

The Troubles

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Please note that much but not all of the book uses British spelling. You will see doubled letters (focussed), ou's (colour) and 're' (centre) as well as a few other differences from American spelling. Grammar, formatting, spelling, and punctuation have been preserved to reflect the raw nature of the originals many of which never went beyond "rough" draft. Other issues may have been induced during transcription. Many of the poems had multiple versions making the choice of which to include somewhat of a challenge. For some the alternate version is included.

The Troubles

RICHARD P.

NIXON



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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; wide 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.”

“Goddamned 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.”