

St Joseph's Industrial School,
Tralee, Co. Kerry,
18 August 1959

We were assembled in the refectory after breakfast and told that the Reverend Mother wanted to talk to each of us individually. By the time it was my turn to be brought into her office I had watched a stream of boys come out crying and distressed. Gazing coldly at me, the Reverend Mother informed me that, because I had no parents and was an orphan, I was to be transferred to St Joseph's Industrial School in Tralee, County Kerry.

I made no response, determined to show her no tears nor signs of weakness, and left her office pondering what the word 'parents' meant, along with my new official label of 'orphan'. The Reverend Mother showed us on a map where Kerry was in relation to Dublin. It seemed a long way away and we would have to get there by train, which delighted some of the boys.

On the appointed day of departure we were lined up in the driveway of St Philomena's for an inspection by our new minders. I was shocked when I saw two big men dressed in black, walking towards us. They looked like

priests, but the Reverend Mother introduced them as Christian Brothers. They differed only in the size of their dog collars, which were half the size of a priest's collar. The lead Brother appeared very businesslike and confident as he stood next to the Reverend Mother. They looked like giants to me and immediately struck terror into the hearts of us boys. The lead Brother introduced himself as Brother Price, telling us we were to call him 'sir' at all times.

He was a big man with piercing eyes who was obviously used to giving orders and having them obeyed instantly. Passing up and down the two rows of boys he peered at us in quite a menacing fashion. If it was his intention to frighten and instil the fear of God in all assembled, he achieved his goal. When he passed me I diverted my eyes towards my shoes. After a few words with the Reverend Mother he approached me and asked my name.

'Michael Clemenger,' I replied nervously without daring to look up.

'Very well, Michael, I am Brother Price. Can you repeat it for me, Michael?'

'Brother Price, sir.'

With that he touched my face with his fingers and half smiled as I recoiled from him. I was filled with fear and felt

distinctly uncomfortable especially as he had not asked any other boy a single question.

With a wave of his hand a large bus drove up the avenue and Brother Price told us to say our goodbyes. Most of the boys were crying; some were hugged by the nuns who did their best to reassure them. For myself I made no attempt to show any emotion. I did notice, however, Brother Price talking very intently to the Reverend Mother and looking directly at me. A large brown envelope and some letters were handed over to him, which he passed on to the other Brother. As our names were called we got on the bus. Mine was called out last. The Reverend Mother ran her fingers through my hair as I made my way up the steps. I ignored her and refused to look back. On the way to the station, Brother Price, in a loud voice, warned us against running up and down the train or talking to strangers. We were to be quiet and behave ourselves. Throughout the commotion the other Brother said nothing.

At the platform a conductor showed us onto the train. We had a carriage to ourselves. Brother Price pulled me aside and told me to wait. When everybody else was seated he sat down and placed me firmly on his knee, holding me very close to him, in a way that I had never experienced

before. Nervously I looked out of the carriage window. He never let go of me once throughout the entire journey. His preoccupation with me, which made me a little uncomfortable, caused him to ignore the other boys tearing up and down the train, shouting at the tops of their voices and throwing pennies out of the windows. They had a great time all the way to Kerry while I sat on Brother Price's knee feeling miserable. Occasionally the other Brother would reprimand the other boys but they paid no attention.

Eventually, in the late afternoon, the train arrived in Tralee. The other passengers hurried off the train in different directions. Taxis brought us from the railway station to St Joseph's. Nothing could have prepared me for the shock and panic I felt when I first laid eyes on the school. It was a grim sight. The building looked like a castle with a million windows, and was surrounded by a very high wall and lots of trees. I thought to myself that I must have done something very bad to end up here. You could almost smell the fear in the boys when the taxis pulled up outside the door. Nobody was laughing now as we nervously got out of the cars. My feet didn't touch the ground, however, as I found myself suddenly sitting on the

shoulders of Brother Price.

We were met by an older Brother who was the superior of the school. He was smiling and spoke pleasantly to us. On seeing him, Brother Price took me off his shoulders and let me stand on my own two feet. It was good to be free of him, if only for a while. We were brought to the refectory, a large, spacious room with lots of tables and chairs, where tea and bread was served to us. I ate mine very quickly and was surprised to be given a second portion from Brother Price. There was no such thing as seconds in St Philomena's, or at St Joseph's either as it transpired.

During the tea, four or five other Brothers came past, eyeing us up. One Brother in particular seemed to cause a stir in Brother Price. I sensed hostility between them. This Brother introduced himself to me as Brother Roberts. He was older than Brother Price, walked slowly, was slightly bent over, but he had a winning smile. I didn't feel afraid of him at that moment. He asked me my name.

'Michael Clemenger, sir.'

'That's a lovely name.'

I don't remember what else he said, but his being near me made Brother Price very uncomfortable indeed, which

pleased me. They did not speak to one another, but both sat close to me. I alternated between smiling at Brother Roberts and looking anxiously at Brother Price.

When tea was finished Brother Roberts gently brushed my face with his hands and said that he would see me later. We were lined up again and led out to the playground, where a blast of noise overwhelmed me. Its force was such that I instinctively clung to Brother Price's knee. This seemed to please him and he rubbed the back of my neck. Silencing the noise immediately with a click of his fingers, he called one of the bigger boys. The boy, who was about fifteen years old, looked frightened. It seemed that Brother Price was charging him to take very good care of me or he would beat the bejusus out of him. Before leaving the yard Brother Price lifted me off my feet, swinging me around for a few giddy seconds. Then he handed me over to this boy and was gone.

Sitting on the steps in the playground my minder asked me my name.

'Michael Clemenger.'

'That's a long name. The Brothers will have trouble trying to call out that name in class.'

He told me that Brother Price mainly ran the school and

was in charge of discipline. He also told me that all the boys were afraid of him.

‘Brother Price would skin you alive if you got on the wrong side of him. You’re lucky that he likes you. No one will dare touch you when he’s around.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Don’t worry, you’ll find out soon enough.’

I asked him how many boys were in St Joseph’s.

‘Hundreds! We have to stay here until we are sixteen years old, then we can leave and the Brothers can’t stop us. I’m nearly sixteen so I’ll be leaving soon meself. Boys here are called “Monoboy”. “Mono” is short for “monastery”, and that’s what you’ll be known as.’

I asked him what an orphan was and why orphans only came to St Joseph’s.

‘An orphan is a boy who has no parents. I have parents though, with lots of brothers and sisters. It’s just that my mam and dad couldn’t manage us all. Have you brothers or sisters?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘That’s all right; you must be an orphan then. How old are you?’

‘I think I’m nearly nine, but I’m not sure.’

‘Well you’ll be here until you are sixteen anyway. So

you'll have plenty of time to get to know what Brother Price is really like. You won't like it, but don't ever say that I said that.'

I asked him what Brother Roberts was like.

'Fuck me, have you met him already?'

'Yes, I met him in the refectory having tea.'

'Did he say anything to you?'

'He asked me my name and touched my face with his hands.'

'Did Brother Price see him doing that to you?'

'Yes, and he seemed a bit angry too.'

'You're in a bit of trouble so.'

Over the next few weeks my minder was more forthcoming.

'If both of them like you at the same time, you're fucked, that's all I'm saying. Never, ever, ever let either of them know which one you like best.'

He whispered this to me, seemingly afraid that some of the other boys might overhear what he was talking about. What was earth did he mean by this? I had only known these two men for such a short while so how could I be so important to them already? Nothing like this had happened with the nuns, I had been nobody's favourite

there. I must have looked terrified because he shrugged and held up his hands to appease me.

‘Look, all I know for definite is that if anything happens to you, I’ll be killed by Brother Price.’

I nodded uncertainly. He tried again.

‘You know that Brother Price has put his eye on you, don’t you, the way he swung you around on your first evening here? That means you’re special; you’ll find that out for yourself in good time. Remember now: never ever tell him a word that I’ve told you. Will you promise me, Michael? Please, I’m serious.’

I heard the anxiety in his voice so I fervently promised not to repeat a word, even though I didn’t really understand what he was talking about.

Settling In

Initially the regime at St Joseph’s was very difficult to get used to. The Brothers ruled with a rod of iron, or more precisely, with a leather strap. Almost from the outset there was a very liberal use of the strap for the most minor infringements of the rules. Boys were beaten severely and in some cases within inches of their lives. Fear hung in the

air like smog, and laughter was seldom heard.

Boys were placed in dormitories in terms of age. Being eight years old I ended up in the lower dormitory, on the ground floor, near the Brothers’ private entrance to the monastery. In bed at night, I could hear the occasional car that travelled along the main road, just outside the big wall. The lower dormitory had approximately a hundred beds in it. The beds were three deep from front to back, stretching from one end of the dormitory to the other. There was also a row of beds placed against the side walls, on either side of the exit that led to the washroom and toilets at the top of the stairs.

My bed was number fifty-two. (Much later I discovered that I had been assigned that bed on the specific instructions of Brother Price.) It was right beside the door that led directly into the Brothers’ private quarters. To the right of that door was the refectory where we had our meals.

Brother Murphy was in charge of that lower dormitory. He and I took an instant dislike to one another. He was a Kerry man with absolutely no sense of humour. His demeanour was always sour and the boys easily annoyed him. I was fascinated by his withered left ear. His response to the most minor of irritations was the wielding of the strap

that he wore on his left hip as if it was a gun. He strutted about the place trying to instil fear into us boys, with the occasional glance at a nearby mirror as if to check out his own toughness. While I recognised the potential danger I always considered him to be a bit of a clown. He was a lightweight posing as if he had gravitas and he was certainly no Brother Price. When giving out the weekly changes of clothes he always gave me the ugliest, tightest fitting clothes. More often than not Brother Price would bring me back to the clothes room to find more suitable items for me to wear. It humiliated Brother Murphy to have to hand over the keys of the clothes room.

Everybody knew I was Brother Price's 'special pet' and gave me a wide berth. He looked in on me in the lower dormitory most nights, deliberately passing by my bed and making some comment. I didn't read anything into it at first but after a time I wished that he wouldn't do it because it made relations with Brother Murphy very unpleasant. Another boy asked me one night why Brother Price always passed by my bed. I had no answer.

Trouble blew up for me quite unexpectedly one Sunday morning at Mass, of all places, when Brother Price caught me smiling at Brother Roberts on my way back from

receiving Communion. He glared at me, full of rage. In my young ignorance I didn't really think much of it. That afternoon, however, he was on yard duty and everybody could see that he was as mad as hell with me.

'That's it Michael, he has it in for you. He's going to beat the shite out of you. Watch out now,' warned one of the senior boys.

I couldn't understand why smiling at Brother Roberts was such a big deal. It certainly didn't occur to me that Brother Price might be inflamed with jealousy. That evening I was waiting in line with the other boys; we were going into the hall to see a film. Brother Price pounced, pulled me roughly aside in full view of everyone. He barked at me to go to the dormitory and wait for him there.

I was quite annoyed with him for embarrassing me, but then, when he appeared in the dormitory, a few minutes later, my irritation was replaced by fear. His face was white with rage and I thought that he was going to beat the day-lights out of me. Instead he told me to undress and get into bed. I thought it was strange as it was still bright. When I got under the covers he gave me a sharp slap across the face with the palm of his hand. I was stunned and started to cry.

'Ha! Where is Brother Roberts now? Hey? I'll teach you

to smile at him like that.’

I had no idea what he was talking about. His rage was such that I decided against asking what I had done wrong, and was beside myself trying to understand what was happening. I said that I was sorry in the hope of being allowed to dress and go back to see the rest of the film, but he was having none of it. Vaguely, I sensed that whatever was going on between him and Brother Roberts – whose name he almost spat out – had something to do with me. My mind churned up the yard conversation with the older boy. I had broken the rule of never letting either of them know which one I liked best. Smiling at Brother Roberts at Mass obviously signalled to Brother Price my preference. The truth was I *did* prefer the gentler Brother Roberts to Brother Price, who scared me a little, most of the time.

‘You’re not to get involved with Brother Roberts in any way and that includes smiling at him. Do you understand me, Michael?’

While I surely did not, I replied that I did, hoping he would leave me alone. I kept crying while my mind raced. Instead of leaving, however, he hauled himself over and sat down on my bed, his hand hovering near my face. I was

terrified that he might give me another slap or, worse still, a few licks of the leather that hung from his hip. He seemed to take pleasure in my fear. Inwardly I resolved never to show any smiles to Brother Roberts in case I missed more films in the future. I don't know how long he sat there in silence, but I must have fallen asleep. When I woke up Brother Price was gone, in his place was Brother Murphy, standing over me with a mean grin on his face.

'Well, Clemenger, how is Brother Price now?'

That night some of the boys asked me what had happened with Brother Price. I told them I was beaten because I had smiled at Brother Roberts. It was all over the dormitories within a minute. They went very quiet and quickly got into bed.