

## THE BEGINNINGS OF A SIN

I believe he's late again thought Colum. He took a clean white surplice from his bag and slipped it over his head, steadying his glasses as he did so. It was five to eight. He sat on the bench and changed his shoes for a black pair of gutties. Father Lynch said that all his altar-boys must move as quietly as shadows. When he was late he was usually in his worst mood. Sometimes he did not turn up at all and Miss Grant, the housekeeper, would come over and announce from the back of the church that Father Lynch was ill and that there would be no Mass that day.

At two minutes to eight Colum heard his footstep at the vestry door. Father Lynch came in and nodded to the boy. Colum had never seen anyone with such a sleep-crumpled face in the mornings. It reminded him of a bloodhound, there was such a floppiness about his deeply wrinkled skin. His whole face sagged and sloped into lines of sadness. His black hair was parted low to the side and combed flat with Brylcreem. Colum thought his neat hair looked out of place on top of the disorder of his features.

'Is everything ready?' Father Lynch asked him.

'Yes, Father.'

Colum watched him as he prepared to say Mass. He began by putting on the amice, like a handkerchief with strings, at the back of his neck. Next a white alb like a shroud, reaching to the floor. The polished toe-caps of his everyday shoes peeped out from underneath. He put the cincture about his waist and knotted it quickly. He kissed the embroidered cross on his emerald stole and hung it round his neck. Lastly he put on the chasuble, very carefully inserting his head through the neck-hole. Colum couldn't make up his mind whether he did not want to stain the vestments with hair-oil or wreck his hair. The chasuble was emerald green with yellow lines. Colum liked the

feasts of the martyrs best, with their bright blood colour. Father Lynch turned to him.

‘What are you staring at?’

‘Nothing, Father.’

‘You look like a wee owl.’

‘Sorry.’

‘Let’s get this show on the road,’ Father Lynch said, his face still like a sad bloodhound. ‘We’re late already.’

None of the other altar-boys liked Father Lynch. When they did something wrong, he never scolded them with words but instead would nip them on the upper arm. They said he was too quiet and you could never trust anybody like that. Colum found that he was not so quiet if you asked him questions. He seemed to like Colum better than the others, at least Colum thought so. One day he had asked him why a priest wore so much to say Mass and Father Lynch had spoken to him for about ten minutes, keeping him late for school.

‘Normally when people wear beautiful things it is to make their personality stand out. With a priest it is the opposite. He wears so much to hide himself. And the higher up the Church you go, the more you have to wear. Think of the poor Pope with all that triumphery on him.’

After Mass Father Lynch asked him how the ballot tickets were going.

‘Great. I’ve sold –’

‘Don’t tell me. Keep it as a surprise.’

In the darkness Colum stood at the door waiting. He had rolled up a white ballot ticket and was smoking it, watching his breath cloud the icy air. He pulled his socks up as high as he could to try and keep his legs warm. There was a funny smell from the house, like sour food. The woman came back out with her purse. She was still chewing something.

‘What’s it in aid of?’

‘St Kieran’s Church Building Fund.’

‘How much are they?’

‘Threepence each.’

The woman hesitated, poking about in her purse with her index finger. He told her that the big prize was a Christmas hamper. There was a second prize of whiskey and sherry. She took four tickets, finishing his last book.

‘Father Lynch’ll not be wanting to win it outright, then.’

He was writing her name on the stubs with his fountain pen.

‘Pardon?’

‘You’re a neat wee writer,’ she said. He tore the tickets down the perforations and gave them to her. She handed him a shilling, which he dropped into his jacket pocket. It was swinging heavy with coins.

‘There’s the snow coming on now,’ said the woman, waiting to close the front door. He ran the whole way home holding on to the outside of his pocket. In the house he dried his hair and wiped the speckles of melted snow from his glasses. Two of his older brothers, Rory and Dermot, were sitting on the sofa doing homework balanced on their knees and when he told them it was snowing they ran out to see if it was lying.

He took down his tin and spilled it and the money from his pocket on to the table. He added it all together and counted the number of books of stubs. For each book sold the seller was allowed to keep sixpence for himself. Over the past weeks Colum had sold forty-two books around the doors. He took a pound note and a shilling and slipped them into his pocket. He had never had so much money in his life and there was still a full week to sell tickets before the ballot was drawn.

His mother stood at the range making soda farls on a griddle. When they were cooked they filled the house with their smell and made a dry scuffling noise as she handled them. He heard the front door close and Michael shout ‘Hello’. At eighteen he was the eldest and the only wage earner in the house.

‘Come on, Colum,’ said his mother. ‘Clear that table. The hungry working man is in.’

After tea they always said the Family Rosary. Colum would half kneel, half crouch at the armchair with his face almost touching the seat. The cushion smelt of cloth and human. He tried to say the Rosary as best he could, thinking of the Sacred Mysteries while his

mouth said the words. He was disturbed one night to see Michael kneeling at the sofa saying the prayers with the Sunday paper between his elbows. Colum counted off the Hail Marys, feeding his shiny lilac rosary beads between his finger and thumb. They were really more suitable for a woman but they had come all the way from Lourdes. Where the loop of the beads joined was a little silver heart with a bubble of Lourdes water in it – like the spirit level in his brother's tool kit.

When it came to his turn to give out the prayer Colum always waited until the response was finished – not like his brothers who charged on, overlapping the prayer and the response, slurring their words to get it finished as quickly as possible. They became annoyed with him and afterwards, in whispers, accused him of being ‘a creeping Jesus’.

At the end of each Rosary their mother said a special prayer ‘for the Happy Repose of the Soul of Daddy’. Although he had been dead two years, it still brought a lump to Colum's throat. It wouldn't have been so bad if she had said father or something but the word Daddy made him want to cry. Sometimes he had to go on kneeling when the others had risen to their feet in case they should see his eyes.

It was Colum's turn to do the dishes. They had their turns written up on a piece of paper so that there would be no argument. He poured some hot water into the basin from the kettle on the range. It had gone slightly brown from heating. He didn't like the look of it as much as the cold water from the pump. In the white enamel bucket under the scullery bench it looked pure and cool and still. Where the enamel had chipped off, the bucket was blue-black. If you put your hand in the water the fingers seemed to go flat.

He dipped a cup into the basin, rinsed it out and set it on the table. Father Lynch had funny fingers. He had tiny tufts of black hair on the back of each of them. They made Colum feel strange as he poured water from a cruet on to them. The priest would join his trembling index fingers and thumbs and hold them over the glass bowl, then he would take the linen cloth ironed into its folds and wipe them dry. He would put it back in its creases and lay it on Colum's arm. He had some whispered prayers to say when he was

doing that. Colum always wondered why Father Lynch was so nervous saying his morning Mass. He had served for others and they didn't tremble like that. Perhaps it was because he was holier than them, that they weren't as much in awe of the Blessed Sacrament as he was. What a frightening thing it must be, to hold Christ's actual flesh – to have the responsibility to change the bread and wine into the body and blood of Jesus.

He dried the dishes and set them in neat piles before putting them back on the shelf. Above the bench Michael had fixed a small mirror for shaving. Colum had to stand on tip-toe to see himself. He was the only one of the family who had to wear glasses. He took after his father. For a long time he had to wear National Health round ones with the springy legs that hooked behind his ears, but after months of pleading and crying his mother had given in and bought him a good pair with real frames.

He went to the back door and threw out a basinful of water with a slap on to the icy ground. It steamed in the light from the scullery window. It was a still night and he could hear the children's voices yelling from the next street.

The kitchen was warm when he came back in again. Radio Luxembourg was on the wireless. Colum took all his money in his pocket and put the stubs in a brown paper bag.

'I'm away, Mammy,' he said.

She was having a cigarette, sitting with her feet up on a stool.

'Don't be late,' was all she said.

He walked a lamp post, ran a lamp post through the town until he reached the hill which led to the Parochial House. It was a large building made of the same red brick as the church. He could see lights on in the house so he climbed the hill. It was still bitterly cold and he was aware of his jaw shivering. He kept both hands in his pockets, holding the brown bag in the crook of his arm. He knocked at the door of the house. It was the priest's housekeeper who opened it a fraction. When she saw Colum she opened it wide.

'Hello, Miss Grant. Is Father Lynch in?'

'He is busy, Colum. What was it you wanted?'

‘Ballot tickets, Miss. And to give in money.’

She looked over her shoulder down the hallway, then turned and put out her hand for the money.

‘It’s all loose, Miss,’ said Colum, digging into his pocket to let her hear it.

‘Oh, you’d best come in then – for a moment.’

Miss Grant brought him down the carpeted hallway to her quarters – she had a flat of her own at the back of the house. She closed the door and smiled a jumpy kind of smile – a smile that stopped in the middle. Colum emptied the bag of stubs on the table.

‘There’s forty-two books . . .’ he said.

‘Goodness, someone has been busy.’

‘. . . and here is five pounds, five shillings.’ He set two pound notes and a ten shilling note on the table and hand-fulled the rest of the coins out of his pocket. They rang and clattered on the whitewood surface. She began to check it, scraping the coins towards her quickly and building them into piles.

‘All present and correct,’ she said.

Colum looked at the sideboard. There was a bottle of orange juice and a big box of biscuits which he knew was for the ticket sellers. She saw him looking.

‘All right, all right,’ she said.

She poured a glass of juice and allowed him to choose two biscuits. His fingers hovered over the selection.

‘Oh come on, Colum, don’t take all night.’

He took a chocolate one and a wafer and sat down. He had never seen Miss Grant so snappy before. Usually she was easygoing. She was very fat, with a chest like stuffed pillows under her apron. He had heard the grown-ups in the town say that if anybody had earned heaven it was her. They spoke of her goodness and kindness. ‘There’s one saint in that Parochial House,’ they would say. For a long time Colum thought they were talking about Father Lynch.

In the silence he heard his teeth crunching the biscuit. Miss Grant did not sit down but stood by the table waiting for him to finish. He swallowed and said,

‘Could I have ten more books, please?’

‘Yes, dear.’ She put her hands in her apron pocket and looked all around her, then left the room.

Colum had never been in this part of the house before. He had always gone into Father Lynch’s room or waited in the hallway. Although it was a modern house, it was full of old things. A picture of the Assumption of Our Lady in a frame of gold leaves hung by the front door. The furniture in Father Lynch’s room was black and heavy. The dining room chairs had twisted legs like barley sugar sticks. Everything had a rich feel to it, especially the thick patterned carpet. Miss Grant’s quarters were not carpeted but had some rugs laid on the red tiled floor. It was the kind of floor they had at home, except that the corners of their tiles were chipped off and they had become uneven enough to trip people.

‘Vera!’ he heard a voice shout. It was Father Lynch.

Vera’s voice answered from somewhere. Colum looked up and Father Lynch was standing in the doorway with his arm propped against the jamb.

‘Hello, Father.’

‘Well, if it isn’t the owl,’ said Father Lynch.

He wasn’t dressed like a priest but was wearing an ordinary man’s collarless shirt, open at the neck.

‘What brings you up here, Colum?’

He moved from the door and reached out to put his hand on a chair back. Two strands of his oiled hair had come loose and fallen over his forehead. He sat down very slowly on the chair.

‘Ballot tickets, Father. I’ve sold all you gave me.’

Father Lynch gave a loud whoop and slapped the table loudly with the flat of his hand. His eyes looked very heavy and he was blinking a lot.

‘That’s the way to do it. Lord, how the money rolls in.’

He was slurring his words as if he was saying the Rosary. Miss Grant came into the room holding a wad of white ballot tickets.

‘Here you are now, Colum. You’d best be off.’

Colum finished his juice and stood up.

‘Is that the strongest you can find for the boy to drink, Vera?’ He

laughed loudly. Colum had never heard him laugh before. He slapped the table again.

‘Father – if you’ll excuse us, I’ll just show Colum out now.’

‘No. No. He came to see me – didn’t you?’

Colum nodded.

‘He’s the only one that would. Let him stay for a bit.’

‘His mother will worry about him.’

‘No she won’t,’ said Colum.

‘Of course she won’t,’ said Father Lynch. He ignored Miss Grant. ‘How many books did you sell?’

‘Forty-two, Father.’

The priest raised his eyes to heaven and blew out his cheeks. Colum smelt a smell like altar wine.

‘Holy Saint Christopher. Forty-two?’

‘Yes.’

Miss Grant moved behind Colum and began to guide him with pressure away from the table.

‘That calls for a celebration.’ Father Lynch stood up unsteadily. ‘Forty-two!’

He reached out to give Colum a friendly cuff on the back of the head but he missed and instead his hand struck the side of the boy’s face scattering his glasses on the tiled floor.

‘Aw Jesus,’ said the priest. ‘I’m sorry.’ Father Lynch hunkered down to pick them up but lurched forward on to his knees. One lens was starred with white and the arc of the frame was broken. He hoisted himself to his feet and held the glasses close to his sagging face, looking at them.

‘Jesus, I’m so sorry,’ he said again. He bent down, looking for the missing piece of frame, and the weight of his head seemed to topple him. He cracked his skull with a sickening thump off the sharp edge of a radiator. One of his legs was still up in the air trying to right his balance. He put his hand to the top of his head and Colum saw that the hand was slippery with blood. Red blood was smeared from his Brylcreemed hair on to the radiator panel as the priest slid lower. His eyes were open but not seeing.

‘Are you all right, Father?’ Miss Grant’s voice was shaking. She produced a white handkerchief from her apron pocket. The priest

shouted, his voice suppressed and hissing and angry. He cursed his housekeeper and the polish on her floor. Then he raised his eyes to her without moving his head and said in an ordinary voice,

‘What a mess for the boy.’

Miss Grant took the glasses which he was still clutching and put them in Colum’s hand. Father Lynch began to cry with his mouth half open. Miss Grant turned the boy away and pushed him towards the door. Both she and Colum had to step over the priest to get out. She led him by the elbow down the hallway.

‘That’s the boy. Here’s your ballot tickets.’

She opened the front door.

‘Say a wee prayer for him, Colum. He’s in bad need of it.’

‘All right, but –’

‘I’d better go back to him now.’

The door closed with a slam. Colum put his glasses on but could only see through his left eye. His knees were like water and his stomach was full of wind. He tried to get some of it up but he couldn’t. He started to run. He ran all the way home. He sat panting on the cold doorstep and only went in when he got his breath back. His mother was alone.

‘What happened to you? You’re as white as a sheet,’ she said, looking up at him. She was knitting a grey sock on three needles shaped into a triangle. Colum produced his glasses from his pocket. Within the safety of the house he began to cry.

‘I bust them.’

‘How, might I ask?’ His mother’s voice was angry.

‘I was running and they just fell off. I slipped on the ice.’

‘Good God, Colum, do you know how much those things cost? You’ll have to get a new pair for school. Where do you think the money is going to come from? Who do you think I am, Carnegie? Eh?’

Her knitting needles were flashing and clacking. Colum continued to cry, tears rather than noise.

‘Sheer carelessness. I’ve a good mind to give you a thumping.’

Colum, keeping out of range of her hand, sat at the table and put the glasses on. He could only half see. He put his hand in his pocket and took out his pound note.

‘Here,’ he said offering it to his mother. She took it and put it beneath the jug on the shelf.

‘That’ll not be enough,’ she said, then after a while, ‘Will you stop that sobbing? It’s not the end of the world.’

The next morning Colum was surprised to see Father Lynch in the vestry before him. He was robed and reading his breviary, pacing the strip of carpet in the centre of the room. They said nothing to each other.

At the Consecration Colum looked up and saw the black congealed wound on the thinning crown of Father Lynch’s head, as he lifted the tail of the chasuble. He saw him elevate the white disc of the host and heard him mutter the words,

*‘Hoc est enim corpus meum.’*

Colum jangled the cluster of bells with angry twists of his wrist. A moment later when the priest raised the chalice full of wine he rang the bell again, louder if possible.

In the vestry afterwards he changed as quickly as he could and was about to dash out when Father Lynch called him. He had taken off his chasuble and was folding it away.

‘Colum.’

‘What?’

‘Sit down a moment.’

He removed the cincture and put it like a coiled snake in the drawer. The boy remained standing. The priest sat down in his alb and beckoned him over.

‘I’m sorry about your glasses.’

Colum stayed at the door and Father Lynch went over to him. Colum thought his face no longer sad, simply ugly.

‘Your lace is loosed.’ He was about to genuflect to tie it for him but Colum crouched and tied it himself. Their heads almost collided.

‘It’s hard for me to explain,’ said Father Lynch, ‘but . . . to a boy of your age sin is a very simple thing. It’s not.’

Colum smelt the priest’s breath sour and sick.

‘Yes, Father.’

‘That’s because you have never committed a sin. You don’t know about it.’

He removed his alb and hung it in the wardrobe.

‘Trying to find the beginnings of a sin is like . . .’ He looked at the boy’s face and stopped. ‘Sin is a deliberate turning away from God. That is an extremely difficult thing to do. To close Him out from your love . . .’

‘I’ll be late for school, Father.’

‘I suppose you need new glasses?’

‘Yes.’

Father Lynch put his hand in his pocket and gave him some folded pound notes.

‘Did you mention it to your mother?’

‘What?’

‘How they were broken?’

‘No.’

‘Are you sure? To anyone?’

Colum nodded that he hadn’t. He was turning to get out the door. The priest raised his voice, trying to keep him there.

‘I knew your father well, Colum,’ he shouted. ‘You remind me of him a lot.’

The altar-boy ran, slamming the door after him. He heard an empty wooden coat-hanger rattle on the hardboard panel of the door and it rattled in his mind until he reached the bottom of the hill. There he stopped running. He unfolded the wad of pound notes still in his hand and counted them with growing disbelief.