can go to a tropical resort down there at Alyeska because evidently it's very humid and warm and raining and there's very little skiing and, of course, there's no snow.*

*Bet there ain't any pretty chicks either, Roger.*

*Yeah, that's right. So I also wanted to tell you Roger how much we're enjoying your spice rack. Mammy's been doing quite a bit of cooking here and she's using a lot of your spices in the cooking and they're all excellent. Very high quality and they're just beautiful. It's really nice.*

*Any rate now I was looking at that beautiful gift you gave me for Christmas, Roger, that traveling kit, you know. Maybe I'll take that with me on my way to California. That would be very nice and very convenient and just out of this world.*

*By the way, Paul, this clock that you gave me for Christmas gift is keeping most excellent time here and is just a wonderful addition to the living room. In fact it's so nice that Mammy won't let me to take it out of the living room. So it's still here, not in my office, and it's just a beautiful addition to the house and we count on it and we look at it and anytime we want to tell the time we just look at it instead of one of the other clocks we have around here.*

*We are really happy that you two guys are there and that we are in such close contact with you and that we will be seeing you very soon within the next few weeks really but Roger it is most important that you note this. Work like billy-ho to get everything you can into your head for that exam in June and please believe me, son, do take it seriously – very, very seriously. Go after it. Go at it. Work as hard as you possibly can and try and get every possible scrap of information into your head for that exam. Really take it seriously and you will not be sorry. And from your report we can see that you certainly have been working at it and you're really trying and I think it's greatly to your credit that you are above the class average in every subject – they having studied this for four years, you having been with it for three months.*

*Oh, on Sunday I went down to the museum. There was a lecture being given there by a Professor from the Slade school of Art in London. He's now teaching at one of the lower 48 colleges and he was up here jurying the annual all Alaska art show. As you know I didn't have any paintings in that show this year, I didn't do any this year. A year ago I had two at the museum, two accepted and, of course, every year I've had something accepted. He was a delightful lecturer and I thoroughly enjoyed it. As daddy reminded me yes he is British and I'd love to go to a college where he is affiliated but unfortunately it's a way down in the deep South.*

*On Friday I've been invited to a luncheon, the council – the world council of world affairs – council of world affairs which is at the Capt. Cook hotel so I'm going to have a luncheon there and the lectures a friend of Karleens, Dr. Robert Moore and he's going to lecture on India which should be very interesting.*

*Well boys it's been really nice talking to you I think this is about as much as you want to hear for now and we're going to try to get a little bit of noise from Brandyball.*

*She won't speak but she licks. Come on Brandyball, say goodbye to the boys. You hear her? She's getting excited.*

*Well boys I believe the weather over there is very, very cold and I'm glad you've got your good boots, good warm boots and Paul we're a little bit worried about you not having shoes. I noticed you brought back your black shoes and we're trying to find a way of getting shoes to you. If you've got any suggestions regarding shoes let us know immediately because you really do need some decent shoes. (And stop licking me Brandy).*

*Well we're trying to get Brandyball – the noise of Brandyball in there. Do you hear her licking? Okay, Dad wants to say cheerio. Get in touch with us very, very soon. We love you very, very much. God bless.*

*Okay fellows, there's old Brandy licking away. Well, God bless fellows and we really love you. Keep in touch. Send us a tape and, you know, what more can we say. We'll see you in a few weeks from now. In the meantime, Godspeed, all the very best.*

*Still trying to make Brandy say something. I bet if we had a little Drambuie on Daddy's hand she'd say something – do you remember that? Okay, God bless.*

No one had met us at Sligo rail station, but because British Airways had lost our luggage, walking to the school wasn't a big deal, and whether anyone expected us at the school I couldn't say, though I suppose had we not shown up they would have sent someone out to find out why. Our luggage showed up a few days later, but some thief had stolen the Alaska moose sausage.

That first morning back I chuckled at the congealed yellow goo the other lads eagerly smeared on their bread. Up until Christmas I'd assumed it to be butter, and I'd written home telling Mom and Dad to make sure they stock up on margarine because butter tasted awful. Mom had held off until I arrived - she wanted to make absolutely certain. "Yes!" I said. Margarine's what I wanted, and margarine's what I received.

I'm sure Mom and Dad got a kick when I scrunched up my nose after biting into that slice of bread thickly spread with the yellow, creamy goo and my realization set in that I hadn't been eating butter at all at school. After seeing a donkey drawn cart waddling along through Sligo town I had assumed that all of Ireland was too backwards to have discovered margarine and, surely, with all the cows in the fields there could be nothing but real butter.

I did not get to see “Where the Red Fern Grows” as I had asked in my letter. Everyone was too busy what with Mom and Dad working and Roger always out doing his thing. I did get the paperback for Christmas, however, and I enjoyed reading it.

And, yes, it was cold - bitterly so. At night my teeth chattered when I got into bed, but slowly the itchy wool did an adequate job of holding in my body heat, allowing me to drift off to sleep often thinking of Alaska, my friends, Brandyball. I tried to imagine being back home, and I tried hard not to let anyone hear me cry. I wanted to go home but couldn't, and yet as part of me accepted that reality another part reminded me I didn't belong. I was special - I was American, and no matter what was said or done, at the end of the year I'd be back in Alaska and never have to worry about being here ever again.

Armed with the knowledge that Sligo, Ireland, boarding school - and margarine - were all temporary and all I had to do was make it to the end of term, I coasted along. No one pressured me to do better than I was. My grades were okay, I suppose. They could have been better but so what if they weren't? Things weren't going to suddenly change for the better, but at least from what my experience had been up to then, things couldn't get suddenly disastrous either. And who knows? Maybe Mom would get into Stanford and there would be a house in California, and maybe I could live there and go to school.

California kept me warm on the rugby field where the rugby couldn't. I learned to keep my head safe during tackles and actually caught onto the game. I even began to enjoy playing, but when Sligo qualified for the Galway Rugby Tournament and the coach told me I'd be playing, I could hardly believe it.

Roger, too, had been selected to play, but unlike me he took to the game like a natural. While I huffed and puffed my way around the pitch, he dodged and weaved his way as if that's what he was born to do.

I played my heart out in Galway, for what it was worth. Roger, and the rest of his team, played as if God himself were on their side. Despite their magical efforts, they could not overcome another type of magic - a biased ref who kept blowing his whistle and calling plays that even I knew were fooked up.

After the match, the hand-shakes and congratulations, Roger and some of the lads disappeared. I didn't even know they'd made it on the bus until after we reached Sligo when I got off and heard “Fook you!” and though heavily slurred I could tell it was Roger. “I'm going!”

I pushed toward the commotion.

“No. You're not,” Blackmore replied, his voice tense and firm. Parents, waiting to collect their kids off the bus, stood silent, shocked.

Roger let out a string of profanity that stunned even me, stormed off towards the teaching block, and smashed his fist through one of the plate glass windows.

I ran away to my dorm and hid my head in my pillow.

I didn't see Roger again until the following morning at breakfast. He didn't seem any different than normal. He smiled as if to reassure me.

"What happened?" I asked.

"Blackmore's calling Dad," he said. "Don't worry. Dad will fix 'im."

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## 7 – Going to California

“Mr. Nixon, I understand the position you are in, really I do. And I feel for you, believe me. But the truth of the matter is that my hands are tied. Roger has to go immediately.” Blackmore leaned back in his chair and sighed.

Dad had dropped everything, taken an emergency leave, and flown half-way around the world to deal with the mess. From what Blackmore said, it appeared Dad had failed.

Blackmore related how, after the match, the boys had been given money for food but they’d gone to the pub and bought drink instead.

Dad interrupted. “You gave my son the money to buy the drink? Are you crazy?”

Blackmore didn’t flinch, explaining that part of the goal of any school was to teach a sense of responsibility, and that is what they had been attempting to do by trusting the boys to be responsible. Roger obviously wasn’t responsible and couldn’t be trusted. Without a sliver of assurance that the same thing wouldn’t happen again down the road, there was nothing to work with.

Dad pleaded with Blackmore to reconsider, but by the grim expression on his face I knew he realized Blackmore wouldn’t be moved. Not by him or God or the two of them combined.

“If your son had had his outburst in private, that would have been one thing,” Blackmore said. “I could have conceivably worked past it. But in front of all those parents, there is just no way something like that can be so easily forgotten, let alone forgiven. I’m going to be apologizing for a long time. You understand that, don’t you?”

Dad threatened to pull me out of school if Blackmore didn’t back down.

My ears pricked up. I didn’t want to be alone at Sligo.

“I tell you what, Mr. Nixon,” Blackmore said. “I’ll allow Roger to finish out the term. I think that’s more than fair, given the circumstances.” With less than three weeks left in the term it seemed the least he could do, though just to get that concession Dad had to promise to keep me at Sligo through to the end of the school year.

Dad sighed, thanked Blackmore, and asked him if he could take is out for the weekend. I had expected Dad to be angry with Roger, but he wasn’t. I had expected Dad to get angry with Blackmore, but he didn’t. Instead, he accepted the defeat quietly and business-like. The closest to cross words he said were, “what am I going to do with you now?” and I thought he meant the school situation.

We got in the car. Dad revved the engine making the whole car shake and vibrate like a cowering animal fearing for its life. He ground the gears and groaned fighting with the steering wheel. “Why do the Europeans have to make everything so difficult?” he said.

“Where are we going?” Roger said.

“Tomorrow,” he said, “I’m taking you to see your new school.”

This explained why Dad hadn’t fought with Blackmore harder than he did.

After a night at Granny’s, where everyone called Dad as Walter for some reason, we headed south to a town called Drogheda. The school there had no Dracula castle feel about it. They’d recently renovated the whole place. Unlike Sligo with its bare wood floors and hospital-style metal beds, the dorms here felt cozy and modern, with only four beds in each cubby, a built-in desk, storage drawers, and a proper locker. In that brief few moments during the tour I felt at home.

As we drove back towards Ballygawley, and as the miles sped by I began to wonder when Dad would surprise me saying that I’d be going to this school as well.

When we were just a few miles from Ballygawley, I couldn’t wait any longer. I asked if I’d be going, too.

“No,” he said.

“How come?”

“Too complicated.”

“But…”

Dad started waving his hand to fend off any more questions. He glanced back at me as if to say, “I mean it.”

My heart sank.

Something darted in front of the car. Dad barely had time to hit the brakes before the sickening thump. “Dammit,” he said. He pulled the car onto the shoulder and got out, but instead of checking for damage to the car, he walked back to where the collision had occurred and began searching.

Roger and I followed. A few moments later, Dad found the pheasant, still twitching. “Dammit,” he said.

I felt a twinge of sadness, seeing Dad standing over the dead bird, helpless. Just as I turned to go back to the car, Dad leaned down and picked up the carcass. “At least it won’t go to waste,” he said.

When we arrived back in Ballygawley, Dad related the story of what had happened.

“You’re supposed to hang it,” Granda said.

Dad was already getting some string. “Maybe we’ll have this Monday,” he said looking at me. “Before I take you back to Sligo.”

It was not to be – no one in the house could bring themselves to butcher that poor bird, looking hastily lynched, its dead eyes staring in the back window. Granny finally cut it down and gave it to one of the neighbors.

Eventually Dad had to take us back to Sligo, but before he left us, he said not to worry, that everything would be okay. “We’ll have a great time in California in a few weeks. You’ll see.”

As the term progressed I wrote home complaining about the rules being rotten and why couldn’t I just come home?

To celebrate the end of term and the mock exams, the school put on a dance, and I discovered that Roger had become more popular than ever. “Sing us a song,” a chorus of girls shouted as he strutted through the assembly hall, and for the first time in a while I saw Roger smile, eager to perform.

Roger took the stage and twice thumbed through the DJ’s records before pulling one. Moments later, Roger belted out, “It’s been a hard day’s night, and I’ve been sleeping like a dog.” He moved and gyrated like a rock star and thundered the rest of the verse. But as the song continued, Roger stumbled. He didn’t know the words. He tried, and though he roused the crowd into a frenzy following along, their belting the song back at him couldn’t fill in what he didn’t know. Roger kept looking at the record player for prompts, but there were none to be had.

I felt my face go flush, and suddenly I had to get out of there. I’d seen Roger stoned, drunk, and out of control, but not vulnerable. For the first time in my life I saw my big brother, Mr. Cool, stripped of his coolness.

The following day Roger held his head up high and had a few last laughs as if the previous night’s performance had turned out just fine. He said to me, “I think we should go out with a bang,” and my first thought was to worry. The school would be practically deserted by the evening as everyone, except us, left for Easter holiday. We were stuck at Sligo for one more day, and I wondered if Roger had been saving up all his anger just for the right opportunity.

Later, under the cover of darkness, we broke into the teaching block. I say broke into because that’s how I felt at the time – it sounded more exciting, more challenging. None of the doors were locked.

Roger headed for the science lab. He went from cabinet to cabinet checking various bottles and set selected ones aside.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“You’ll see. Just hold that flashlight steady.”

After a while, Roger had a jar filled with an assortment of bits and pieces. “Let’s go,” he said.

I hurried after him to the river. Waves of fear rolled through me as Roger prepared whatever it was while I hid behind a clump of bushes, my teeth chattering uncontrollably from the cold, or fear, or both. The sudden flare of a match followed by the welcoming glow of a cigarette distracted me. What I wouldn't do for a smoke right now, I thought. Without saying a word, Roger handed me a lighted Cadet. I drew in slowly and inhaled; enjoying the warm acrid smoke and the slight euphoria it gave me. I hadn't had a cigarette since half-term in Ballygawley.

Roger said, "Are you ready?" I nodded. He threw the package far out into the river near the weir. I held my breath.

Without warning, night turned to day in an explosion of light and thunder, powerful enough to knock me off my feet. Well, maybe I jumped in surprise, lost my footing, and fell down. "Holy fook, man!" I squealed.

Roger laughed. "We could teach the IRA a thing or two, eh?"

"Holy fook, man! That was far out!!"

"You've not seen anything yet, man."

The next morning we were on a train headed for Dublin, our only entertainment being Ritchie Blackmore's "Rainbow Rising" sounding stale on Roger's boom box even before the batteries ran down, and half a pack of cigarettes. Boredom nearly drove me mad by the time we arrived, but Roger said not to worry, the Blackmore brothers – no relation to the headmaster or Rainbow's lead guitarist - promised us a send-off we'd never forget.

After some pub crawling with Ivan and his older brother, Quentin, and a couple of Sligo Grammar girls from Dublin who came along, we ended up back at the airport hotel with a bottle of gin, one of vodka, and some orange juice.

I helped myself to a tumbler of gin and drank it down as easily as I would water. I felt a tad warm but not dizzy. Roger, on the other hand, chased one of the girls around the room without making much progress – so drunk he didn't notice his pants down around his ankles and he kept falling over. Quentin and Ivan were in hysterics. The second girl polished off her drink and poured another.

Eventually, the laughter turned to heated arguing. "I just wanted to have a bit of fun," the girl Roger had been chasing said.

"Who's not having fun," Roger retorted. He shot a glare at Quentin. "You?"

Quentin shook his head.

"You?" He said, turning to Ivan.

The girl used the opportunity to make a break for it, but Roger had finally figured out what was slowing him down and followed after her into the hallway. They argued some more, and I thought for sure someone would come any moment and kick us out, but no one did. Perhaps it only seemed loud. Either way the party was over. The second girl crawled into my bed wearing only her white, long sleeved shirt unbuttoned most of the way over green panties. She flopped onto her back and splayed her arms. I chanced a look. Wait; did I just see what I think I saw?

I looked again. My eyes widened, fixated on her tender mounds just barely covered by the fabric.

I reached over and, with a trembling hand, palmed a bare breast. Instantly, her flesh responded. She let out a soft moan but did nothing to stop me.

With my heart pounding, I explored further down. My fingers glided through warm dampness far more intoxicating than the gin. I trembled all over, and even though I wanted to stay there forever, I began to feel pins and needles in my wrist and hand, so I retreated to where I'd started and fell asleep clutching my prize.

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## 8 – Falling Solo

All the gin caught up with me the next morning. I didn't feel sick or headachy, just sloshy, like my vision was a little behind my head movements. Worse - I'd woken up cold, empty-handed, and drooling on the pillow.

In what seemed like a blur, I went from the airport hotel to the back of an Aer Lingus BAC-1-11, freezing cold and pounded by the roar of the engine beside me.

I wanted to sleep, and maybe I did, because the next thing I knew we'd landed in Manchester to begin our scheduled eight-hour layover.

After seven numbing hours, Laker Airways announced the flight would be delayed by two hours. A couple of hours later they announced another two hour delay, and even once aboard the aircraft we sat for yet another two. At long last the aircraft lurched with the push-back tug - we were on our way!

The pilot didn't even wait to get fully lined up with the runway before opening the throttles. I always loved the feeling of being pushed deep into my seat and how the roar of the engines became an almost rhythmic drone as the wheels bumped over the runway imperfections faster and faster. The DC-10 creaked and groaned. As tired as I had been, especially after such a long and exhausting layover, nothing could dampen my excitement. This is what made going to boarding school worth it.

I grinned wide at Roger.

In an instant my head slammed into the aircraft sidewall. The engines' drone became a deafening roar. I had to brace myself against the seat in front of me to keep my head up to see. Overhead bins fell open, their contents seemingly exploding onto the passengers below. The DC-10 shuddered to a halt.

"Shit. Now what?" Roger said.

"Hey man," I said. "Do you smell that?"

Roger shook his head no.

A few moments later, the captain apologized for the abrupt stop. "We shouldn't be delayed too long," he said. About ten minutes later he announced we should be on our way within half-an-hour and that the cabin crew had been authorized to begin handing out complimentary drinks.

I couldn't help but focus on the stench of burning rubber.

"What do you want to drink?" Roger asked.

Not gin, for sure. I'd had enough of that already. "What does Vodka taste like?" I said.

I didn't get a chance to find out. They said the damage to the plane would take longer to repair than originally anticipated and that we'd have to go back to the terminal. As I descended the air-stairs, I saw that

several tires on the main gear were shredded. One of the front wheels was just gone completely. “Gonna be a while,” I said to Roger.

Somewhere around one in the morning, Laker Airways finally relented on putting on a hotel, but we hardly had a chance to sleep before the wake-up call came saying we had to get back to the airport. They made it sound like the replacement aircraft already had its engines running and we were late. Of course we should have known better, for we didn’t get on the plane for another three hours, and then we sat for another two. When we finally did leave the ground, everyone clapped whether out of relief or joy, or both.

The fun didn’t stop there. Because this flight was a no-frills deal they didn’t serve free food and we didn’t have any money except about a dollar in change. I stuffed that into a vending machine for a candy bar at Niagra Airport where we’d stopped to refuel. I kept telling myself this wasn’t the real America. Just wait until we get to California. Then I’ll be home in the States.

But Los Angeles International wasn’t much better than Niagra. I’d expected rows of airliners from all over the world for me to gawk at. The few I managed to spot were miles away at the other side of the airport while we were, once again, in the middle of nowhere, clearing customs in little more than a glorified warehouse. Ah, but this was just the beginning, I thought.

Mom and Dad had rented a place overlooking the Pacific in Laguna Beach. “Can we go to Hollywood again? Please Dad?”

The closest I got to Universal Studios was when we went to the airport two weeks later to fly back to Ireland. Most of the other time seemed to be spent in the car.

On our way to some place called Escondido to visit some old people Dad used to work with, I asked if we could go see the Lockheed factory in Palmdale. Dad said no. “Too complicated.”

When I spotted a sign for the Mount Palomar Observatory I asked if we could go see that.

Dad took the next turn-off towards the observatory without hesitating. As we drew closer, I got all excited about the idea of looking through the giant telescope not even thinking about it being daytime.

“Ah well, son. Maybe some other time,” Mom said.

I arrived back at Sligo feeling like I hadn’t been to the States at all. I couldn’t put my finger on it, but somehow felt like I didn’t belong there. I didn’t have much time to dwell on the cause, though. Within a week someone had stolen my new Timex digital watch Dad had bought me before I left California. I found its strap discarded near the hospital across the street. Shortly after that, a prefect called me out during prep for talking. “Bend over your desk,” he demand, and when I did he whipped me several times with a straightened wire coat hanger, and when I began shrieking he promised I’d get more if I didn’t stop.

A few days later a fellow and I were rough-housing. He managed to wrap his arm around my throat and hauled me onto his back. He let me go not realizing I'd passed out. When I came to I had a lump on my forehead the size of a grapefruit and panicked. "What the hell were you thinking?" I yelled. My yelling attracted a prefect who didn't want to hear any explanation. "Come with me," said.

Blackmore didn't want to hear what really happened. "You above all others should know to stay out of trouble, Nixon." He gave me the cane five times across the remnants of the coat hanger welts, but instead of shrieking and crying, I gritted my teeth and thought back to Anchorage when I'd been paddled, especially since this time neither of us deserved it.

In French class the teacher asked me, "Ou est la toilette?" I hadn't the faintest idea what she said, though I probably would have, had I done my homework. I stared silently through her, hoping the answer would magically come to me, and as I sensed all eyes upon me, my face grew warm, and I began to sweat. Finally, I nudged Michael with my foot. He mumbled something, twice, but trying not to get caught. I was sure I heard him and proudly replied, "Ma toilette est dans la salle de pain."

The class erupted in howls of laughter.

I looked around the room sheepishly.

"Great Paul, your toilet is in the bread room," Michael said.

It seemed even Michael had turned against me. "I didn't do my homework," I whispered.

"Maybe next time, try telling the teacher before class."

The next morning I woke up with a knot in my stomach having realized I'd forgotten to do my English homework. Then I noticed red bumps all over my arms. In fact they were all over. I thought, "aha!" and went straight to Chuggy. Last time I went to her with just a slight cough, she gave a dose of magic brown liquid that had me flying high before knocking me out for most of the day. This whatever-it-was rash all over had to be worth at least a week out of school.

When Chuggy saw me, she said, "Oh my!" She stuck a thermometer in my grinning mouth and grabbed my wrist to check that my heart hadn't stopped beating, I thought. When she finished she looked at me up and down as if trying to decide just how much *sick* time I should get.

She gave me a Dispirin, saying, "Not much else we can do for you, I'm afraid."

What?

"Oh don't worry, lad. You've got German Measles."

That didn't help.

"Right then. Off you go."

Go where? I thought. I didn't budge.

“Well? What are you waiting for?”

Some of that magic brown liquid, like last time. Not this time. I had no choice but to face my English teacher.

I decided maybe I could impress “Yaw” with honesty. I’d tell him I simply forgot, as Michael suggested, and he’d understand, tell me not to let it happen again, and I’d be fine. When I saw him approaching I stepped forward sheepishly. “Excuse me, Sir?” I said, stopping him in mid-stride.

“Yes? What is it, boy?” He said, looking down on me, crushing me with the weight of his authority.

I gulped, took a deep breath, and told him my story. He furrowed his brow for a moment, smiled. “I see,” he said.

On the first spelling word, Sir called me to stand up in front of the class. My heart pounded as I looked at the man pleadingly, but Sir offered no relief, his eyes saying, *yes, boy, spell the word.*

I stumbled with a “but but sir,” but Sir would have none of it and insisted. I think if I hadn’t been so scared, I wouldn’t have left off the last “l” from parallel.

Even my friend Michael laughed. Humiliated, I wanted to rip into someone but held back. Mom and Dad already had to take care of one mess - they didn’t need another one. Still, despite what I knew I convinced myself that none of this would have happened had Blackmore not kicked Roger out of Sligo.

So I turned my anger on the school itself. I could have kicked in a door, smashed a window, or vented my rage in some similarly explosive way, but I’d seen where that led. I had to be smarter, to prove Roger and I were two different people. Then it hit me!

At every opportunity, I removed screws, nuts, bolts - anything that I could remove. Single-handedly I began taking Sligo Grammar School apart piece by piece. Before long doors and windows malfunctioned at the slightest touch, leaving the custodian scratching his head as he tried to keep up with repairs. Whoever invented the Swiss Army Knife - genius.

When my trophy collection became a pile of useless junk, I felt compelled to push harder. I needed to scratch an itch but didn’t know how. In a supermarket in downtown Sligo I tried walking out with a bottle of soda. I’d cleared the checkouts and only a couple of yards from the door when a policeman stepped in my way, leaned down and said, “You’re going to pay for that. Right?”

I turned around and put it back but decided I’d come back later and try again. And then something unexpected happened. I ran into Cathy Gallagher from my class. She asked if I had any American money. I told her no but that I could get some. Suddenly thoughts of stealing soda evaporated and I no longer needed to scratch.

Dad sent the silver dollars like I asked on the phone. I gave them to Cathy who insisted on paying for them despite my protests. She asked what they were worth and I just told her fifty pence.

I started to notice myself noticing Cathy more, too, and when the swimming pool opened we played shark and minnow. I saw it as an opportunity to maybe cop a feel, and more than once I got kicked for my efforts.

Just before my time at Sligo came to a close, she and I signed up for a canoe trip up the river to the lake. "Those are kayaks," I said nervously. I'd never been in a kayak before.

Cathy said not to worry, that I'd do fine and held back to give me lessons enough to where I could at least keep a straight line. By that time, we'd fallen well behind the others and decided to make our own trip of it.

We paddled over to a dock, stretched out on the wood to catch some Irish sun, and talked about a lot of different things. Just when I leaned in to score a kiss, someone yelled in the distance.

Several kayaks were headed our way.

"We'd better get going," Cathy said.

Two weeks later I was on Aer Lingus heading for London, then to Anchorage on British Airways.

On the flight, I found myself thinking of Sligo, but not in a way I expected.

I felt warm inside, and smiled.