

Chapter One

Interview with Fr. Walsh

“Danny Gallagher.”

The name rebounded from the cold green plaster of the corridor. Danny felt a shiver run down his neck. The words were not so much shouted as projected, in the manner of a skilled stage actor, so as to precisely fill every cubic inch of the enclosed space.

“What are you doing here at this time of day?”

“My mother had one of her turns, Father.”

There was a pause while the priest absorbed the information. “And that made you twenty-five minutes late?”

“Yes, Father.” The smell of stale school milk seeped into Danny’s nostrils. In the distance he could hear the muffled chant of a class reciting the familiar gibberish of The Lord’s Prayer in Irish:

*Ár nAthair atá ar neamh,
go naofar d'ainm
Go dtaga do ríocht
Go ndéantar do thoil
ar an talamh mar a dhéantar ar neamh...*

“Have you got a note?”

“No, Father.”

“Come into my office. I’ve been meaning to have a talk with you anyway.”

Danny wiped a bead of sweat from the bridge of his nose and walked towards the still figure. The priest opened the office door as Danny reached him and with dignified slowness walked ahead of Danny into the room and sat behind his large mahogany desk with its green leather inlay. The window, like most of the windows in the gloomy Victorian building, was small and high, and admitted only a narrow shaft of sunlight that touched one corner of Father Walsh’s desk. Within it tiny dust motes floated endlessly downwards. On the wall behind the desk, between the two tall bookcases, the red flame

of an oil lamp glowed on a small shelf in front of a 'sacred heart', a garish picture of Jesus with an exposed heart in the middle of his chest. Neatly propped against the side of the desk was a thin bamboo cane with its end curved into the shape of a handle. It held Danny's attention like the sight of the gallows to a man on Death Row. In front of the desk were two simple wooden chairs. As Father Walsh sat down Danny sat also.

"Did I ask you to sit down?"

"No, Father." Danny sprang to attention.

The elderly priest scanned the boy from top to bottom. "How long have you been with us now, Gallagher?"

"Three and a half years, Father."

"So you're fifteen?"

"Very nearly, Father."

"Is that a hole in the leg of your trousers?"

Danny tried to cover it with his hand. "Yes, Father. It got burned with a soldering iron."

"And what's that on the shoulder of your jacket?"

"I think it's pigeon..."

"Pigeon guano. That's what it's called in polite society. Does your father keep pigeons?"

"No, Father. I think I got it at a friend's house."

"Hugh Lavery?"

"Yes, Father."

The priest continued his inspection. "What is the colour of the shirt that we wear at this school?"

"White, Father."

"And what is the colour of your shirt, young Mr Gallagher?"

"Blue, Father. I... couldn't find a white one when my mother took her bad turn..."

"I see. And would you like to give me your opinion of the shoes that you are presently wearing?"

"They're a bit dirty, Father."

"I agree. In fact I would say, extremely dirty. Unacceptably dirty is a description that I might apply. Do you by any chance have shoe polish in your house?"

"Yes, Father."

“May I suggest that you apply some before you come to this school again?”

“Yes, Father.”

Father Walsh picked up a black address-book from his desk and thumbed through it. When he found what he wanted he cranked out a number on the rotary dial of his antiquated desk telephone. The voice with which he spoke into the device could scarcely have been recognised as belonging to the same person. “Oh, good morning Dr Gallagher. Sorry to disturb you. It’s Father Walsh at the School. I have your son here and he tells me that Mrs Gallagher is unwell this morning... oh, I’m very sorry to hear that... yes, I understand. We shall include her in our lunchtime prayers. Thank you, Doctor.” He put down the phone.

“May I go to Science now, Father?”

Walsh gave him a cold look. “Sit down, boy.” Use of the term “boy” suggested trouble. Danny obeyed.

Walsh paused for a few moments.

“Your family background is somewhat different to that of the other boys at this school.” The priest spoke slowly to lend theatrical weight to the words. “You may see this as a burden. Perhaps the children of artisans victimise or tease you. I don’t know. But having the background that you do is in fact an enormous opportunity and privilege. You come from a home where learning is respected and encouraged. You are surrounded by highly educated adults. You live in a world of books and newspapers, art, culture, intelligent conversation. Isn’t that so?”

“Yes, Father.” Danny didn’t really recognise this picture, but if it was the one Father Walsh wanted to believe in then it was fine with him. His own perception of his home life was of something more akin to a boxing ring, in which the two contestants continuously chased each other around in circles looking for a gap in the ropes.

“Your privileged life brings with it great responsibilities,” Father Walsh continued. “To the other boys here, you represent a kind of role model. Education, after all, is the product on offer. You come from an educated and professional family. The boys look to you for an example. How you dress, how you speak, how you behave. These

things matter more in your case than in the case of the other boys. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"Yes, Father."

"That is why I find it necessary to point out to you those areas in which you are not setting the example that you should be. What is that in your pocket, boy?" The priest made a beckoning gesture for Danny to hand it over.

The sudden jump in the flow of Father Walsh's monologue made Danny start. He drew the object from his trouser pocket, standing out of his chair to do so. "It's a valve, Father," he explained in a meek voice, placing it in Walsh's outstretched hand.

"One of those glass tubes out of a wireless set?"

"Yes, Father."

The priest twirled it between his fingers and looked at the metal components inside. "And what would this do if you had a fall in the playground?"

"Probably break, Father."

"Exactly so. And then what would happen? Shards of glass in your leg. All kinds of sharp pieces of metal sticking into you. Heaven knows what chemicals injected deep down under your skin."

"I don't think it contains any chemicals, Father."

"Don't you, indeed?" The priest slipped the offending object into the side drawer of his desk. "You may have it back when school is over. Why did you bring it to school anyway?"

"To give to somebody, Father. Somebody who's trying to make a radio set."

"Ah, yes. Radio sets. Quite the radio expert, aren't you?"

"I read *Practical Wireless*, Father. I make radio sets as a hobby."

Father Walsh paused again, looking Danny straight in the eye. "So I am informed." He opened another, lower, drawer and took from it a small red lapel badge bearing the face of a Russian astronaut and placed it on the desk. "This was confiscated from a boy in Father McCormack's class. The boy said that he got it from you."

"Yes, Father. It's a Yuri Gagarin badge. I got them from Radio Moscow. Yuri Gagarin was the first man in space..."

"I know who Yuri Gagarin is. But do you know what Russia is? What the Soviet Union stands for?" Danny was out of his depth and

did not answer. "It's a godless country where the Roman Catholic Church is banned, and anybody who practices their religion is thrown in gaol! No religion is allowed except the worship of the state and the Communist Party. People get dragged from their beds in the middle of the night and thrown in prison cells. More often than not taken out and shot without a trial. The newspapers and radio and TV stations are all controlled by the state and anybody who disagrees with the government is executed. People can't leave the country or travel abroad. Everybody has a number and the secret police watch all the people in the country, day and night, just looking for any excuse to drag them out and shoot them. And if we didn't have our own atom bombs in the West to defend ourselves with they'd have atom-bombed us all and taken over the whole world years ago. Do you want to live in a country like that?"

"No, Father."

"Why are you distributing the badges, then?"

"They're just about Yuri Gagarin, Father. About flying in space..."

"They're Communist propaganda, boy! An attempt to corrupt the minds of Ireland's young. Do you even know what the writing on the bottom says?"

Danny picked up the badge and, with some difficulty, read out the Russian words: "'Hayuk za mir', Father."

"I know what it says! But do you know what the words mean?"

"They have two meanings, Father. Like a kind of pun. 'Science for peace' and 'Science for the world'."

"Are you trying to be a smart Alec?"

"No, Father."

The priest grabbed the offending badge and tossed it back into the drawer.

"I don't want to hear that you've been distributing anything like this ever again. This is a liberal institution but the line has to be drawn somewhere. If I hear about anything like this coming from you again you're out of this school on your ear. I don't care who you are or who your father is. A line has to be drawn. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, Father."

"Now, go and join your science class. And let that be an end to it."