

Prologue

West Coast of England

1948

My mother and father were Irish and, as far back as I can ever remember, they did not get along. He was an aggressive man, powerfully built and prone to sudden rages, dangerous and unpredictable even when he was sober. One of my earliest memories is of sitting up in bed with my mother, knowing that we had to be quiet but not knowing why; he'd been out drinking all day and now he was demanding that she get up and serve him his dinner.

"Open up!" He was banging his fist on the bedroom door, shouting at the top of his voice. "Open up!" The pounding grew louder and I could see the door shuddering as he flung his shoulder against it. "Open up! Open the door!" He was screaming now. "Get up and get me my dinner! Open the door!" There was a crash and then a splintering sound as one of the top panels began to give way.

We sat there in the bed, staring at the door. My mother had one arm around me and the other around my brother. There was another heavy blow to the door and the panels began to cave inwards. I could see his crazed eyes glaring at us through the shattered wood. He disappeared for a second but then came crashing back again, his head coming right through one of the broken panels. The rest of the door was beginning to give way.

My mother's head was bowed, her eyes shut, and she was clutching me so tightly around my neck that it was hurting. One last blow and he came smashing through the opening, bits and pieces of wood flying about in front of him as he fell forwards onto the floor. In a second, he was up and onto the bed, slapping and punching at her. She was knocked over sideways and fell down on top of me, her arm crushing against my nose.

I couldn't breathe, suffocating under their weight. She was screaming and I was too but I don't know if any sound was coming out.

I don't know what happened after that, I don't remember, but I know the next day, she wasn't well and she had to go away for a week and we weren't allowed to see her until she got better.

When she returned, things were good again for a while. My father didn't go out drinking at all and even when one of the guests at our hotel offered to buy him a drink, he wouldn't have one.

The Alexandra Private Hotel was our home. I was brought up there from earliest childhood and knew of no other place. It stood on the corner of Alexandra Road, South Shore, Blackpool. From the front rooms, you could see the Irish Sea and, at low tide, glimpses of the long, sandy beach. It was a well-kept, three-story building with a steeply gabled roof and bay windows that jutted out over a concrete-covered yard, surrounded on three sides by a low brick wall.

During the holiday period, the hotel was always busy, full of happy, noisy strangers, talking and laughing together. On those summer evenings, I would sit by the lounge room window and watch the nightly procession of seagulls gliding past the end of the road, floating on the breeze towards the sand dunes at the far end of town.

It was as if we led two lives; in winter Blackpool lay deserted, a ghost town awaiting the turn of the seasons. I awoke each morning to an eerie silence, the hotel as quiet as the grave, the corridors silent and empty, the bedrooms tidy, sterile and pristine, as if in some deserted hospital.

Sometimes when I was very young, I would wonder if the visitors had discovered some dreadful secret and had fled the town forever, never to return.

Chapter 1

The Boy in the Boat

I found the boats late one afternoon. They were drawn up on the tarmac by the sea wall, close to the end of Waterloo Road. I guess they'd always been there; the fishermen brought them up out of the water after every trip, but it was the first time I'd ever noticed them.

I was seven or eight at the time, a frightened boy with a wooden sword, wandering along a seaweed-strewn beach, deserted except for a few cold, unhappy-looking seagulls leaning forward on spindly legs, squinting into the wind.

I was frightened of going home, afraid of what I might find there, feeling sad and looking for refuge. I wanted to get as far away from the hotel as possible. My father had been out drinking again and my parents had been arguing and shouting at each other when I'd picked up my sword and slipped out the back door. From long experience, I knew that it had to end in violence. My mother's pride would not allow her to surrender to my father's verbal abuse and threats. He could only cover her by physical violence and frequently, not even then. I used to silently beg her not to respond, to stay quiet but she just couldn't seem to do that. Too much courage, I guess, and too much contempt for him.

I'd tried many times in the past to save her during these attacks, flailing at him uselessly with my fists or trying to hold onto his arms and screaming for him to stop, but that only served to enrage him further. He'd slap me aside as carelessly as you would a cat and, over the years, as I'd grown to fear him more, I'd had less and less courage to face him.

One dreadful day, he had come at me like a madman, his arms outstretched and his eyes enraged. I was so terrified of him by then that, in my panic, I wet myself. The sense of shame I felt was overwhelming, made all the worse because my mother was there when it happened. I was seven years old and a coward now along with everything else.

After that, I began to disappear before the violence started, slipping out the back door of the hotel at the first signs of trouble. To see my mother's bruised face at the breakfast table and to know that I'd done nothing to stop her humiliation was to scar my mind for life.

The sickening hypocrisy of the following days was almost worse. Watching my father posing for the hotel guests, smiling broadly, his arm around my mother as he explained how 'Chrissie had fallen down the stairs' or 'had walked into a door', confused and revolted me.

He was always the actor, the gracious host of the Alexandra Private Hotel, the loving husband and father. He spoke of decency and honor and of how one should behave in life. He helped my mother and opened doors for the waitresses in a gentlemanly manner. He would tell the hotel guests earnestly: "If there's any way we can improve your stay with us, please don't hesitate to ask." The guests would be enchanted when, after a few drinks, he'd close his eyes and sing to my mother in his Irish brogue:

*I'll take you home again Kathleen
Across the ocean wild and wide
To where your heart has ever been
Since first you were my blushing bride.*

Teary women would bend and whisper in my ear what a “fine father” he was, but behind the scenes, he was a different man altogether. On the occasions when he went too far, my mother would have to go away for a ‘holiday’ and then I’d watch him drinking and laughing with the hotel guests, flirting with the waitresses and fondling them whenever he could.

Knowing that my mother was languishing in some distant town, recovering from his violent excesses, my heart, mind and soul turned against him forever and I swore to God that I’d kill him one day and set my family free from his terrible rages.

* * *

He was still shouting at Mum as I closed the back door quietly behind me. By that time, I had learned how to move into a different world at will. Crossing the promenade, I was on the beach. It was a winter afternoon, grey skies and a cold wind hurrying dark clouds across a bleak ocean.

I walked out to meet the sea. The tide was low, the sands corrugated by the ebbing waters. I continued along the high water mark, searching through the bits and pieces washed up by the ocean. It was then that I saw the boats.

There were three of them in a row, almost identical, about twenty feet long, wooden clinker construction, the planking curving graciously from stem to stern. A short, sturdy mast protruded from each of the canvas covers protecting them from the threatening rains.

I approached cautiously. There seemed to be a life about them somehow, a presence. I was drawn to the boat in the middle and walked around her, admiring her black hull. On her bow, scripted in faded gold paint on a dark red background, were the words *Kathleen R.*

I traced the groove of each letter with my finger. The letters were carved deep into the wood and then painted over. I looked around from where the boats lay nestled together. The promenade was deserted, not a soul in sight; winter held sway.

The canvas cover was held down by a light rope threaded through holes and then lashed to sturdy brass hoops on the boat’s gunwale. My heart beat quickly as I undid enough canvas to peer inside. Saltwater and tar, fish and foreign lands, the smell enveloped me like a dream. I hurriedly pulled more rope away, tossed in my sword and wriggled under the cover. I was inside the boat.

I pushed my head and shoulders back out through the hole in the canvas to make sure no-one had seen me. The coast was clear, nobody in sight. I waved my sword and screamed out into the wind and sea: “I’m the captain! I’m in charge! I’ll kill anybody that comes near my boat!”

I slashed about wildly to show my prowess with the blade. *That* should terrify them all! After a final victorious look around, I retreated back into the boat, tidying up the canvas so as not to give away my presence, then sat down on a pile of fishing nets and took stock of my surroundings.

The nets were still damp and, here and there, caught in the folds were small, dead fish, remnants of the night’s trawling.

I lay there for a while, worrying. Evening was drawing near, the skies darkening and I wondered what had happened at home in my absence. Was my mother alright? Had he hurt her? Oh God, I thought, why does he have to live with us? Why can’t he stay away and live in Manchester all the time.

As I lay there, I stared at the dead fish caught in the nets, too small for the fishermen to bother about, staring eyes, open mouths, singing for a help that would never come.

Suddenly, there was a glitter, a movement at the bottom of the net. I peered closer. There it was again! In the net’s lower folds, half submerged in seawater at the very bottom of the boat, a small silver fish was moving. I pulled away the strands of rope and there he was, sharing his tiny pond with a few seashells and some rusting keel bolts, with barely enough water to stay alive.

I looked around. At the forward end of the boat, an old galvanized bucket poked out from beneath a sail. I grabbed it, climbed out through the canvas cover, and ran as fast as possible down to the sea. Minutes later, I was back, the bucket half full of fresh seawater.

The tiny fish stared back impassively from his watery dungeon. With the greatest care, I scooped him up, palms full of water, and slipped him into the bucket. He didn't look too bad and I knew he'd be fine once he was back in the ocean.

I climbed out of the boat and carried my precious cargo down to the sea. I warned him to stay away from fishing boats and then released him back into the ocean. With a grateful glance and a flick of his silver tail, he was gone.

I stood there for a while watching, wondering whether he'd be alright out there alone with all his friends dead and gone. I waved after him and imagined he was thinking of me with affection as he swam away from the shore towards safety, the sole survivor of a terrible adventure.

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It was getting dark. I went back to the boat, removed all traces of my visit and retied the canvas cover. Then, going to her bow, I touched the golden words, *Kathleen R*, once again and bade her farewell before reluctantly turning towards home. I paused at the corner for one last look. The three fishing boats remained huddled together in the failing light. My world had changed. I'd found a refuge and a sanctuary, a place to hide from the dark family secrets of the Alexandra Private Hotel.

Chapter 2

The Hotel

Throughout the year, my father worked in Manchester. He only came home on the weekends and the hotel was always much more peaceful in his absence.

In the summer, with the town packed with tourists, Blackpool was a different world. My mother didn't worry so much about the money then and she was busy all the time. There were always three or four Irish girls working with her, everyone had a job to do and you answered to her if it wasn't done.

During the quiet times, the hotel was more like a home. We were allowed to choose our own bedrooms anywhere in the hotel and they would be ours until the beginning of the following season.

I spent the long winter months in Number Three because it had a view of the ocean. Number Four had a better view but it was the best room we had, so it was kept vacant in case a travelling salesman might happen along for a night or two.

During the wintertime, mum was always short of money and the mail was of great importance to us. Guests had to confirm their bookings for the next season with a deposit of two pounds and each day, we watched and waited for those letters to arrive.

On the mornings when we weren't at school, I'd sit at the breakfast table with my brothers, Bernard and Peter, listening for the postman. It was like a game. When we heard the clatter of the letterbox, we'd stampede down the hallway to see who'd get to bring the letters back to mum.

My mother would sit there at the table, staring at the little pile of envelopes while we watched her, assessing them carefully like a fortune-teller studying the cards. Then, after choosing one from the pile, she'd examine the postmark and feel the thickness of the envelope.

"Manchester," she'd declare, looking very serious, "umm, this could be a good one!" We'd wait expectantly; she was almost never wrong. She'd slit open the envelope, pull out the letter and then hold up the two-pound notes with a flourish. "Ah, thank God for the Manchurians!" She'd be smiling around at us all, "they're grand people." Then she'd pick up the next one. "Birmingham ... umm, feels a bit slim, does Brumich!" She'd open it up, frowning as she read the enclosed letter, so I knew there was no two pounds there. It was just an inquiry or a booking without a deposit. "Miserable people those Brumichers," she'd say, still smiling. Then on to the next one, peering at the postmark. "Now, where are you from, mister?"

Each morning was like a lottery; on a good day, we might have six or eight deposits, other times, we could go for a week or more without anything at all.

* * *

Bernard was the oldest boy, then me and then Peter. Mary was older than all of us but she was away at boarding school most of the time. We only saw her on holidays or when we visited her on some special occasion. I missed her and worried about her a lot. The convent was only a few miles away and we never knew why she was sent there, year after year.

I would sit in her room at the hotel sometimes when she was away, thinking about the convent and wondering why she was sent there, and what about those nuns in the long black robes? Were they kind to her? Would she ever be allowed to come home?

It was always exciting when we went to the convent to visit, the car turning into the long-graveled driveway, crunching along through the avenue of trees, gliding past the nuns as they moved silently down the pathways, smothered in black, heads bowed and covered, holy and sinister, speechless and serene.

Bernard always seemed much older than me although there were only two years between us. He was a big lad and, from the earliest memories I have, everyone respected him. He seemed to know what was going on all the time and the house always felt safer when he was around.

Sometimes when Mum and Dad were arguing, Bernard would try to stop them but that only made things worse. After it was over, Mum would call us in and plead with Bernard never to interfere again. He'd stand there, stony-faced as she talked, and he'd always say the same thing. "He's not allowed to hurt you mum. I'm not going to let him hurt you." Bernard was the bravest of us all.

Peter was the youngest, a shy, sensitive boy who spent much of his time reading. He avoided the troubles in the house by not being there when things happened, slipping away quietly to his room at the first signs of a row, disappearing into his books for hours on end.

When I was five, I was sent to St Cuthbert's. I don't know where my fear of school came from but I dreaded the place long before I ever went there and when the day came, I was determined not to go. It was wintertime, bleak and freezing cold and I was convinced that my mother was going to give me away when we got there.

She dragged me up the road by my arm and, by the time we arrived, she was in a terrible mood. As we approached the classroom, I was terrified. The door was made up of small panes of glass and through them, I could see rows and rows of desks filled with strange-looking children. At the front of the room, a blackboard covered in chalk marks stood next to a large open fire. A tall, thin woman came towards the door, her hand outstretched, staring at me through the glass panes. I panicked and made one last desperate effort to escape but the door opened and I was pushed into the room, the whole class turning around to stare at me.

"You can leave him with us now, Mrs. O'Raleigh." The thin woman's hand had closed like a talon around my arm. "He'll be fine once you're gone."

I clung on to my mother.

"You'll be alright, son." Mum was prizing my fingers off her wrist. "Mrs. Russell will look after you."

"It's best if you go now, Mrs. O'Raleigh." The teacher was pulling me further into the room. "He'll settle down just as soon as you leave."

I watched in despair as my mother walked away, convinced I would never see her again.

Mrs. Russell took me to the front of the room and sat me down on the hearth, close to the fire, facing the class.

As I sat there feeling absolutely worthless, I became aware of the heat from the fire on my back and I knew immediately what I had to do. I was wearing a thick jacket over a heavy wool jumper. Very slowly, I eased myself backward towards the flames. Now I could feel the heat even more. I moved again, still closer. The heat was intense but I had to get out of that room. The flames were scorching my jacket; the pain was unbearable.

Suddenly a girl jumped up. "Miss ... Miss!" She was pointing at me. "He's on fire, Miss!"

Mrs. Russell let out a shriek as she grabbed me, beating her hand on my back and pulling frantically at the jacket, and I screamed as the charred material pressed against my skin.

“Stand still! Stand still! I’m trying to help you!” I was struggling frantically to get away from her, trying to run from the pain, but she got the coat off and threw it on the floor. “Oh my God, how could that have happened? Didn’t you feel the heat? Are you alright?”

Moments later, we were in the headmistress’s office.

“I have no idea how he managed to burn himself, Miss Nicholson! No idea at all!”

Fifteen minutes later, my mother appeared at the office door. She was furious and she shouted at me all the way home.

“How did I end up with a child like you? God, you’re a problem! You set yourself on fire, for Christ’s sake! You did that intentionally. You might have fooled that poor woman but you can’t fool me.” When we arrived at the hotel, she slapped me across the back of the head and pushed me in through the front door. “Get up to your bedroom now! Go on, up to bed and stay there! I don’t want to see your face again today! Do you hear me? Go on, get out of my sight!”

She came up to my room later and examined my back. “That was a terrible thing to do, son, you could have burnt yourself alive for God’s sake! Don’t turn out like your father, whatever else you do. We don’t need any more mad people in this house.”

When she’d left, I curled up in the bed, thankfully. On any other day, her words would have cut into me but today, they had no effect at all. I was home, safe and sound, with my mother.

The following day, she took me back up to the school again. She’d talked to me for hours the night before and I’d somehow resigned myself to the fact that there was no way out of it.

We arrived just as the bell was ringing and I went straight into the classroom with all the other children. I still felt bad about being there but the events of the previous day seemed to have broken the ice somehow.

When the bell rang at ten-thirty for the morning break, everyone poured out into the playground. I was one of the last out and as I stepped through the doorway, a group of kids was standing there, waiting for me. I tried to avoid them but they followed me across the yard and I ended up with my back against a wall with them standing around me, chanting: “Cry baby! Cry baby!”

Their leader was an overweight boy with angry eyes and short, cropped hair and, as the rest of them crowded around, he jabbed a finger in my chest. For a moment I felt close to tears again but then something inside me snapped and I lashed out and punched him in the face as hard as I could. As he fell to the ground, I threw myself on him and began pummeling him furiously, the rest of the crowd scattering in panic, shocked at his sudden demise.

A moment or two later, a teacher was dragging me off my sobbing opponent and I was hauled off to the headmistress’s office in disgrace and given a severe telling off. It was my first taste of school and from that day on, I was involved in all sorts of petty troubles.

I hated St Cuthbert’s; things were bad enough at home with my father ranting and raving all the time without being ordered around at school all day too. At the end of that first school year, on the bottom of my very first school report, Mrs. Russell scrawled the words: *Brian is very fond of fighting.*

* * *

I met Des Reagan on my second day at St Cuthbert’s. He came across to my desk and told me that the fat kid that I’d fought with had been bullying him too. Des was smaller than me, slim and wiry with pale blue eyes and blond hair that looked almost white in the sunlight. He lived with his mother a few streets away and after school, we’d go down to the beach and wander along the sands together, searching for treasure amongst the rubbish that littered the high water mark, or chasing seagulls, running along the sands after them, screaming and laughing.

Des became my best friend and I told him, if anybody ever bullied him again, I would stick up for him, but I never took him to the *Kathleen R*, she was my greatest secret and I knew that I could never share her with anybody.

Some evenings, I'd slip down to the beach by myself and walk along the sands to the black granite slopes at the end of Waterloo Road. Then, after making sure that nobody was watching, I'd climb up into the *Kathleen R*. There was always a sense of peace about the fishing boat. She was sturdy and reliable and welcoming, the heavy timber keel and solid planking of her hull, surrounding and protecting me as I lay there on the nets dreaming.

Besides the *Kathleen R*, the church was my other sanctuary. From my youngest days, the sights, sounds and smells of the Catholic faith had captured my imagination entirely. My favorite service was the Benediction and I'd sit there in awe, watching as the priest moved about the altar, trying to remember when to stand up and when to kneel down. I always sat close to the front so that I could see everything.

I'd wait for the priest to light the incense; it was the most special moment. He'd move about the altar in his brilliantly-coloured robes as the organ played in the background and then he'd kneel down with the altar boys and prepare the incense in the little silver pot and then, after what seemed like an age, there'd be a puff of smoke and he'd start chanting the prayers and swinging the incense backwards and forwards. The thick white smoke would come billowing out immediately, rising up towards the rafters like the Holy Ghost they were always talking about, as the choir broke into a hymn and we all joined in ...

*Faaaethof Our Faaaatherss Hooollyname
Weeee wiiil betrueuue tethee till death!
Faaaethof Our Faaaatherss Hooollyname,
Innnspiite of dungeonfiresword!
Innnspiite of dungeonfiresword!*

Oh, God! All I ever wanted was if they would give me a sword! I'd prove how much I loved Jesus then! I'd fight anyone for him and I knew I'd face death fearlessly in his name. I almost felt like crying sometimes with the frustration of it all. They wanted to treat me like a child but, if they only knew how brave I could be for Jesus, they'd know different then. And if any one of them didn't believe in God's love or that the Holy Roman Catholic Church was the one true faith, they deserved to get killed anyway.

Joey Brennan had told me once that he was a Protestant but my mother said he couldn't be with a name like that. But he was a friend of mine and he never talked about religious stuff or anything like that, so it didn't seem so bad. Mum used to say that he was probably a heathen but I think she was only joking.

The priest kept on swinging away with the incense, backwards and forwards, and I could hear it slapping against the silver chain with every swing, until finally, after the longest wait, the smell would arrive. A rich, powerful aroma of frankincense, so strong you could taste it, wafting down the aisles, drifting through the congregation, filling your senses with hope like a blessing from above.

I loved the Benediction. The mass was good but the Benediction was better with all the smoke and the songs about dungeons and swords and martyrs, it was more like an adventure.

* * *

Father Boyle was our local priest and every year he'd come to visit us just before Christmas. I knew my mother was going to give him some money for the poor people because I'd been there when she'd put

it in the envelope. I'd asked her could I give it to him but she wouldn't let me. "Give him as much as you want of your own money son, but don't be giving away any of mine!"

"How does he give it to the poor, mum? Does he go around and give it to them himself or does he post it to them?"

"That's a good question and one that no living creature could answer." She was giggling. "Oh, God bless you, you're like an empty dustbin, are you not? Sure you'd take anything in! Oh no, it's not as simple as that! Oh no, you see, Old Red Socks has to get his share first before anyone else. Then there's all the bishops to feed and their servants. And then there's the priests and there's hundreds of them, and then finally, you have the sheep, God bless them, standing in line waiting, starving to death."

She was laughing but I didn't like it when she made fun of holy things and I never asked her who Old Red Socks was because it didn't feel good.

Father Boyle was Irish, too and when he arrived, he and my mother sat in the front room talking about Ireland and the weather and how the hotel was doing. I was excited to see him: he said the main mass at St Cuthbert's every Sunday morning and everyone knew he was very important.

I waited there patiently until my mother asked me to make the tea, then I ran out to the kitchen to boil the water and slice the cake the way she'd told me, before taking it back in very slowly on the tray so as not to spill anything and leaving it down next to her on the table.

Father Boyle was sitting in one of the leather armchairs near the front window, talking away as my mother poured the tea. I sat next to them quietly, hoping that I would be allowed to stay. Everything seemed good at first and they both sat there, smiling and laughing, but then, after a while, things began to change.

"And so, what brings you here today, Father?" my mother asked, "You're not looking for another donation for that steeple of yours, are you?"

Father Boyle was smiling. "Well now, Mrs. O'Raleigh, I wanted to call in and see you anyway but, as it happens, we are raising money for Christmas. It's for the poor, you know, for their annual dinner."

"Do they only get dinner at Christmas time? Sure the poor souls must be famished!"

He was sitting back comfortably in the leather chair, smiling and sipping at his tea, a big slab of fruit cake on the plate next to him.

"Oh no, it's a year round thing! But of course, we do like to make sure they have a good meal on Our Lord's birthday."

"Ah, you're a grand lad, we should all be proud of you. It's always nice to have a good meal on someone's birthday. I just wonder where you are the rest of the year sometimes. The last time I saw you, you were asking for money for that steeple of yours. It would be nice if you dropped in once just to say hello, without having to come here begging all the time."

Father Boyle's smile had changed a little.

"Ah, sure you have a great sense of humor, there's no doubt about that."

"Well, you need a good sense of humor nowadays with people coming around begging for money all the time."

I was beginning to feel embarrassed and hoped she would stop.

"Ah, now Mrs. O'Raleigh, we all have to do our bit to help the poor, especially at this time of the year."

"If it's the poor you're looking for, then go no further. Sure we're as poor as church mice here ourselves. I'm not at all sure whether you should be picking up money at this house or delivering it! And to be honest, I don't feel too inclined to put any more of my hard-earned cash into that wretched steeple of yours."

"But it's not for a steeple, we don't have a steeple on our church. Like I said, we're collecting money for the poor of the parish."

But it was as if she didn't hear him and she kept going on about the steeple, even though he told her, over and over, that the money was for the poor. Finally, he was red with embarrassment.

"Ah, and now you're blushing! Sure isn't that always a sign of a guilty conscience? There's probably nothing wrong with the steeple at all!"

I was feeling sorry for him now and praying that she would just stop and give him the money but she kept on saying things to him about the steeple until eventually he got up and told her he had to go even though he hadn't finished his Christmas cake. But then, finally, just as he was about to leave, she pulled out the envelope with the money in it.

"There you are now, don't you forget that, don't you forget what you came here for." She handed him the envelope. "There you are now, that's my contribution for the new steeple and make damn sure it's on there by this time next year or there'll be no more money from this house."

"But I've told you, it's not for any steeple, it's for the poor ..."

She cut him off, shaking her head.

"Ah sure you'd tell us anything Father, and you a priest; sure I don't know what to believe now!"

He went off out the front door then, clutching the envelope in his hand, and she stood there looking after him through the small square panes of glass as he peddled his bike away off up the road.

"Well, I hope for his sake that's the hardest two pounds he'll ever have to beg for, the bloody parasite!" She was laughing. "They're all the same. Every one of them! We all know who the poor are! You'll never see one of them buggers going hungry to give a starving man his dinner! You can bet your bottom dollar on that!"

I was worried now in case Father Boyle was angry with us, but she thought it was a great joke and she went off up the hallway, laughing like mad.

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The following Sunday, I was up at 7 am; St Cuthbert's was always crowded for the morning mass and if you were late, it was difficult to get in there at all. I got a seat about halfway up the aisle so as to get into the Holy Communion queue early. The church was full and it had that smell of old incense and candles and holy water.

When things were bad at home, I used to pray every night that my father would stop drinking, but on those Sunday mornings, it felt so much more powerful to be at the mass and to speak to God directly, as it were.

When the time came, I walked forward to the altar and knelt there waiting for Father Boyle to pass along the row of worshippers. There was a flurry of movement to one side and then the murmured prayers. I didn't look, staring straight ahead fixedly, afraid of spoiling something, and then the green, red and golden robes swung into view and the hand came towards me, offering me the Holy Communion, the body and blood of Christ. I looked up, trying to catch his eye, wondering if he remembered who I was.

"*Corpus Domini nostri Jesu Christi custodiat animam tuam in vitam aeternam, Amen,*" he intoned.

It felt good when he said that to me. I didn't really know what it meant but I wished he would just look at me so I knew everything was alright about the money for the poor people and everything.

He chanted the blessing, making the sign of the cross before me in the air and then the wafer was on my tongue and he was gone on to the next person.

I stayed there for a few moments, staring up in awe at the majestic golden tabernacle standing star-like above me on the altar, and then, with the pure clean taste of the Holy Communion clinging to the roof of my mouth, the smell of the scented candles all around me, and the organ playing softly in the background, I prayed with all my heart that Jesus would help change my father.

I felt guilty though because I knew I was partly to blame. I was always breaking some commandment or other and I knew if I did that, God couldn't help me at all. I knelt there, asking for forgiveness, begging for Jesus to help us, promising to be good from then on. I swore that I would do anything in the world for him if he would only help my mother.

By the time the mass was over, I was convinced that he'd heard me. If I was good, and I would be, then the trouble between my parents would stop.

I walked out into the sunlight afterwards, filled with a great sense of hope, feeling at peace with God and the world and every living creature in it. I had been forgiven and blessed. It was the start of a new week. It was a new beginning. And then we all ran home together, Bernard, Peter and me, bursting into the house, shouting and laughing. I rushed through into the kitchen, expecting miracles to have happened already.

My mother was in there, cooking breakfast. Bacon and eggs, black pudding and white pudding, sausages and toast and marmalade and, seeing her standing there smiling, I was sure that from now on, everything was going to be alright.

We carried our plates through into the dining room. My father was already in there, reading the Sunday papers and I watched him across the table, knowing that Jesus was working in him and searching for signs of change. But he was the same as he always was after a Saturday night at the Red Lion Hotel. He didn't look up or speak, so we just sat there quietly, eating our breakfast.