

Chapter 1

In the Beginning

I remember the day. It was early in March 1950, just a few days before my eighth birthday. I came out of my classroom in Sandyford school. It was a beautiful day – the cloudless blue sky, the sun splitting through the tall chestnut trees in the school yard where every year, in the gold of autumn days, I would gather fallen conkers.

I was carefree, happy and had no fears. My classmates shouted their goodbyes to me and my best pal: ‘See you tomorrow, Pat! Bye, Dessie!’ I had no inkling that it was my last day in the school; that I would never again see my classmates,

not even to say goodbye.

There was a steep climb called 'the old dirt track', which the lorries used to bring stone to the city from the quarries in the hills. This was also the way to my cottage home in the peaceful hillside setting of Barnacullia. I raced Dessie up the road to The Tiller Doyle's grocery shop.

'I won yeh again,' said Dessie, as he burst through the door. I'll get him back tomorrow, I thought, not knowing that my whole life was about to change from a normal, carefree, happy one, without fear, to a life of terror, violence, physical and sexual abuse, and shattered dreams. No one could tell me.

The Tiller Doyle was our friendly grocer, a short, affable, tubby man, bald on top. He always wore a dust-coat. The shop had almost everything. Sides of bacon, sods of turf and legs of lamb hung from the bars on the ceiling. On the counter were blocks of red cheddar and creamery butter, loose bags of sugar and crusty batch loaves and turnovers. In a line behind the counter, on the floor, were open sacks of sugar, oatmeal, flour and rice; coffee and chests of tea; jars of sweets – allsorts, honeybees, gobstoppers, (nancyballs were our favourites, because they lasted longest); and boxes of broken mixed biscuits.

The Tiller was filling and weighing brown paper bags of sugar when we entered. He raised his head to greet us. 'Ah, there you are, boys. Nice to see you.' I noticed a slight difference about The Tiller's manner that lovely spring day. His

smile was missing, and he wasn't his usual self.

The door opened and a bell rang to announce a new customer. It was old Mrs Costello from along the road. She looked at me with a rather curious expression, I thought. What's up with her? I wondered, as she made her way up to the counter.

'I see the police were up at Bridget Doyle's place on the hill, and the nuns are there as well. I wonder what's going on, don't you, Mr Doyle?'

'Nothing at all to wonder about; sure the nuns are up every year around this time.' The Tiller moved over to me.

'But not with the Guards, surely now,' said Mrs Costello, staring at me with a sorrowful expression.' I turned to Dessie, as I began to feel scared.

The Tiller placed batch loaves and turnovers in front of me, then filled paper bags with sweets. 'Look, Mrs Costello, you are only putting fears into the young boy. If I hear of anything that's newsworthy, I will be the first to inform you.' Well done, Tiller, I thought.

The Tiller winked at us and put the sweets on the counter. 'There are your batch loaves, Patrick, and one large turnover for Bridget. Five Woodbines and two ounces of tobacco for Mr Doyle. Twenty honeybees and some gobstoppers, with a few nancyballs, to keep you and Des happy. Off with yez, now.'

'If you hurry, boys, you will see the big black car coming

down the dirt track,' said Mrs Costello in an anxious voice. That had me scared.

'Let's go and see it,' said Dessie.

He pulled open the door, and the bell rang out. It was a nice sound. I liked it. I turned to thank The Tiller. His two hands rested on the wide counter-top, next to the big block of open butter. His smile was soft. 'Thanks for the sweets. See yeh tomorrow. Bye, Mrs Costello.' She looks so sad, I thought.

As I made my way towards the dirt track, Dessie shouted, 'Here's the car!'

'Gosh, look at the size of it! I'd love a ride in it, would you?'

His response surprised me. 'Maybe, but it would depend on where it was going, cause my ma warns me never to take a lift from strangers. See yeh tomorrow, Pat – same place.'

Once the big black Ford had gone by, I made my way slowly up the steep dirt track. When I came to the spot where old Bill Morgan's truck turned over with a full load of granite from the quarry, I rested for a while and, as usual, picked at the loaves. I loved the skin on the batch loaf.

I heard a voice calling me. I stood up and looked. It was my pal Stephen Caulfield, all smiles. He lived with Mrs Roseanna Fay Doyle in Carthy's Green. I loved roaming the hills with Stephen. We'd go out after tea, usually. 'I can't go out today, Pat,' he said. 'I've milk to bring down for collection.' 'Will I see you at the the dirt track in the morning?' I asked. 'Yes,' he said.

‘We’ll go to school together. We’ll go through the fields and get a few swings on the big tree.’ I was delighted. I watched him run off home through the heather.

From where I rested, I had a smashing view of the Sugarloaf Mountain and Enniskerry. I could hear the chirp of the birds nesting in the bushes and hedgerows. I couldn’t imagine a more peaceful place to live.

Our collie dog raced down to greet me, jumping up excitedly, licking my face. ‘Get off me, Shep – go chase a hen!’ I shouted, as I made my way home to the cottage on the hillside.

I was treated as one of the family. It was never explained to me that I was not a real son of the Doyles; nor did it ever occur to me that Bridget was only a foster parent. Bridget Doyle was a sturdy, homely person. She had three children: John was the eldest son, Margaret – she was a real sister to me – was the only girl, and the baby was Edward. I called Bridget ‘Mam’, as the others did.

I never knew my father or my mother – just that her name was Helen Touher and my father was John. I had spent the first year of my life in St Brigid’s Orphanage at 46 Eccles Street in Dublin, as my mother could not afford to look after me; her husband had gone away, and did not return when the war ended in 1945. When I was a year old, I was fostered to Bridget. My mother died soon after the war ended, and I never again heard of my father. But I didn’t know these facts

then and I was happy at home in the cottage of my dreams in the hills of Barnacullia.

After dinner it was my job to fetch buckets of water from the well, bring in the cows and help Margaret with the milking. That day, as I moved away from the table, I caught a glimpse of a big brown paper parcel. Excitedly, I shouted, 'Is that for my birthday?'

'You'd better go now, son, and fill the buckets. Margaret will help with the milking after she collects the eggs. Go on, now,' said Bridget.

A strange silence swept through the cosy room. The expression on Bridget's face suggested to me that something was about to happen. I could not figure out what it might be; but on my way to the well, I was left with a weird feeling.

I rested the buckets down and gazed out over the city at night. The lights shone like stars. Maggie came by and asked, 'What are you thinking about? You look as though you're miles away.'

I was relieved she had asked. 'What's in the parcel?' I asked her. 'Please, Maggie, tell me, or I'll never talk to you again.'

She half turned to look at me, by the open cottage door. 'I'm sorry, I can't, I promised Mam. But you will find out very soon.' Her hand brushed a tear from her face. Edward was running after the chickens in the yard; he made a dive at one and missed, and Shep barked at him.

Bridget's voice rang out. 'Time for bed!'

As I closed my eyes to the night and the ticking of the grandfather clock, all I could think of was the big brown paper parcel and its contents. I prayed it was for my birthday, and I wished it would hurry up and come. I couldn't wait to show my present to Stephen.

I was woken up the next morning by Bridget. The first thing in my mind was the parcel at the foot of my bed. 'What's in it, Mam? Please tell me. Please,' I begged.

Bridget's response was cold. 'Shut up, son, you'll know soon enough.' I stared, eagle-eyed, as she tore the parcel open to reveal its full contents. Margaret entered the room quietly. She looked sad.

'Gosh,' I murmured, 'new clothes ... Where am I going? Tell me, please, Margaret. It's not my birthday yet.'

Margaret didn't utter a word. She proceeded to dress me in the new clothes – new underwear, a new suit, new shoes and new socks. I noticed tears in her eyes and then she whispered to me that I was being sent away, for how long she could not say, or to where she was not sure. She thought it was to a hospital or a very big school. Margaret was just like a loving big sister to me.

I was all dressed up now, looking very smart and feeling very odd. I was about to travel, destination unknown. I ran from the bedroom to the kitchen where Bridget was making the tea. 'Please tell me where I'm going,' I pleaded. 'Please give

me a hint even. Is it good or bad?’ Bridget said, ‘Be quiet now! You’ll find out soon enough. Sit down there and eat your porridge. You’ll need it where you’re going.’ I said, ‘Where’s that, Mam?’

Margaret looked at her mother as she went to sit down. I noticed the nod and wink. Bridget then said, ‘You’ll be going to the hospital as soon as the car arrives.’ ‘Hospital!’ I cried. ‘What’s a hospital, Margaret? Is it like something you were telling me about? Like a big school, sort of, with priests and nuns?’ ‘Well, not really,’ Margaret said, ‘but it is as big, yes.’

‘The hospital has doctors and nurses,’ Bridget butted in, and then said, ‘You’ll be going there to get your tonsils looked at, and maybe to get them out.’ I felt just as confused as before. I ate my porridge that morning with a kind of fear in me, a fear of the unknown, a feeling I had never experienced before. But I still ate up two bowls of porridge and lots of homemade buttermilk bread.

Though I was very young, I could tell when something was wrong in the house. I felt now everyone was watching me and saying very little. A nod or a wink, oh, sure, I could see it in their eyes, I tell you. Margaret was very upset, as was Bridget, and Mr Doyle was very quiet, sitting in his armchair, puffing away at his pipe. Mr Doyle seemed quite old to me. He was a tall straight man. His son John was just as tall and straight and looked like his father.

The clock over the fireplace struck nine. I heard Bridget saying to Margaret, as they washed up after the breakfast, 'It should be here now.' Then I heard a car pull up outside the cottage door. I noticed that everyone looked towards the window, stopping whatever they were doing. Bridget hurried to the door. I rushed towards Margaret and she held me, her arms tight around me. Fighting back the tears, she blurted, 'You must go now, Pat, the men are waiting.'

'But I'm coming back once my tonsils are out. And you'll come and see me, won't you, Maggie?' There was no response – only silence, as if someone had died – as Maggie led me to the car. There was no time to be afraid. I was put into the car, a black Ford, and before I could say 'Barnacullia', it took off down the steep hill to the main Sandyford road. I was on my own now and I was going to somewhere unknown. I remember as the car passed Tiller Doyle's shop I felt it didn't matter where I was going, really. You see, I could do nothing about it, so I just sat there. I did not ask the two men in the front of the car any questions, nor did they ask me any, except if I was okay back there.

Then the car came to a sudden stop and we got out. I can just vaguely recall standing in a courtroom not far from Sandyford, and being asked my name by a judge. 'Patrick Touher, sir,' I replied. There were many people in the court. I remember the judge asking some men, 'Is there no other place we can send our

friend Patrick to?’ A Garda gave me a bar of chocolate and brought me outside and told me to play awhile. There were several older boys outside playing, and one of them asked me why I was there and I replied that I was being taken to get my tonsils out. The boy laughed and said, ‘This is no hospital. These are cops, you know.’ Just then a Garda came out and brought me into the courtroom. A little while later I heard my name being called out. A Garda came to me and brought me before the judge. The judge said, ‘Well now, Patrick, it is the decision of this court to send you to Artane, as I can find no other suitable place for you.’

I said, ‘Is that where I have to get my tonsils out?’ I heard people laugh. Then the judge said, ‘Well, yes, my boy. That’s it. Yes, they’ll get them out for you.’ I can still recall the judge saying to the men sitting at the bench in front of him, ‘For how long will Patrick be in Artane? How long will it take to find a place for him?’

‘Six weeks,’ came the quick reply. The judge looked down at me then and said, ‘Well now, six weeks is not a long time, Patrick, is it?’ ‘No, sir,’ I replied.

It was probably normal practice at that time for children to be fostered in their first seven years only. I’m not really sure. In any case I was soon back in the car for what was to be a long drive across the city to the place that was to change my whole life. That place was called Artane Industrial School.