

Born in Belfast, Paul McVeigh began his writing career as a playwright before moving to London where he wrote comedy shows, which were performed at the Edinburgh Festival and in London's West End. His short stories have been published in literary journals and anthologies, read on BBC Radio 5 and commissioned by BBC Radio 4. He is co-founder of London Short Story Festival. *The Good Son* is his first novel.

Praise for *The Good Son*

‘Scenes from *The Good Son* are going round in my head months later. Paul McVeigh’s is an original voice of which I, for one, can’t wait to hear more.’

—PATRICK GALE author of *A Place Called Winter*

‘A writer to be championed . . . utterly engaging . . . vivid, fresh and brought fully to life . . . written with a sharp eye and a big heart, *The Good Son* will establish Paul McVeigh as an important new Irish voice’.

—LUCY CALDWELL author of *All the Beggars Riding*

‘Charming, scary, witty and touching, this is a wonderfully written coming of age story.’

—CLAIRE FULLER author of *Our Endless Numbered Days*

‘Paul McVeigh brilliantly achieves a very difficult thing: he turns a coming-of-age tale into high art. Mickey Donnelly navigates The Troubles like Huck Finn navigates the Mississippi River letting us see the human condition through penetratingly fresh eyes. *The Good Son* is a work of genius from a splendid writer.’

—ROBERT OLEN BUTLER, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain*

‘I was knocked out by this stunningly intelligent, compassionate, and mordantly funny debut novel. *The Good Son* is a brilliant portrait of both political and familial unrest, and Paul McVeigh is a wildly important new talent.’

—LAURA VAN DEN BERG, author of *The Isle of Youth* and *Find Me*

‘Someone’s going to make an exceptional movie out of this amazing, cinematic, perfectly structured and realised book.’

—CATE KENNEDY author of *The World Beneath*

‘From the very first page I knew I was in the hands of an accomplished storyteller, McVeigh’s vibrant and irreverent prose carrying along a novel that is both hopeful and big hearted at its core. It deserves to be widely acclaimed and widely read.’

—CLAIRE KING, author of *The Night Rainbow*

‘Paul McVeigh has created a strong, unique, and funny protagonist, able to reveal the everyday intricacies and the broader politics of the Troubles in a fresh, engaging way. I fell in love with Mickey Donnelly.’

—SARAH BUTLER, author of *Ten Things I’ve Learned About Love* and *Before the Fire*

‘Brilliantly sparky and original. Fairly ripples with wicked humour, warmth and coming-of-age wonder.’

—SARAH HILARY, author of *Someone Else’s Skin* and *No Other Darkness*

‘A real page-turner. Mickey Donnelly is a brilliant creation – a captivating, complex boy on the cusp of young adulthood. A poignant, devastating, funny, unforgettable read.’

—VANESSA GEBBIE, author of *The Coward’s Tale*

‘Beautifully written, heartbreaking story of a young Belfast boy during the Troubles. There’s something very brave about the writing and wild about the character.’

—LIZ NUGENT author of *Unravelling Oliver*

‘Paul McVeigh is a story-teller of the highest order. *The Good Son* is a joy to read, truly a page turner, and at the same time, its structure is masterful, and its nuanced use of language, dialogue and narrative create a remarkable journey of discovery. The last book I felt this strongly about, in terms of its completeness, its build, its pacing and punch, its lyrical perfection, its use of a young protagonist to reveal exceedingly adult issues, and its voice was *All the Light We Cannot See* by Anthony Doerr.’

—NANCY FREUND author of *Rapeseed*

‘There’s no nostalgia in the depiction of simmering brutality and intense claustrophobia in a place where everyone – a full-colour close-up of life in a no-go area.’

—*The Guardian*

‘. . . transportingly vivid. The effect is often very funny and then touching; the injustice of a life spent half in fear, the pleasure of a life half lived in laughter.’

—*The Big Issue*

‘One of my favourite books coming out in April, this completely charming, pitch perfect story stole my heart. Has to be one of the best voices of 2015.’

—*A Case for Books*

‘Heart-rending. It has everything. It’s so real, one the best protagonists I’ve read in a long, long time . . . The last time a character had stayed with me like that was Holden Caulfield in *Catcher in the Rye*. Takes you from sadness to humour to horror to a whole range of other emotions quite often even in the space of one page which is not an easy thing to do.’

—BBC Radio Ulster, Book of the Month

‘Mickey Donnelly stole my heart. You’ll fall in love. It’s an excellent debut. It’s a great story, he’s a great writer.’

—EDEL COFFEY on RTE Arena

‘The hatred and destruction of Belfast’s tribal politics, seen through the eyes of a child, exposed with appalling clarity. With this first novel McVeigh has set himself a high standard. Despite its horrors, *The Good Son* has a warm heart . . .’

—*The Tablet*, Book of the Month

‘I can’t overstate how much I fell for Mickey as a voice, he’s one of the most engaging, captivating voices that I’ve read in a novel this year. His voice is so warm and the book is so funny, quite dark humour. You will completely fall in love with this voice.’

—BBC Radio Oxford

‘Vivid . . . unsettling . . . a powerfully resonant novel . . . two of the characters that Mickey most calls to mind are Scout Finch and Paddy Clarke . . . a remarkable achievement.’

—*Wales Arts Review*

‘*The Good Son* delivers a real sense of a damaged child within a broken family constrained by his society, while also presenting a refreshing portrait of the troubles through the eyes of one of the most beguiling and endearing narrators I have encountered in a long time. McVeigh and *The Good Son* are destined for prizes.’

—*Structo Magazine*

'The Good Son is bursting with action, love, loss, betrayal and so much more – it is the sort of book you pick up and hours later emerge from, wondering where the time went.'

—*Culture Northern Ireland*

'A truly affecting and absorbing novel. Although only his debut novel, *The Good Son* perfectly illustrates what a masterful storyteller Paul McVeigh is and I personally can't wait to see what he does next.'

—*The Ulster Tatler* Book of the Month

'A vivid, playful, fence-hurdling, page-turning act of cocky bravado and endearing imagination. Mickey is a shining star of a protagonist; charming, erudite, and warmly, infectiously funny . . . a startling debut. The writing is sharp and the voice, a difficult one to sustain over a novel's length, rarely falters.'

—*Bare Fiction Magazine*

'The Good Son is a triumph of vivid recall . . . so much more than a coming-of-age story. It's a finely delineated depiction of a brutal and brutalising environment. The dialogue, in particular, is exquisite, every nuance and rhythm perfectly cadenced . . . genius. Highly recommended. Watch out for Paul McVeigh.'

—*Writing.ie*

THE GOOD SON

Paul McVeigh



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To my Ma

THE GOOD SON

I

I WAS BORN THE day the Troubles started.

‘Wasn’t I, Ma?’ says me.

‘It was you that started them, son,’ says she, and we all laugh, except Our Paddy. I put that down to his pimples and general ugliness. It must be hard to be happy with a face like that. I almost feel sorry for him. I spy a dirty, big love bite on his neck and store this ammunition to defend myself against future attacks.

Steamy, flowery-smellin’ disinfectant fills my nose and joins the sweet tastin’ Frosties in my mouth as Ma passes with the tin bucket and yard brush. Ma only cleans the yard when somethin’s up. That would be Da, as usual.

‘Do you want a hand, Mammy?’ says me.

‘No, son,’ says she, disappearing out the back. She didn’t even look at me. I’m worried about her after last night.

‘D’ya wanna hand?’ Our Paddy says in a girl’s voice. ‘You wee lick.’

‘I’ll tell m’Mammy on you,’ I say.

‘I’m tellin’ Mammy on you . . .’ Paddy mimics me.

I look at Wee Maggie and give her the *We hate him, don’t we?* look. She gives me the *Yes we do, he’s a big, fat pig!* look back. I was taught how to give looks by a monk on Cave Hill. I trained like a Jedi Knight but my lightsaber was my face. I became *Look Skywalker*. My mission: To defend all weak-

lin's and youngest ones in families against the evil that is older brothers. Wee Maggie is now my disciple.

To test her telepathy training, I send – *Don't worry about him cuz he's gonna be knocked down by a car then a lorry will run over his head makin' his eyes pop out.* Wee Maggie smiles. She got it. I think we're actually twins born years apart in some CIA super-genetic-test-tube experiment.

Paddy gets up, leavin' his dirty bowl on the table like he's King Farouk.

'Don't leave that for Mammy,' I say.

'Mammy's boy,' says he.

'Shut up you,' I say. 'At least I don't have a dirty, big love bite.'

Wee Maggie laugh-chokes and Frosties shoot from her mouth onto Paddy's jumper, just like that wee girl in *The Exorcist* I saw at the Pope John Paul II Youth Club.

'That's your fault, you wee gay boy!' Paddy slaps me across the head.

I try to kick him but my shin hits the table leg.

Paddy laughs, wipin' his jumper. 'And you're supposed to be the smart one? Grammar School? Away on.'

'I'm smarter than you, dumbo,' I say. 'By the way, does your girlfriend like suckin' the pimples on your neck?'

Paddy dives at me and trails me off the chair by the jumper.

'Mammy!' I shout out the back yard.

'What?' Ma screams. The house trembles like when bombs go off. Paddy lets go. Not even Muhammad Ali would mess with our Ma.

'Nothin',' I shout back. Paddy grabs his blazer from the back of the chair and heads off. I raise my eyebrows and smile at Wee Maggie. 'Victory is mine!' I laugh like the Count from *Sesame Street*.

There's mess on Ma's good table. I run to the sink, wet the

cloth and rush back before Ma comes in and kills somebody. Somebody = me. Even though I'm the good son in the family, I get the blame if Wee Maggie does anything wrong cuz she's the youngest and I look after her. Wee Maggie could set me on fire and Ma would kick *my* head in for lettin' Maggie near matches.

Wipin' the table, I see my reflection in the smoked-glass. I look like a Black Baby we do collections for at school. I usually give them creamed rice. We get free tins from the community centre cuz we're poor and cuz somewhere there's a place called Food Mountain made from tins of creamed rice and corned beef. I think it's in Switzerland.

One day I'll be President of Ireland. I'll be so kind and good. I'll bring all Black Babies to Belfast where there's free food for poor people and they can live in new houses like they're buildin' at the bottom of our street.

I've only ever seen black people on TV. Apart from the ones starving in Africa, there's ones America stole to make slaves, which isn't very nice, but at least they gave them some clothes. You wouldn't be allowed to walk around America with no clothes on. Or Belfast. Maybe if they lived with the Protestants. I've only seen Protestants on the TV too.

'Mickey, stop spacing out,' Wee Maggie tugs me. 'You're going to be late for school.'

I throw the cleaning cloth in the sink and run through the living room and up the stairs. I tip toe into my room cuz I don't want to wake Da. Ma took him back in when he hammered the door in the middle of the night. He brought men with him. I listened from the top of the stairs. I told Paddy I heard Da cryin' and they were talkin' about money. The men said they'd come back today.

Paddy thought Da wasn't comin' back this time. But Da

always comes back. I don't know why Paddy even bothers trying to think.

I grab my schoolbag and run down the stairs and into the kitchen.

'Ma, I'm away on,' I shout to the yard.

'Did you get washed?' Ma shouts back.

'Aye,' I look at Wee Maggie through the doorway, pretend to pick my nose and wipe it on my jumper. She laughs into her hand. She thinks I'm like one of them from the TV. Like *Laurel and Hardy* or *Abbot and Costello*. We play them sometimes. She says it's not fair that we don't play any girl funny ones but I say it's not my fault that girls aren't funny. Cuz if they were, wouldn't they be on the TV?

I get on my horse and ride him, dodgin' the chair and table, swerve round the half-open door into the livin' room, side-ward round Da's chair and past the sofa.

'Cham-p-ion The Won-der Horse!' I sing, salutin' the TV. I gallop out the front door, Wee Maggie running after me.

'Don't be doing that in the street, Mickey,' Wee Maggie says, like she's the one who looks after me.

'I'm not stupid,' I say. 'Go on you.' I push her back into the livin' room.

The waste ground in front of the house becomes an open prairie and the aul half-knocked-down houses to the right now an abandoned Gold Rush mining town in the Wild West.

I ride Champion off into the sunset.



'Mr Donnelly, what time do you call this?' says Mr McManus. I'm in the doorway lookin' at my feet. 'Sorry, Sir.' He's a funny frigger Mr McManus, cuz he's sayin' that, but I know he doesn't care, due to my telepathic abilities. A power like mine

comes in very handy so you know when someone's really bein' real. He's just pretendin' to be annoyed, so I'm pretendin' to be sorry.

'Go and sit down, Donnelly,' Mr McManus says, goin' back to readin'.

'So what's happenin', Fartin'?' I say, slidin' into my seat.

'Shite,' says he.

'Well, now we're all here,' Mr McManus gives me the side eye, 'I thought we could have a little competition. Some creative writing, one page in length, on any subject and there will be a small prize for the winner. If you're not taking part, you can read quietly at your desk.'

The room groans. Since we finished our 11+, ages ago, it's been singin' and stories and everybody hates it. Not me. I love singin' and stories. I'm gonna write somethin' but I'll have to hide it from the Hard Men who would love to kill me cuz I'm smart and not hard. Thank the Lord, His Holy Mother and the Little Baby Jesus, I've got my mate Fartin' Martin. Fartin' is cool *and* hard but not one of them. Without him I'd've been murdered about seventeen times.

MY DOG KILLER

My dog Killer, he is great.

My dog Killer, is my mate.

I take him walks about the street,

And he stays right beside my feet.

Because he does what he is told,

And he's never, ever, bold.

He knows what to do because he's dead cool,

Though he's never even been to school!

He's my dog and he's the best,

I bet he could even do a test.

THE GOOD SON

*Late at night he likes to bark,
Because he's scared in the dark.
He sits in my Da's chair,
And he covers it with hair.
Then my Mamma goes mad,
And tells him he is bad.*

It's not one of my best but it's only for fun. Are you allowed to tell lies in a poem? They'll all be dead jealous if they think I have a dog.

'Have those of you who're entering the competition finished?' asks Sir.

'Yes, Sir.' Everyone tuts and stares at me and the two brainers who answered. I always get too excited about things. Why can't I just keep my big mouth shut until I get to St. Malachy's and away from this school?

'Who would like to read first?' asks Mr McManus.

'I will, Sir,' The Blob says.

Everybody looks at each other tuttin'. That'll distract them from me. You can depend on The Blob. He's always first. First with his hand up, first to offer things and first to get his head kicked in. But I won him in the exams cuz I didn't get some wrong on purpose like I do in class.

The Blob clears his throat then reads with his put-on voice of a somebody not from here. Mountains and the sea and somethin' about *beauty*. I mean, who talks about those things in Ardoyne? You'd think he'd know by now what to hide from the Hard Men.

The Hard Men *starrin' Wee Twin McAuley, Big Twin McAuley – co-starrin' Ma's-a-Whore and Monkey McErlane. It's a filim about stupid people – how they do bad at school and beat the shite out of everybody that's got a brain cell. Comin' to a cinema near you.*

Wee Twin is starin' at me while chewin' a straw from our bottles of milk. He must've nicked it cuz we haven't had our milk yet. That's the kind of bad thing he does. He's shootin' pure hatred at me from his good eye. The other is pointin' towards our display of Carrickfergus Castle. The bendy eye followed a bullet that grazed his face and decided not to come back. So would I, if I was his eye. Havin' to see that face in the mirror.

'Thank you, Mr Campbell, that was a great effort, well done,' says Sir. 'Now, who's next? Mr Close?' he says.

Status Report: *Sean Close – AKA Helmet Head – under observation – moved into my street last month – posh – therefore probably a Protestant double-agent as who's ever heard of a posh Catholic – has no mates – thinks he's great. Conclusion – I hate him.*

Helmet gets left alone cuz somebody tried to beat him up on his first day and he kicked their head in with Karate. Definitely suspicious. A Protestant child spy trained in Kung Fu? I wouldn't put it past them.

'This is a story called "Monty the Fly",' says Helmet. I snigger the loudest. "Monty was from Surrey and flew Spitfires for a living. He was a short-sighted fly, so he had to wear very large spectacles."

He's talkin' but I can't hear. I already know how brilliant it's gonna be. Some things you just know right from the word *go*. If it had been homework, I'd've said his posh Da must have helped him. It's not enough he's moved into a new house near me and into my class, but he's movin' in on my action too. It's me that comes up with brilliant stories in here.

I could never think of somethin' like that though. Never. Maybe if I didn't come from Ardoyne, but from a place where you're allowed to learn things. But I'm goin' after the summer. St. Malachy's Grammar School, here I come! I'll learn to write brilliant stories like his.

He's gonna win me today. I can't let him. Never let them win.

I put my jotter down the back of my trousers. 'Toilet, Sir?' I stand up.

'You shouldn't interrupt someone, Mr Donnelly, it's very rude,' says Sir.

'I'm desperate,' I squeeze my dick like pee is about to explode out. Like when you should've gone ages ago and now it's killin' you. Like that. *Oh, I'm in agony. Oh God, I'm goin' to die.* Hold on, I'm only actin'. I actually believed myself there, I'm that good. I should be an actor.

Sir waves me out like a bored king. In the corridor the class doors are open and the teachers look out as I rush past. At Mrs O'Halloran's I slow down and look in. We have a secret, me and Mrs O'Halloran. She looks up and smiles.

'Well, if it isn't Michael Donnelly. Come in a moment,' she coos like a dove.

I'm in love with Mrs O'Halloran. I was the only one she got to take her notes to Mr McDermot. She used to call me her *Wee Currant Bun*. Her *Wee Pet*. She said I was different. Not like the other boys. I bought her a necklace on my last day in her class. It cost one whole 50p. It had a little golden heart and on the back it said *I Love You*.

'Now class, I want you all to have a look at Mr Michael Donnelly,' she says, her arm on my shoulder makin' my skin fizz. 'He is one of, in fact, he *is* the finest pupil ever to come out of Holy Cross Boys.' I'm completely scundered. I take a massive redner, my face burnin' like a slapped arse.

'St. Malachy's Grammar School. It doesn't surprise me at all. You see, class, this is what you can achieve at this school with hard work and determination,' she beams at me. It's supposed to be a secret, but I guess it doesn't matter if these wee

ones know. She's right too. I am determined. I've got a plan. Get away from this school. Get smart. Get to America. Get Rich. Bring Wee Maggie and Mammy over to live with me in my penthouse.

'Thank you, Mrs O'Halloran,' says me, in my good-boy voice, to prove to her class she's right.

'You'll be sorely missed around here,' she says, smiling. She whispers: 'Make sure to come see me before you leave today, won't you?'

'Yes, Mrs O'Halloran,' says me, now completely on fire like a human petrol bomb. I kick the leg of her desk, smile and speed-walk out. I do want to grow up and make all my dreams come true, but mostly I just want to be back in P3 with Mrs O'Halloran.

In the toilet, I take out my jotter. I rip out my poem and tear it up, throw it down the toilet and flush it away forever.

Everyone looks at me when I walk into class so I put my head down and go to my seat. I hide under my desk, pretendin' to tie my lace.

'Ah, Mr Donnelly. We've been waitin' for you,' says Mr McManus.

'What, Sir?' I say, like I'm completely thick and really stupid and cool.

'You said you had something for the competition?' says he.

'No I didn't.' That came out cheeky.

'Stand up, Mr Donnelly,' he says. I've crossed the McManus Line. Whisperin' and *oohs* around the room. 'Are you now saying that you don't have something to read out?'

'Aye, he does, Sir. I saw him writin' it,' Fartin' says, and hides his head in his arm on the desk, laughin'.

'Well?' says Sir.

'No, look.' I hold up blank pages. 'See.'

'You are being very irritating today, Mr Donnelly. First

you're late and now this. What do you think will happen if you behave like this in St. . . . in secondary school? Why don't you stand there for a while and perhaps you'll remember what you did with your writing.' Mr McManus goes for a fag at the door.

Why does he even care? I love Mr McManus, but sometimes he gets on like someone shoved a duster up his arse.

'You're for it, now,' Fartin' laughs.

'What did you do that for?'

'Cuz I saw you write one. I thought you were only messin'. You don't have one?' he says, in complete eyebrow-raised disbelief.

I don't want to fall out with Fartin' cuz he's my best friend in school. My only friend. We don't knock about after school cuz he lives at the other end of Ardoyne near the Prods and I'm not allowed up there cuz of the riots. We won't see each other much after school finishes next week. And after the holidays I'm goin' to St. Malachy's and he's goin' to St. Gabriel's with everyone else. I wonder where Helmet Head is goin'? He thinks he's great with his blonde hair and blue eyes and *Oh, look at me with my brilliant stories and clean uniform.*

Mr McManus comes back in, followed by Mr Brown, the Head.

'Donnelly, come here,' says Mr Brown, and I do cuz he's one scary specimen. I'm never in trouble in school. I'm a good boy. Can't be about the writin'. Must be about St. Malachy's. Mr Brown said it was best not to tell the other boys and finished the sentence with the look *If you want to get out of here alive.* Mr Brown is whisperin' to Mr McManus, lookin' very serious. Mr Brown puts his hand on my back and pushes me into the corridor.

I stand by the windows lookin' out at the tarmac play-

ground covered in glass and splats of colour from the paint bombs the Hard Men throw over the walls at night. Reflected in the window I see Mr McManus, hand over his mouth, starin' at his feet. Mr Brown has one hand in his pocket and the other is rubbin' his baldy head. Somethin's wrong. It's like one of those scenes in a film where someone's bein' told bad news while the music plays and we know what they're sayin' even if we can't hear the words. Usually the hero is being told he's terminally ill or his parents have died in a car crash. We don't have a car, so . . .

'Follow me,' says Mr Brown. I do, but look round at Mr McManus who's still at the doorway smilin' at me like . . . I've got leukaemia! I did have a nose bleed last Christmas. I feel a bit dizzy.

At the end of the corridor, Mr Brown's office door is open. He walks in. I wait.

I'm in my hospital bed, the whole family kneelin' by me cryin', I raise myself to say, 'I forgive you all. Even you Paddy.' I smile, touching his head, then die.

'Come in, Michael,' says Mr Brown, which is the first time in seven years he's called me by my first name.

Holy Shite! Ma and Da are here. In their Sunday clothes. This is gettin' too TV.

'Sit down, son,' says Da, all nice. Hopefully Mr Brown can't smell last night's drink under Da's Polo minty breath. I sit in the empty chair.

'Michael, I know we've spoken about the offer from St. Malachy's, and I want to assure you that we're extremely proud of you here at Holy Cross,' says Mr Brown, fidgetin' with his papers. 'You're a big boy now, Michael, and there are certain things you have to understand.' He folds his fingers like a cat's cradle and taps the knotted bunch on his desk. He takes a deep breath. 'Michael . . . your mum and

dad have asked me to talk to you, to help you understand that . . .’

Ma coughs, shifts in her chair and looks at the floor.

‘. . . unfortunately . . . Michael, you’re not able to go to St. Malachy’s.’

Mr Brown’s mouth moves but there’s no sound. *Concentrate Mickey – don’t space out!* I hear somethin’ about ‘five years . . . trips . . . uniforms and books . . . two buses there and two buses back.’

‘But I love buses,’ I say, lookin’ at Ma to back me up, but she’s starin’ at Mr Brown who gets up from his seat and plays with the blinds, all the while talkin’. My breathin’ is loud in my ears. I keep missin’ what he’s sayin’, like when Our Paddy turns the sound up and down on the telly to annoy me.

‘Your mummy and daddy can’t afford it, Michael. They feel terrible,’ Mr Brown says.

Ma’s face is purple. She’s not goin’ to say anythin’. And whatever is jammin’, the sound in my head is messin’ with my powers. Is it the aliens? Or the Russians? Protestants!

‘Now you’ll be able to go to St. Gabriel’s, just like Paddy,’ Da smiles, puttin’ his disgustin’ orangey-brown, fag-burnt fingers on my shoulder. He means wear Paddy’s old uniforms like I’ve done my whole life. Paddy’s old everythin’. Even his bloody trunks.

I look at Da and know with absolute certainty that this man is not my father. Just as I know, by the smallness of his eyes, this is all his fault. Everythin’ bad that ever happens to our family is because of him.

‘We’ll see ourselves out, Sir,’ says Da, holdin’ out his hand, actin’ like he doesn’t want to cause any trouble when that’s all he’s ever done.

‘You can take Michael home with you, help him through the . . . transition,’ says Mr Brown.

‘No, I’m sure he’d rather be here playin’ with his friends. Wouldn’t you, son?’ says Da.

Frien-dab! One friend. That’s how much he knows. And no . . . ‘Actually, I would like to go home,’ I say.

‘No problem,’ says Mr Brown, lookin’ pale and walkin’ fast out the door. ‘I’ll get your schoolbag.’

Silence. We stare out the window and watch the sun come out from behind a big Fuzzy Felt cloud. All three of us squint and turn our heads makin’ sure we don’t catch each other’s eyes.

‘I . . .’ starts Da, ‘Mickey . . .’ he sighs into the sandpaper shuffle of his hand along his stubble. ‘I’ve got a big surprise for you. It’s comin’ tonight.’

I look at the stupid grin on his face. I check Ma; she hasn’t a clue. He’s a big liar. Ma nods to me, then towards Da, her eyes openin’ wide. This means *Please Mickey, play along with your Da. For me. You know what’ll happen if you don’t.*

OK, Ma. For you.

I know we have no money and I would never scunder her about it. ‘A big surprise? Wow,’ I say, like some kid on TV. I look out the window. Then it descends upon me like the Holy Spirit. ‘It’s a dog, isn’t it? Oh, Daddy, I’m so happy, that makes up for everythin’.’

Ha. I won him. I smile at Ma like I’ve no idea what I’ve just done. She’s said *no* to a dog since I was five. She’s gonna break every bone in my body. At least then I won’t have to go to St. Gabriel’s.

2

‘C’MON YOU, WEE boy. And don’t lift that dog or I’ll kill ye,’ Ma says out the kitchen window. ‘You too, wee doll,’ she says to Maggie. She’s still annoyed with me about Killer, but I haven’t said a word about St. Malachy’s so I’m safe as long as I keep my mouth shut.

‘I’ll be two shakes of a lamb’s tail,’ I say and wink.

‘Don’t wink on a Sunday,’ says she, her head disappearing back through the window.

I laugh. That’s a new one. We’re in the yard leanin’ into Killer’s box Uncle John made out of wood from the burnt-out houses in Havana Street. If anyone asks, we’re to say Da made it cuz Ma doesn’t want people knowin’ he’s useless.

‘How’s my wee son? Eh?’ I scratch Killer’s black back. He collapses and rolls over. ‘How’s my wee man?’ I tickle his brown belly. ‘He’s brill, isn’t he, Maggie?’

‘Yes, oh my God, I love him,’ says she.

‘He can be yours too. Nobody else’s, but.’ I frown and wag my finger.

I really want to pick him up but I’m in my new *do you for the whole summer holiday clothes* to be debuted at the

Chapel's Summer Fashion Mass – the first Sunday after school breaks up.

A tumbleweed of curly, ginger hair sticks out the back door. Our Measles. AKA Our Mary, the eldest. Her chubby cheeks are so covered in freckles there's only a few white dots around her nose. Like freckles in reverse.

'Yous two better get movin' if yous know what's good for yous,' says Measles before dashin' back in to get the dinner on while we go to Chapel. She has to do everything round the house like Ma cuz she's a girl. Boys don't have to do anything but I always help cuz it's just not fair.

'Right!' Ma growls.

I run in, Wee Maggie, my stickin' plaster, behind me. Ma's us trained like those kids in *The Sound of Music*, but she doesn't need a whistle with a voice like hers. And I don't mean she sounds like Julie Andrews.

Ma gives the finger-on-the-lips signal cuz Da's still in bed. Everythin' has to be kept quiet so he doesn't leave us. Or worse – drink. Ma grabs Wee Maggie's hand and marches out of the house and down the street. I catch up.

'I swear to Almighty God, if I'm late for Mass I will not be held responsible for my actions,' Ma says, her tiny feet goin' 100 miles an hour.

The further down we go, the older and dirtier our street gets. They're knockin' these aul houses down soon. At the bottom, you can see across to Flax Street where they're buildin' huge, corrugated iron barricades, beside No Man's Land. To keep us in and the Protestants out.

We turn up Brompton Park road and head up the hill. Nobody's talkin' cuz we're rushin'. I don't care. I'm happy as a pig in poo cuz I have Killer and I can't wait to get back from Chapel to play with him. And it's the Summer Holidays so there's cartoons on every mornin'. *Flash Gordon* and old black

and white films too. And even though I'm not goin' to St. Malachy's, St. Gabriel's is not til nine whole weeks. Plenty of time for me to come up with a new escape plan.

Everyone in Chapel is goin' to love my new T-shirt. It's cracker. I chose it cuz it has the American flag on it. Our Paddy says it's crap but that's just cuz he thinks he's great since he turned Rude Boy for Easter. If you want to change who you are, you have to wait til you get your new clothes at Christmas, Easter or Summer. Everybody turned Mod last Christmas. I don't know how they all know when to turn what. They must tell each other on the street when they're playin'. I don't play with the other kids. I play with Wee Maggie.

Look at me in my brill, super-duper, cool, Americano, baseball boots too. We call them guddies, Americans call them sneakers. I'm learning the names from the telly so I don't look like a *dork* when I go. I can't wait to get to America. I'm going to work in a diner. I've got dreams.

A Saracen crawls down the road, snipers' heads out the top. It's like a tank but fatter with bits bolted on, like Frankenstein. It's a *Tankenstein*. Ha!

I skip like a boxer and do a little dance up on the side of the road.

'Mickey! If you ruin them guddies you'll spend the rest of the summer runnin' around in yer bare feet,' says Ma. 'Now stop actin' the eejit.'

'They're not guddies, Mammy, they're sneakers,' says me.

'I'll sneak you a dig in the head if you don't stop contradicting me, wee boy. And then you'll know your arse from Joe McKibbon,' says she.

I have absolutely no idea what that actually means, but it will translate into pain inflicted on me. But Ma knows that really I'm a good boy, it's just I get on her nerves sometimes. But I can't help it. I'm lovin' myself right now.

At the top of Brompton Park I look down Balholme Drive. ‘Mammy, I’m waitin’ here for Fartin’.

‘You are, my shite. It’s too dangerous, sure the Shankill Road’s just there,’ says Ma. The Shankill Butchers live there. They don’t sell meat, they chop up Catholics. I don’t think they eat us but it wouldn’t surprise me.

‘I won’t go behind the Chapel, I’m not simple,’ I tut. ‘Look, there he’s comin’ now,’ I point. ‘Please!’

‘Can I wait with him, Mammy?’ Wee Maggie whinges.

‘See what you’ve started, wee boy?’ says Ma. ‘You’d better not be late for Chapel, you hear me?’ She trails Wee Maggie off by the hand.

I hate those bloody Prods livin’ across there cuz it means I’m not allowed up to play with Fartin’. We arranged to meet here on the last day at Holy Cross. I didn’t tell Fartin’ I wasn’t going to St. Malachy’s.

In the shop window, there’s an IRA poster. A man’s face. Eyes starin’ at you, frownin’. A bodyless hand covers his mouth. *Loose Talk Costs Lives* it says. You have to be careful all the time. Keep your mouth shut. I move and it’s like the eyes follow me, same as the 3D Jesus picture in Aunt Kathleen’s.

‘Wait til you hear this one,’ Fartin’ says, like we’re already in the middle of a conversation. ‘Ye walk up to somebody and say, *You’re lookin’ well*, and when they smile, you say, *Who shat on you?*’ Fartin’ pisses himself laughin’. I think that’s horrible, bein’ nasty to somebody. ‘I heard that yesterday on the street,’ says he. ‘Everyone’s out playin’ all the time. It’s cracker. Are they in your street?’

‘Yeah,’ I say. ‘I’m not goin’ to St. Malachy’s.’ I had no idea I was goin’ to say that. Shit, that’s how *loose talk* works. ‘I’m goin’ to St. Gabriel’s.’

‘You’re goin’ to St. Gabe’s?’ says he, his eyes poppin’ out. ‘How come?’

'I told them I didn't want to go,' says me. 'I said I wanted to be with my mate. *I'm goin' to St. Gabriel's with Far-tin' Mar-tin and you can shove your posh school up your bums.*' I stick my two fingers up. 'I thank you,' I give a little bow.

I can see Fartin's totally blown away. God, I'm good. It's called improvisation. Marlon Brando does it. I saw it in a documentary.

'Well, I've got news too. I'm not going to St. Gabriel's,' says he, and an alien raygun disintegrates me.

'Why? Where are you goin'?'

'Some school far away. You go if you're special.' He grabs his dick with happiness then puts me in a headlock and grabs my nose. I don't try to get away cuz you get a Chinese burn on the neck in the struggle.

He doesn't even know that special means stupid. Damn it! I thought he'd protect me like he used to at Holy Cross. I'm going to be all on my own in St. Gabriel's.

He lets me go and we walk to the road waitin' for the cars to stop.

'I've got somethin' you can do when you get to St. Gabe's,' says he. 'The older ones in the street've been tellin' everyone all the tricks so they'll be OK.'

We run though a gap in the traffic, across Crumlin Road, to the gates of Holy Cross Chapel.

'You need someone else to make it work,' says he. 'They go up to somebody and say *Go up to Donnelly and ask him how his granny's gettin' on with her knittin'*, right? So yer man goes up to you and says *Donnelly, how's yer granny gettin' on with her knittin'*? And you say, dead serious, you say, *My Granny hasn't got any arms*, and they shit themselves cuz they think you're goin' to kill them. Class, isn't it?' says he, wetting himself.

'That's cracker,' I say, forcin' a smile. I think it sounds like somethin' a really horrible person would do. St. Gabriel's

sounds like it's goin' to be Holy Cross multiplied by a hundred million. I'm goin' to ask Our Paddy. I'll have to be nice to him. *Shiver me timbers.*

The Chapel is enormous. Huge, grey bricks, ladder up to two high spires. Men stand smokin' outside the doors holdin' their babies. They pretend the baby's cryin' so they can leave for a fag. Me and Fartin' bless ourselves with holy water from the font – you have to, to get in – push through the latecomers standin' just inside the door.

Mass is bunged and we walk down the aisle lookin' for Ma and Wee Maggie. I use it like a catwalk. I know everyone is starin' at me. I don't look but I can feel their jealousy mixed with total admiration for my style and general coolness.

I push Fartin' into Ma's pew and everyone shuffles along. Ma narrows her eyes til they say *You've embarrassed me in front of the whole friggin' Chapel.*

The new Priest is so quiet it's hard to hear what he's going on about. Our Paddy says he's gay, but how can that be? He probably thinks that cuz Priests wear robes that look like dresses. They make altar boys wear them too. You'd never catch me wearin' one of them. I'd rather eat my own eyeballs soaked in bleach. It'd be like walkin' round in a T-Shirt that said *KICK MY HEAD IN PLEASE.*

The rows in front sink to their knees and like dominoes we follow.

'That new Priest is so borin',' Fartin' whispers.

'Shush, yous two,' whispers Ma. 'Mickey Donnelly, I'm warnin' you.'

It's not friggin' fair. And it's not fair I'm not going to St. Malachy's and Fartin' won't be in St. Gabriel's. That's God's fault.

Mickey, that's a black mark on your soul.

I wonder what your soul looks like. I reckon it's a red

circle. No, a heart is red, so a soul is probably pink. Pink is for girls though. I picture my circle soul now and it's definitely pink. I just won't tell anybody my soul's a girl's one.

I forgot the black mark. I'll make it an X for wrong. But I don't want to go to Hell. Wait a minute. What did Old Father Michael used to say? 'Ask for forgiveness and your soul will be cleansed.' Hmmm . . . I see a pygmy God, inside my soul, with a wee mop.

God forgive me. God mops the black mark off.

Sex! *God forgive me.*

Fuck! *God forgive me.*

Big diddies. Two black marks appear. Must be one for each diddy.

God forgive me. God forgive me.

Poor God is rushin' around on fast forward.

'Mickey,' says Ma.

'What?'

'Will you get up for Communion,' Ma scowls. I was last in on the pew so everyone's standin', waitin' to pass. How long have I been spaced out for? 'I'm takin' you to see the Priest afterwards,' says she, loudly for those watchin'.

'I'm goin' to Communion, Mrs Donnelly,' Fartin' says, with the voice of an angel, his hands together in prayer and his head tilted to the side like the statue of the *Child de Prague*.

'Mickey,' Fartin' whispers behind me in the line.

I bring my prayer hands up to my face and whisper into them. 'What?'

'Your Ma's mental.'

'I know. But you'd better watch yourself. She'll end up whackin' *you*, if you don't stop,' says me.

'The Body of Christ,' the new Priest says.

'Amen,' I stick my tongue out and he puts the white, cardboard circle on it that sticks to the roof of my mouth. The

nuns came to school to give us a special lesson on unstickin' Communion without using your fingers – that's a sin and punishable by Hell.

There's Martine. *Hey – did you happen to see the most beautiful girl in the world?* That terrible song plays in my head. Two wee cherubs fly out of the stained glass windows above and trumpet down to hover over her.

Martine . . . She's got long, blonde hair and everybody knows, long, blonde hair is the most gorgeous thing any girl could have.

Martine . . . she has a garage. She's so lucky.

Martine . . . is like Farrah Fawcett-Majors without diddies. *God forgive me. Twice.* And she's even an actress like her too. Last summer she put plays on in her garage. Everybody went mad for them. I hope I get to act in a proper play in her garage one day.

She smiled at me. Nah, it couldn't have been. Could it? Not unless she went temporarily Stevie Wonder. Must have been at Fartin'.

I sit up and let Fartin' pass. I nip him on the inside of his leg. He yelps like Killer and falls onto the pew. Ma digs me, givin' me a dead leg. 'Wait til Mass has finished, wee boy,' Ma says. She'll crucify me on the altar. I never mess around like this in Chapel. It's just cuz Fartin's here. He makes me do things I wouldn't do in a million years. Ma will never let him sit with us in Chapel again.

'May the Peace of the Lord be with you always,' the new Priest whispers.

'And also with you,' we all answer.

'Go in Peace, to love and serve the Lord,' says he.

'Thanks be to God.' Yeah, thanks be to God that's over.

Everybody legs it out. It's like leavin' the cinema. Everybody's pushin' to get out first.

‘Mickey,’ Ma says in a deep voice that she uses when she wants to shout but she can’t.

‘You go on, I’ll have to go with her,’ I whisper to Fartin’.

‘Oh Donnelly . . .’ he sucks in through his teeth.

‘I know,’ I say, noddin’ my head up like it’s all one big laugh but really I should start sayin’ my prayers, for real this time.

Fartin’ heads on and I slow down. A hand grabs my arm tight. I let it pull me any way it wants. We bless ourselves and go outside. The light is blindin’. I’m pulled down the steps, across the path to the side door of the Chapel. The new Priest is there, shakin’ hands, all smiles, talkin’ to the Holy Joes. Mrs Montgomery even has a grotto in her front garden, re-staging Mary’s appearance to Bernadette at Lourdes.

Ma can’t really be takin’ me to the Priest. I’m a good boy really. It’s all Fartin’s fault for makin’ me act the maggot.

‘Hello, Father,’ Ma says, half bowin’, like she’s talkin’ to the Queen. ‘I was wonderin’ if you could have a word with my wee boy. He was actin’ up somethin’ shockin’ in Chapel.’ She looks at me: *Didn’t I tell you I was gonna do it?*

‘Mrs Donnelly, isn’t it?’ says he.

‘Yes, Father.’ Ma’s over the moon he remembered her. That’s it now. He could tell Ma to stick needles in my eye til I sang *Hail Glorious Saint Patrick*, and she’d say, ‘Needles in just one eye, Father?’

‘Och, Mrs Donnelly, I’m sure he’s not that bad,’ he winks at me.

I have to nip my leg hard to stop myself from sayin’ *Winkin’ on a Sunday, why Father, I’m shocked*. I am seriously on my *funny half hour*, as Ma would say.

‘When I was his age I wasn’t exactly an angel either. At least he comes to Mass with you,’ smiles he. ‘Where’s Mr Donnelly?’

Ma near has a stroke; face frozen on one side and a cripple's smile on the other.

'He's sick, Father. Was ragin' he couldn't make it,' says she.

'Och, well, I hope he gets better soon. I look forward to meeting him. But I can see your wean is worrying you though,' says he, soundin' all Scottish. He speaks so soft in Chapel you'd never notice. 'If it makes you feel better, I'll certainly have a chat with young . . . ?'

'Mickey . . .' I say.

'Michael,' says Ma, diggin' her nails into my arm.

'Michael,' he says, smilin' at me. 'Why don't you come up and see me soon and we'll have a wee chat, OK?'

'Thank you, Father,' says she. 'Say *thank you* to the Father.'

'Thank you, Father.'

'Go in Peace,' he smiles and pats me on the head.

'There, that'll get the messin' out of you,' says Ma when we get out of the gates.

It wasn't as bad as I thought it was gonna be. I think Ma came off worse.

'Mammy, can me and Wee Maggie run on down to the house?' I say.

'After the way you've messed about in Chapel? Anyway, we're too far away.'

'Aye Mammy, dead on. Sure am'n't I gonna have to go past here to get to St. Gabriel's?' says me.

Ma goes purple. I wasn't sayin' it in a bad way.

'Mammy, can we not go on down to the house?' Wee Maggie says. 'We could set the table for you an' all,' she says, sweet as strawberry jam.

'No,' Ma says, but her heart's not in it. 'Go on then, give my head peace.'

'Thanks, Mammy,' I say and take Wee Maggie's hand. We walk ahead, down Brompton Park.

‘Will we do our walk?’ says Wee Maggie. We can walk at exactly the same time. We’ve been brilliant at it since we won the three-legged race at the Summer Scheme last year. God, the Summer Scheme, I wonder when it starts. We’ll have to go back this year and win again.

‘Jesus Christ!’ Our Paddy nearly has a canary. ‘Don’t burst into the house like that.’ He thought he was gettin’ shot by the Prods. I want to laugh but I need him on my side.

Wee Maggie grabs my hand and we go into the scullery. Our Measles’ face is the colour of a raspberry Slush Puppy, leanin’ over the steamin’ pots of potatoes and cabbage. She looks like a mad scientist in her lab. If we *were* gunmen, she’d be shot without even noticing, but I tell you, with her last breath she’d have reached up to turn off Ma’s potatoes.

‘Alright, Measles.’ I run over and grab her round the waist. Maggie copies me.

‘Awoooooah!’ I laugh, as my ear gets pulled off my head. Measles has us both by an ear and we’re on our tippy toes, like naughty school kids caught by the headmaster.

‘Shut that dog up before Ma gets home,’ she says, throwin’ us to the back door and pretendin’ to kick us up the bum. We laugh. We love Our Measles. I wish boys and girls were swapped so Paddy had to do all the work around the house and then we could play with Measles more.

‘C’mon, wee son,’ I call, openin’ the yard door, ‘It’s me and Wee Maggie to see you.’ Killer runs out of his box barkin’ and jumpin’ up on us and burlin’ round with his pink tongue floppin’ out the side of his mouth. ‘Isn’t he the best dog you ever did see?’ I say, in an American voice.

‘Can you wait five minutes?’ says me to her. She frowns. ‘You can play with Killer all by yourself.’

‘OK, hurry up but,’ says she.

I sneak into the livin' room and slide onto the sofa beside Paddy. He's watchin' TV. I hate football in real life, never mind the TV. 'What's the score?' I say.

'2-1 to Everton,' says he, then looks at me. 'What you lookin'?' he squints.

I have to hurry before Ma gets back. 'What's it like in St. Gabriel's?' I ask.

He laughs. 'So you want info. What's in it for me?'

'I'll polish your shoes.' He completely hates them not bein' shiny.

'You can clean my football boots.'

I can clean them when Ma's polishin' Da's boots and we can be together. 'OK. It's a deal.'

'On the first day they'll have your head down the toilet,' he says.

My stomach churns. 'Yeah, right,' I say. Ma walks through the door behind Paddy. He doesn't see.

'They'll do a big shit in it first. And then they'll shove your face right in it. And flush the chain,' he says. He mimes wipin' his face then puts his hands under his nose and smells somethin' disgustin'.

I'm goin' to be sick. Ma looks like Medusa. She grabs the wee shovel from the companion set on the hearth and whacks Paddy on the leg. He screams like a girl, jumps to his feet and squares up to Ma. She takes a step back, eyes wide. He's gettin' too big for his boots. In that freeze somethin' changes, Paddy's chest unpufts and he gets smaller. Ma whacks his elbow with the shovel. Paddy dances like a demented leprechaun.

'What're you sayin' that for?' she shouts.

'They do, to ones like him,' he points at me. 'Sure he still plays with his wee sister.'

Ma whacks him on the knee and he hobbles out the door.

'He's a good boy,' Ma shouts after him and she slams the door. 'Don't listen to him.'

'OK,' I say. Nine weeks til shite on my face.

Bangin' on the ceilin'. Da's been woken up and wants somethin'. Ma forgot not to shout.

'Go on, play with your dog,' Ma says, frownin' up at the ceilin'. She goes to Da and I go out the back. Paddy could be lyin'. Fartin' could find out for me. How am I goin' to see him? We didn't arrange anythin'. I wish we had a phone. I could get rop and go up to the payphone on the Cliftonville Road, but that's more dangerous than going to Fartin's house, there's so many Proddy areas around it. Who else can I ask?

Wee Maggie's lyin' on the ground with Killer jumpin' all over her. I pick him up. He licks me. It tickles and I laugh but I can't concentrate. I need to ask boys, but I don't play with any. I hate them and they hate me. Why can't I live in America where girls and boys go to the same school? Girls would protect me.

'I've got sweee-eeets,' Wee Maggie sings.

'Yum yums,' I say, in my funny voice. We laugh and she shoves somethin' pink, soft and sweet into my mouth. I bite half off and give it to Killer so he knows he's my dog. Killer! The boys would love Killer. I can use him as my secret weapon to get behind enemy lines. Genie-Ass! Ha! Mickey Donnelly will never be defeated. *No surrender!* Shit. That's the Protestant saying. Luckily only me and Maggie can read minds cuz that would get me knee-capped. In the future, everyone will be telepathic and the IRA posters will say *Loose Thoughts Cost Lives*. I'd better be careful cuz they may already be testing this kind of technology.