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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Right!' Ma growls.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Why? Where are you goin'?'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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