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Breakfast on
Pluto

Patrick McCabe

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PICADOR

Breakfast on Pluto falls in a logical progression from *The Butcher Boy* and *The Dead School*, which about two Dublin schoolteachers caught in a psychological maelstrom of drugs, music and youth culture. *Breakfast on Pluto* embodies the kinetic frenzy of its predecessors through the eyes of a new kind of Irish *enfant terrible* – a sentimental yet ironic nineteen-year-old transvestite with a temper. The Troubles in Northern Ireland have pricked scores of literary imaginations throughout the years, and will no doubt continue to do so. McCabe's latest may be the most successful book yet to be born out of the violence, and with its surety of voice and stunning originality, it moves beyond the parochial Troubles novel. Where *Breakfast on Pluto* succeeds is where others have failed – by underlining the vast contradictions inherent in the Irish conflict, of brutality and kindness, horror and gaiety, conviction and apathy. With a sassy narrator clad in an ice-cream-pink mohair sweater, humming the tunes of Barry White as he sashays into a London disco-pub on the verge of exploding, is a mosaic of sound, colour and spirit. The underlying grief resonates deeply and personally, transforming what could be a literary trifle into an obsessive gift, from a man who may be one of Ireland's finest living writers.

Courtney Weaver, *New York Times Book Review*

Breakfast on Pluto was a UK chart hit for Don Partridge in 1969

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I Was a High-Class Escort Girl

Although I'm afraid I don't get too many clients these days! I can just imagine the reaction of my old acquaintances if they saw me now, sitting here in my silly old coat and headscarf – off out that door and down the Kilburn High Road with the lot of them, no doubt! Still, no point in complaining – after all, every beauty has to lose her looks sometime and if the gold-digging days of poor old darling poo poo puss are gone for ever, well then, so be it. I ain't gonna let it bother me, girls! Just give me Vic Damone, *South Pacific*, plus a yummy stack of magazines and I'll be happy, as once more I go leafing through the pages of *New Faces of the Fifties*, *Picturegoer*, *Screen Parade*, gaily mingling with the stars of long ago.

Old Mother Riley they call me around here, never passing up an opportunity to shout: 'How's about you, darlin'?' or 'What's the chance of a bit tonight then, Mrs Riley?' whenever they hear me coming in.

Quite what they would have to say if they suddenly became aware of just how many 'bits' the old girl has given away in her time, I would dearly love to know! Sometimes – it can be hard to resist, let me tell you! – I find myself on the verge of calling back: 'Why yes! But of course, boys! I'll leave the door open tonight and you can all troop in and give me a jab! Why not!'

Shouldn't be long running then, methinks! Embarrassed-out-of-their-lives, poor little innocent red-cheeked, shovel-wielding horny-handed sons of the soil of counties Sligo, Leitrim and Roscommon!

But, best that it should never come to that, for the truth is that they're all grand fellows. What benefit them, now that so many years have passed, to know the sordid, squelchy details of the life that once was lived by darling Patrick Braden – *sigh!* – sweetness pussy kit-kit, perfumed creature of the night who once the catwalks of the world did storm as flashbulbs popped and, 'Oo!' she shrieked, 'I told you, *from my best side*, darling!'

As off on the arm of Mr Dark and Broody then she trooped! Rock Solid handsome man, mysterious kind she liked. Who would bass-voiced coo: 'I love you!' and make her stomach gurgle till she'd swoon.

A Word of Advice from Dr Terence

Write it all down, Terence told me. ‘Everything?’ I said. ‘Yes,’ he said. Just as it comes to you.’

It was great, him saying that. Especially when he listened so attentively to what you read, making you feel you were his one special patient and that no matter where he was or what he was doing, all you had to do was call his name and there he’d be: ‘Well? And how’s the scribe?’

That was what he called me – the scribe! Ah! There you are! How are you today, my old friend, the scribe!’

Which made his vanishing act all the harder to bear!

You wake up one morning, call out his name as usual and what do you find? There he is – gone! as they say in Tyreelin.

I won’t pretend I wasn’t upset. I bawled for days. ‘How do you like that, then?’ I said to myself. ‘You certainly made a right idiot of yourself this time, Braden, scribbling all that rubbish and thinking it would make him stay for good!’

But I mean, there’s no harm in hoping. There was no harm in hoping, was there? That every morning you’d wake up and there he’d be – standing right in front of you, looking at you and smiling in that lovely way he was going to do for ever.

Just how beautiful that might have been, I certainly haven’t the words to describe, despite all the supposed skills I am supposed to have in that particular field! (At school Peepers Egan used to say: ‘Braden! These essays of yours – they’re absolutely wonderful! If only you’d settle down! You could be so good!’)

I don’t regret writing all this (in the end I put a name on it – *The Life and Times of Patrick Braden* original, eh?) because some of it he definitely did like – I know, because he told me. ‘This is terrific!’ he said one day and raised his bushy eyebrows over the page. ‘It really is!’ And all I could think of then was – don’t ask me why! – him putting his arm around me and saying: ‘Pussy’s mine! She’s mine and she belongs *here! With me.*’ One of his favourite pieces of all and he used to keep asking me to show it to him was the bit about Whiskers, although he knew that strictly speaking he should have been encouraging me not to call her that (after all, to him she *was* my mother), which I wouldn’t have minded because for him I’d have called the old bat anything.

The Life and Times of Patrick Braden

Chapter One

Merry Christmas, Mrs Whiskers

It was a beautiful crisp Christmas morning. All across the little village which lay nestled on the southern side of the Irish border, one could sense an air of tense but pleasurable expectancy. Already the small birdies, as if conscious of the coming mood of celebration and acceptable self-indulgence which was so much a part of the much-loved season, had begun their carefully co-ordinated invasions: their industrious beaks like so many arrowheads stiletto-jabbing the frosted gold-tops of the early-morning milk bottles. Even at this early hour, there are one or two children playing – cork guns being proudly displayed and nurses' uniforms flaunted in so many minx-like parades. In places, the snow has begun to melt but this is still a scene that any seasonal greeting card would be more than proud to play host to. A door closes quietly and the first Mass-goer makes her way determinedly through the streets, her Missal clutched tightly and her knitted cap pulled firmly about her ears. Through a gap in the clouds comes the peal of a church bell. Already, the beloved pastor of this parish, Father Bernard McIvor, will be busying himself inside his sacristy. Donning the starched vestments which, it would later be the contention of ill-formed psychiatrists, were partly responsible for his son's attraction to the airy appareil of the opposite sex.

For him, in many ways, these Christmasses have lost their meaning. Once upon a time, as a young curate, he remembered, he would have held his congregation in thrall with tales of yuletides long ago and of the special meaning the season had for all Christians throughout the world. His homily topped off, as a plum pud with a sprig of holly, with one of his truly awe-inspiring renditions of 'The Holy City' or perhaps 'O Holy Night', for which he was renowned throughout the length and breadth of the county. Or had been, once upon a time. But sadly those days were no more. When asked why he no longer sang in the church on Christmas morning, his eyes would appear to glaze over and he would regard his inquisitor with an expression of mystification almost as if the reasons were far beyond him too. Which they weren't, of course, for as many of his parishioners knew, despite rarely giving voice to it in public, the what might be termed: *Change in Father Bernard* dated back to a single 1950s morning in the year 1955 and to no other – the morning he inserted his excitable pee pee into the vagina of a woman who was so beautiful she looked not unlike Mitzi Gaynor the well-known film star. And then arranged for her to go to London so that there would be no dreadful scandal. 'Dear, dear. I wonder what is wrong with Father Bernard,' his parishioners would say, adding: 'He's not the man he was at all.'

It would have been nice, of course, if at any time in the intervening years – particularly at Christmas – he had arrived down to the Braden household with a little present for his son. Which he didn't, of course, with the result that Yuletide celebrations in that particular establishment consisted

of one plate of Brussels sprouts, a midget of a turkey and God knows how many half-human children growling and tearing at it like wild animals. And, of course, 'Mummy' sitting puffing Players in the corner, shouting: 'Quit youser fucking fighting!' and 'Stop tearing the arse out of that turkey!' as Santa jingle-belled all the way to the North Pole. What? On the television? Are you out of your mind? Whiskers Braden couldn't afford to buy televisions! She had her ciggies and bottles of stout to purchase! Any jingle-belling there was took place on the beat-up old wireless on the mantelpiece above our dazzling array of wee-wee-stenching undies.

But nevertheless all's well that ends well and now that she's suitably drunk she decides to pull the only cracker available, triumphantly producing it from her handbag and yowling: 'Come on over here and pull this fucking cracker till we get this fucking Christmas finished with!' as, happy family that we are, like a snapshot from the past, we all come crowding around, happy bright-eyed bastards all – Wee Tony, Hughie, Peter, Josie, Caroline and snot-trailing Little Ba, who for such a magnificent display of domestic harmony are hereby presented unopposed with the Patrick Braden ALL-IRELAND FUNCTIONAL FAMILY OF THE CENTURY AWARD! So congratulations, Hairy Ma and all your little out-of-wedlock kids!

Chapter Two

Patrick Braden, Aged 13 — The Trouble Begins in Earnest!

Peepers Egan, the English teacher and acting headmaster, was on the verge of losing his mind as he paced the floor of Class 2A, St Martin's Secondary School, Tyreelin, intermittently smacking the sheaf of papers with the back of his weatherbeaten hand as he addressed his hangdog pupil: 'How dare you!' he croaked perplexedly. 'How dare you submit the like of this to me, Braden! When I said it would please me if you would develop your literary skills, I did not – I repeat *not!* (his croak quite high-pitched now) mean *this!*'

It was unfortunate that I had now learned the truth once and for all about my clerical parentage, for I really was becoming quite obsessed with it. Hence the persistently colourful titles of my submitted essays, e.g. 'Father Stalk Sticks It In' and 'Father Bernard Rides Again!'

It was inevitable, of course, on foot of this, that poor old Peepers would have to come down and visit Hairy Ma. It was his duty, after all, and, I daresay, the execution of which probably came close to putting the poor man in his grave. 'You see, Mrs Braden,' was all you could hear as he twisted and turned in his chair, 'I have to be seen to do something . . . it's a direct challenge to our authority and slur on the character of . . .'

'Daddy!' I almost squeaked.

But didn't – keeping my own counsel very impressively indeed right until the very end when Peepers said: 'You won't do it again, will you, Patrick? You'll try and stop this anti-social behaviour. You'll try and fit in, won't you?' when I replied: 'Oh, no. I haven't the slightest intention of stopping it, Peeps, or trying to fit in either!'

It was, in fact, impertinent of me to call him that. 'Peeps,' I mean. Because he *was* my teacher and I liked him and should have shown him more respect. An appraisal of the situation with which Hairy hastily concurred, out of nowhere landing a fat-fingered thump on my jaw, squealing: 'Don't talk like that to the Master! He's a cur! From the day and hour I took him in off the street, Mr Egan, a cur!'

Understandably, Peeps didn't want to get involved any further for he'd gotten himself into such a state about everything already that I think all he wanted to do was charge off to the Tyreelin Arms and have himself a few dozen whiskies.

Chapter Three

In Flagrante Delicto, 7.03 p.m., Sept 13, 1968

I was absolutely sure I was safe, you see, I really was, having cocked my ear to the bedroom door for at least five minutes and then at last heard them squawk: ‘Hello, Patrick! Patrick – yoo hoo! Are you up there at your books? Me and Caroline are off to Benediction now!’ before trooping off down the hall and closing the front door behind them. ‘Gone for at least an hour!’ I cried, in the grip of a delightful excitement. But no! Hardly twenty minutes later – the pair of them back, mooching about in the kitchen looking for a prayerbook or something they’d left behind. None of which I was aware of, of course, being much too busy dabbing on Whiskers’ lipstick (Cutex Coral Pink, would you believe!) and saying: ‘Hello, Patricia!’ into the mirror and pretending I was dancing with Efrem Zimbalist Junior!

Whom I didn’t really know, of course, except that I’d seen him in *Modern Screen* once or twice and really liked the look of him – thought the name quite fab too, may I add! And was more than glad to say: ‘Oh yes!’ when he husky-groaned: ‘Like to dance then, sweet Patricia?’

As round and round we twirled to my favourite song: ‘Son of a Preacher Man’ – what else, darling, with Efrem crooning, ‘The only one who could ever teach me was the—’ at exactly the same moment as the door came bursting in (they must have heard me ‘la-la-laa-ing’!) and who’s there only – yes! – Caroline going: ‘My dress! He’s wearing my favourite dress!’ and putting on quite a performance, I have to say – (Watch out, Efrem! This is Oscar material we’re dealing with here!) – as Whiskers gets a grip of me and starts yowling and – *slapping* me, would you believe! – saying that this is it, this is definitely the end – and then, can you believe it, collapsing hopelessly into tears!

Chapter Four

Mrs O' Hare's Smalls

A situation which wasn't helped, I admit it, and it's not something I'm proud of, by my promising them I would never do it again because they were Caroline's private things and I had no business taking them, and then sneaking off a few days later and stealing Mrs O'Hare's smalls off the washing line, pretending this time that I was dancing with Lorne Greene out of *Bonanza*! Why him, don't ask me, whether it was the distinguished grey hair or what I don't know, all I know is that someone had seen me climbing over the fence into her garden and next thing there's O'Hare in the kitchen waving her fists and shouting about the guards. It was stupid, of course – I mean you can imagine what I looked like in those voluminous monstrosities! (O'Hare was huge!) But I was so frustrated – dying to dance with Efrem so much that I couldn't get it out of my mind!

Predictably enough, it didn't take long for word to get around the town and all you could hear going up the street was: 'Ooh! Cheeky!' and 'Lovely boy!' It was pointless explaining to them that I wasn't all that interested in sex and that all I wanted was for Lorne or Efrem to say to me: You see this spread? It's all yours. Your name's going on the door, Patrick! It's all yours from now on!

Some nights I'd lie there thinking about that and then see – don't ask me why! – Caroline and Whiskers standing outside in the rain, drenched, asking: 'Can we come in?'

Whereupon I'd chuckle a bit and shrug as I looked at them and said: 'Sorry, folks! Closed, I'm afraid!'

Well, poor old Whiskers! Would she be furious about that or what!

Chapter Five

Welcome to Juke Box Jury!

Certain other people, however, would be admitted straight away to my salubrious abode, and in would stomp to marvel: ‘Boy, Braden! What a place!’ as I cried out: ‘Hellay, dahlings! To my castle, welcome, old friends Irwin Kerr and Charlie!’ continuing to make up more posh rubbish for them to join in with – why? Because that was the way we went on and always had. For as long as I could remember they’d been calling down to Rat Trap Mansions, annoying the arse off Whiskers asking he could I come out to play cowboys and war. I met Irwin first when he was in mourning for his brother who was eaten in the Congo by Balubas. He was in floods of tears coming across the square, choking ‘Bastards! Fucking bastards!’ and saying every one of them would have to die. Except that only three days later, his brother arrived back from Africa with an ebony elephant for everyone in the street and not a bother on him from the day he’d gone off with his kit bag. ‘He was in a fight but . . .’ Irwin said as we headed off the next day to our hut, which was the headquarters of the famous Kane Gang. ‘Even though I’m a girl, I have to be in charge,’ Charlie said. ‘Otherwise you can forget about the whole thing.’

Me and Irwin didn’t care who was leader. All we wanted to do was read her comics and listen to the records she played on the battery-operated record player her sister brought home from England. We’d just sit there on the grass, clicking our fingers and going: ‘Fantastic! Fab! It’s just fab, baby!’

That was how the international modelling shows started. Charlie would bring out her mother’s clothes and start showing all these magnificent creations to fashion-buyers and pop-star managers from all over the world. ‘What do you think?’ she’d say, and I’d frown and cradle my chin as I said: ‘Oo! Magnifique!’ or ‘No! I do not like it!’ in the same French accent.

The Juke Box Jury Shows just grew out of that, I suppose, and before long there was one every day. As soon as we got out of school, we’d race off out to the hut and get our gear on and Charlie would go behind the plank which was the juke box jury counter and announce: ‘Ladies and gentlemen! You’re welcome to Juke Box Jury!’

In the beginning, she did some singing too but after a while I did most of it because Irwin said he was too shy and so there I’d be, going: ‘You know you make me wanna shout!’ or ‘Stop! In the name of love!’ by the Supremes as Charlie held up her cards and cried, like the woman on the telly: ‘I’ll give it foive!’ as Irwin shouted: ‘It’s bollocks It’s a load of bollocks! Look at Braden the eejit dressed up as a woman!’

Which I rarely was, to be honest with you – although not from lack of desire! – and made do mostly with a pearl necklace or one of Charlie’s mother’s blouses. Still – it was better than nothing! And sometimes she’d bring out a perfume spray to squirt all around the hut and make it smell just

fabulous! ‘Nothing like perfume for taking all your cares away!’ I’d say and do a twirl. ‘If this doesn’t stop,’ Irwin said, ‘I’m quitting the gang!’ but Charlie said: ‘Oh pipe down, why don’t you,’ and he did, shuffling off and sticking up two fingers.

It wasn’t long after that anyway that we started the wars as well and that kept him happy, there wasn’t a word out of him about the perfume and the international modelling as long as we promised to keep doing the wars. Which I didn’t mind in the slightest, especially as Charlie clicked her heels and went: ‘Compan-ee-tenshun!’ I loved that, for some reason – her being the boss! As off we’d march behind her, with Irwin looking all around him for British soldiers to kill and shout ‘Die dog!’ at, as he stuck his bayonet in their necks.

How all that started was that 1966 was the jubilee commemoration of the 1916 rising and no matter where you went in Tyreelin, everyone was waving a tricoloured flag or singing an Irish ballad. Every day there was a different politician in the town and in the pubs at night they were all talking about getting into a lorry and driving across the border to take over the north.

To tell you the truth, we didn’t care that much for the wars in the end. But Irwin – he was going clean mad over them! He had even taken to wearing his James Connolly rebel hat around the town and going off over the fields on his own to practise drilling. To keep him happy, we kept on saying the wars were great and then running off back to the hut to put on the Beatles and go absolutely mad as we clicked our fingers and jived in and out among the sheep and cows, singing: ‘Try to see it my way! Don’t you see it my way! I have to keep on talking till I can’t go on! We can work it out! We can work it out!’ until we couldn’t do any more and just lay down there holding hands and staring up at the sky. And which we kept on doing, and had no intention of stopping, right through secondary school and everything!

Chapter Six

Most Popular Adolescent Boy

Which at times must have been difficult for Charlie, for let's face it, what with the famous 'smalls' and other similar episodes which I shan't bother going into here, as time went on, it became abundantly clear that I wasn't exactly growing up to become Mr 'Most Popular Adolescent Boy' around the town! Not that it seemed to bother her, mind you! 'Oh, who cares, Braden!' she said. 'The sooner they blow this kip up and be done with it, the better!'

Something that – now that we were a bit older and had started noticing these things – didn't look like it was going to take very long at all, for every time you picked up a paper, someone else had been shot or maimed for life. Of no consequence to me, of course, for, as I said to Charlie, I really wouldn't be hanging around for very much longer. 'You're fucking right,' she said. 'And as soon as I get my exams, I'm gone too!'

Charlie was doing her Inter Cert now and I was in my final year at St Fucky Good-For-Nothing's. Her and Irwin were the only people I could be remotely bothered with. 'You're out of your mind!' Irwin said. 'Breaking into shops to steal cosmetics! You're a Head-the-Bail, Braden!'

'Indeed,' I said. 'No doubt your Provisional IRA friends will be around to sort me out!'

'Don't worry your head about the Provies!' he said. 'The Provisional IRA have a lot more to do than be bothered with dying-looking bastards the likes of you, Braden!'

Chapter Seven

A Real Soldier and a Work of Art Delivered

Quite how Irwin ever managed to get around to conceiving of himself as a *real* soldier really must be classified amongst the great unsolved mysteries of our time, for the silly little idiot wouldn't have been able to shoot a crow! But now, of course, nothing could stop him, it being 1971 and with the balloon in Northern Ireland having gone up in earnest, it was his bounden duty and his chance at last *real* soldier to become, to take up arms and: 'Tuck anyone who gets in the way!' He was hilarious when he got started!

I, of course, was much too preoccupied with my own personal revolution to be bothered with anything so trivial. As my dearest father was soon to discover when, having made my decision to once and for all take my leave of sweet Tyreelin, I decided to pop in his letterbox one of my more recent (and somewhat obsessive there is no doubt!) exhaustively crafted compositions!

Chapter Eight

Breakfast is Served

‘Ah, God bless us, it’s yourself!’ remarked randy old Father Bernard on a grand soft day in February as he opened the door to reveal the young girl who bore a startling resemblance to a very well-known film star standing on the front step of his residence. ‘It is indeed,’ replied the young girl. Who, on account of her coming to work for the local parish priest whose dicky she knew would be only, given the slightest encouragement, too eager to start stirring and getting up to mischief, had gone out of her way to take precautions and camouflage herself – with the result that she looked just like any old ordinary priest’s housekeeper you might see shuffling along the road with her shopping basket or ferrying a plate of rashers and eggs across the floor to her employer. And most definitely *not* a perfume-sprayed vision called Mitzi Gaynor with a head of gorgeous bubble-cut curls that would make any man’s privates go – *sprong!* – never mind that of a poor deprived clergyman!

In spite of her inexperience, the clergyman’s new employee found herself to be quite relaxed about the position she was about to take up, her situation rendered much less intimidating than it might have been because of the fact that in those times, almost as if there was a church-employed quartermaster somewhere to whom one could apply for the standard uniform, one had no difficulty whatsoever in acquiring a washed-out,¹ pale blue housecoat with a ringpull zip, a pair of tan stockings the colour of tea kept in the cup for twenty years or thereabouts and an old hairnet which when you squashed your hair under it made it look like irregular handfuls of rabbit’s droppings. All of which served the purpose for which it was intended – of saying to the mickies of all those whose duty it was to bend the knee and wear black serge: ‘No mickies today! Off with you and say your prayers for no tiddler standing for girls like these!’ Callous as it might now sound, inserting one’s wee man into these rasher-frying ladies – well, it simply wasn’t on! You couldn’t do it, dearies! ‘Go in!’ you’d cry to Peter but I ask you – could you do it?

Let us consider for a moment that melancholy sound which, at crucial moments in the world of animated cartoons is often to be heard: after so much labour and literally lakes of perspiration, all the efforts of Tom the weebegone pussycat have all but come to naught – no, *have* in fact, and there he is his entire body corrugated from head to toe, bludgeoned, his tattered soul in disarray – only – despite the fact that he thinks nothing further of an adverse nature can possibly befall him – to find that a large anvil has appeared above him, making its way towards him at great speed, all the better his poor bewildered head to flatten. What is that sound upon which we now attend, appropriate to this dicky downward-going moment so familiar to housekeeper-retaining clerics all across the land? Why, three groaning notes upon a cello played – *waugh! waugh! waugh!* – as flump goes Mr Prawn the dicky-doodle man!

Or so perhaps was hoped! But what if this is not the case and inside those black pants a riot is about to start? No! It simply cannot be! Mickey is devious, Mickey is naughty, but drab old housecoats, shuffly slippers and stockings of cold tea must surely ensure he minds his manners and stays where he belongs.

Which is exactly what our hero thinks. And goes on thinking it right through his breakfast, the contents of which he is consuming with great gusto, pausing intermittently to magnanimously observe: 'God, but them's great sausages altogether!' and 'I'd do jail for another slice of that fried bread!', thinking to himself all the while just how lucky he is to have found a replacement as good as this for Mrs McGlynn who had become indisposed at such short notice. 'Ah, Mrs McGlynn,' said Father Ben, 'God love her! Slipped and fell outside Pat McCrudden's gate!' as he advances upon a crispy rasher with his fork, smiling away contentedly to himself.

His new housekeeper is thrilled by all this of course! As indeed, why wouldn't she be? After all – this extra money will be buying not only Perry Como's latest record but also perhaps – if Mrs McGlynn ('God forgive me!' she whispers softly.) stays out sick for long enough – the complete, long-playing soundtrack of *South Pacific*! You could hardly believe that in an ordinary, unspectacular presbytery in a small village in Ireland that no one had ever heard of, that the sun could rise and singing angels practically fill the air when someone thinks of such a little thing, but in that moment, that is almost what did happen: on her first morning in his kitchen, Father Bernard McIvor's new housekeeper flapping her arms and in her mind skipping along the sand with a straw hat on her head and Rosanno Brazzi calling after her: 'Wait for me! Wait for me, you silly girl!'

What might have happened if she had not leaned, for no reason other than to fork some more rashers onto Father Bernard's plate – thereby permitting her housecoat and skirt to ride up just a little, not a lot, but just enough – must remain forever in the realm of conjecture. Was she herself aware of the fast-moving developments occasioned by this oversight on her part – the metal suspender of a white girdle gleaming in the gritty sunlight – why, of course she was! Which was why she remarked: 'Oops! My skirt and housecoat are riding up! Better abort this task at once or we could have an explosive clergyman filling the air with pent-up sexual energy thanks to God knows how many years abstinence!'

O yes – but of course she said that! I mean – what else would you expect? Because, like Father Bernard, thwacking penises and salty sweatbeads running down your face were never off her mind! Well, excuse me, Father, but don't make me laugh – please don't make me fucking laugh – you know. For that sort of thing she doesn't think, actually. That sort of thing she doesn't say. She doesn't say because she doesn't care. She doesn't fucking care, you see!

Rosanno say: 'Darling?' and kiss her full on the lips? Of course! Frank Sinatra in a nightclub tilt his hat and croon to her alone? Yes! And yes a million times! But trembling, veined stalks so invasive, angry? I really do not think so, Father! I really do not fucking think so!

But to Father Stalk – as he shall thenceforth be known – such considerations were immensely academic, of course. As Mr Mickey in his fury now reminded him. Tick tick goes time bomb in the parlour. 'Oo!' he cries – old Mick Micks – 'would you look at that! Not often you see a foot of thigh so creamy in this place we call the presbytery, is it, Father? It certainly is not! By golly! Is this a surprise or what!'

As indeed it was and could not be denied. But nothing – absolutely nothing – when compared to the one experienced by the merrily-humming help in the housecoat when, through the air, out of the corner of her eye, she perceived what she took to be a flying man: (*Newsflash! Priest grows wings in latest miracle!*) and was about to giggle: 'Gosh, Father! How did you do that!', when she found herself enveloped by her own skirts in the manner of a parachutist who has just effected one of the most unsuccessful jumps in the history of aviation. At first, she really was one hundred per cent certain that

it was a joke (albeit, it has to be admitted, one a little more daring and outre than one might expect from the store of Father Ben, who, as a rule, contented himself with stories along the lines of ‘Peanut at Confession’ – in which the confessor asks the penitent boy: ‘And did you throw peanuts in the river too?’, only to receive the side-splittingly hilarious reply: ‘No, Father, I *am* Peanuts!’ (It was one of his favourite stories and he rarely missed an opportunity to tell it when he and his colleagues were relaxing at conferences and so forth.) But – she thought it a joke nonetheless! Which made her go: ‘Oh, now, Father!’ and ‘Eek!’ and ‘Oops! That hurt!’ until all of a sudden she cried: ‘Ow! I’m being split in two!’, and there was so much squirty stuff all down her she thought that maybe Father Ben was playing more games – squidgies with the Fairy Liquid washing-up bottle that she’d often seen the kiddies doing. It was only when he fell back across the room with a Hallowe’en mask on him that she really became confused, thinking to herself: ‘But it’s not Hallowe’en!’ How long it was before she realized that it was in fact her employer’s actual face she was looking at – and not a whey-coloured Egyptian mummy-type papier mâché affair – it is impossible to say but she eventually did, realizing too that the Fairy Liquid – it wasn’t Fairy Liquid at all! And that thing – that glaring red thing with its malevolent eye – what was that?

You see, in those days, girls didn’t really have any experience of boys and their electric little tootling flutes! To be perfectly honest, I don’t think they even knew they had them. To them, what was between a boy’s legs was the little snail-type fellow your brothers had. Not an insatiable, unreasonable trunk of a thing that reminded you of some illogical version of the song that you heard regularly on the radio, except now going:

It was a one-eyed, one-horned flying purple weenie-poker
One-eyed one-horned flying purple weenie-poker!

instead of the correct words. And who would obviously stop at nothing now until he had you destroyed with sticky stabs and practically broken you in two into the bargain! All she could think of as she lay there on the table with the small moist map forming on the fabric of her housecoat was: ‘Rosanno wouldn’t do it!’ and ‘Neither would Vic Damone!’ (Whom she also loved.)

All of which made her break down in tears – and is it any surprise! Why, it was as if into the spoon of a ballista she’d been placed and unto the outer reaches of space propelled!

Are you aware, dearest Papa, that did from nothing spring me – but mysteriously has forgotten! – that a song telling of all this once was sung, echoing out across the birdcalling day as beneath the sky once more we did entwine, a girl called Charlie Kane and me? ‘Go anywhere,’ we sang, Daddy, ‘go anywhere without leaving your chair/and let your thoughts run free/ Living within all the dreams you can spin/ There is so much to see/ We’ll visit the stars and journey to Mars/ Finding our breakfast on Pluto!’

It’s a beautiful song, isn’t it, Father? You could be a dandelion seed floating out across with the world when you hear a song like that.

Do you think that was what she was as she laughed all the way out there on her own, Daddy? A dandelion seed in a happy childhood song?

No – you’re right, daddy – she wasn’t.

And all because of you! All because of naughty Papa who should never have left *his* chair to do his naughty wandering! Isn’t that so, Daddy? Don’t you think that’s true, when you think about it – *Father-of-the Year*?

Chapter Nine

Ladies and Gentlemen — Mr Dummy Teat!

I know it's not nice – or healthy, either, maybe! – wanting so badly to see Daddy's face when he opened those elaborate letters of mine (Yes! There were others! Quite a prolific author I turned out to be, Peeps!) but I just couldn't help it. Whether or not he had words with Hairy I don't know but after having furnished his postbox with a series of blistering specials ('Sex Mad Sky Pilot!' 'Fornicator', 'The Adventures Of Father Benny Rape!', etc.) I decided it was time once and for all to vacate Rat Trap Mansions.

Well – can you believe it! No sooner have I said, 'I'm going,' than Caroline and Whiskers are on top of me, pulling at my jacket and going: 'You can't! You can't!', doing their damndest to get me to reconsider, after spending years threatening to turf me out themselves! 'Please, Paddy!' was all you could hear out of Caroline, 'What will you do – where will you go?' and Hairy shouting: 'Let him go! Let him go to hell! What do we care! We're better off without him!', and then changing her mind and offering to be nicer to me – and even give me money! (Which of course I had been entitled to all along, considering the amount the government and, as it transpired, on the quiet, old Father Stalk, had been giving her.) And was probably the only reason she wanted me to stay at all!

In the end, anyway, none of it made any difference in the wide world as off I went with my little bag, my coat thrown across my shoulders, strolling along the midge-ridden country roads on the way to Scotsfield, the next nearest town, with my thumb stuck out, although not caring a damn whether or not a car stopped now or in ten days' time! I was free! 'Birds of the air – as free as you!' I chirped and burst into a song by Gilbert O'Sullivan. Why? Don't ask me! Just as – *screech!* – I couldn't believe it when a Merc pulls up beside me and who is there as the door swings open but the one and only, ladies and gentlemen – His Eminence Mr Dummy Teat! My darling Married Politician Man!

What I didn't know, of course, was that no sooner than I'd left the house, Whiskers had gone off down to the police station to get the guards out after me, who, if they had found me and saw what I was at now, making eyes at good old Dummy in the front seat of his car, would have had more than plenty to say about it! Not that I cared what they had, for now my journey had begun and I could tell by Dummy as he hungrily chewed his bottom lip that he, for one, about that would have no complaints to lodge!

The great thing about old Dummy was that with him you just didn't know what to expect. All you could say with any degree of certainty was that at any hour of the day or night, that old tootling stick he had in his trousers would always be ready for action. 'Oh, man, dear, he's at it again!' he'd say, and you'd have to, as he said – 'Put him out of his misery!' Yes, I will make no bones about it, post Leaving Certificate in the bomb-exploding year of 1971, I was more than content to be the regular

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