

The Other Priest

The boy thinks. I still have the white evil liquid in my mouth. I feel myself choking. It rises and falls again and again. I try to move the liquid. It sticks. The other boys are singing in church. I open my voice to sing and cannot. I hope I will sing again. I will sing of my father in Africa, of my mother in the war. Perhaps, I will sing with her when she sings sweet songs to make injured soldiers forget their wounded arms and legs. Perhaps I will sing it again for my friend, Bertram, and his father who is in Africa. I am one year younger than Bertram.

The boy is frightened. He looks at the other priest and listens to his words. He knows inside his small head that he has done wrong. It is right that he should be punished. The other priest has merely confirmed the boy's doubts.

The boy tells the other priest in confession. I am wrong. I should not have done this thing. It echoes through him again and again. A thunder enters his head and bursts in his body. Wrong, wrong, the thunder says.

After the thunder come tears to fill up every part of his world. He thinks of his father, far away in Africa fighting a strange battle with Hitler. Why did his father go to Africa, thought the boy – Hitler is not there? The boy could not answer his own question. He thought it must be Hitler's brother his father is fighting. No one can be in two places at once. More thunder and darkness. His tears invade him again. Father, Father, he thinks – please come back from Africa. I don't want to be responsible for you staying there forever.

He feels his arm shaking. For a moment he thinks it is more thunder. He sees the other priest standing naked before him. He is frightened. The boy looks around him, but he is not in the other priest's bedroom but in the classroom. The other priest has now vanished. He hears a voice talking to him.

He looks at the old priest in the classroom. Aloysius, the one with few teeth and no hair who walks with a limp. Come, Patrick, says old Aloysius. You are in a different world today. You tell me whatever you want to tell me. But, Patrick is fearful – if he talks, he will never see his father again. That is what the other priest told him. If he talks his father will stay forever in Africa. It is dark there. He knows that. Everything is black – the people, the ground and the animals are dangerous. Lions kill people. Snakes bite people. His father will have to live with snakes and lions forever. He wants him home. He quickly decides he will not tell old Aloysius anything at all.

Old Aloysius smiles at Patrick. We all get frightened, he says. I will tell you a story. He had told it many times to many boys. It is about his life in Africa before he came to the school. Patrick knows the story but will enjoy hearing it again. Old Aloysius said he was young at the time with hair like a lion and he could run fast. Old Aloysius talks of the time when he was hungry and was invited to a dinner in the village. The chief put a stick into squashed fruit. Then he put the stick in the ground, pulled it out and heated it over the fire. The chief licked the stick, gave a big cry of enjoyment and then put the stick into the fruit again, then into the hole and into the fire. He gave it to Aloysius and told him to eat the delicious food. It was warm, sweet and the priest enjoyed the food. Then there was wine – plenty of it and old Aloysius who was young also drank the wine. He danced and the chief let him dance with his daughter. That is wrong, thought the boy. A priest is not allowed to dance with a young girl. But, I was there with the chief, said old Aloysius. That made it all right. It was his daughter I danced with. The boy looked at the old priest as he told this story again. He knew the ending too. The stick had been put into an ant hole and the ants had leaped onto the fruit and then they were cooked. Old Aloysius ate ants. He enjoyed them. The thunder had gone from inside him. Patrick started to feel better. He thought of his mother. Before she went away to nurse injured soldiers she used to talk to Patrick about how she met his father and how they used to walk together and look at the stars. She also talked of dancing with his father. The boy could not understand why women liked dancing.

The boys heard the bell go to end the class. The boy was hungry. He queued with the other boys. Eat up, me hearties, shouted Priest John, as he piled up a small mountain of mashed potatoes on the many plates that kept appearing before his large spoon. Peas, me lads, said Priest John. Have some peas? No, said Patrick. But he got the peas anyway. They sat on his plate like little green soccer balls leaning against his white stadium of mashed potatoes. Young Patrick, chortled Priest John. Have some mince? No, thank you. It arrived. A brown flood soaked the green soccer balls.

The boy sat down next to his friend. Bertram was the smallest boy for his age in the school. He never talked much. Patrick liked him. Sometimes the two boys ran to a corner of the school playground where there were

tall bushes. They would sit and talk about sounds and colours and the origin of stars. Both knew how stars had been created. Bertram knew they were fires in heaven to keep God warm in winter. Patrick knew he was wrong. The stars were torches being carried by angels looking for children who were lost at night. But where do sounds come from, said Bertram? They are in the heads of animals and people, but why are they in their heads? Why are they not in different parts of our body? How about in feet? There are sounds in feet, shouted Bertram. The two boys kicked and kicked until the toes of their black shoes were white. Both boys liked the voices in their feet.

The bell rang. Once, twice, three times. Bertram said it was time to go to church for evening prayer and psalms. Come, he said. The boy shook his head. He kicked a rock. Bertram looked at him and ran towards the church. Patrick stood looking. He was not going to go to church. He was frightened. But he would not tell Bertram why.

He waited for a long time and walked back towards the school. He had to have an excuse for not attending psalms. What could he say? The boy was frightened. He remembered the words of the other priest, the one who asked to see him each night after supper.

Looking from high in the sky it was possible to see a dot on the corner of the field. Closer examination shows it is the boy. The small spot move around the corner of the field. It is not possible from high in the sky to see the face of the boy. The dot moves and stops again. The boy's face is distorted. His fingers hurt as he presses them into his body. In his mind the boy see his father in Africa He stops. He knows he has to go back to the other priest that night. If he does not he might never see his father again. Why does he feel so hot and then cold? He closes his eyes. He hears thunder. But when he opens his eyes, the thunder had stopped. He stares at the ground. The grass looks back.

He will avoid supper that night although he is hungry. The boy knows that when old Aloysius is on dining room duty, he never counts the number of boys at each table. He is tired. Each day murmurs old Aloysius... it is time for God to rest too. Six days did he work and the seventh. ...but after each day's work he also needs to rest a little. Old Aloysius mumbles to himself, I need to rest too. God bless me.

That night the other priest is on duty in the dormitory where the boys sleep. Bertram sleeps in the same dormitory. There is a noise. The other priest is beside him with his hand under the boy's bedcover. The boy awakes. A hand is moving around between his legs. Oh my soul, says the other priest as the boy opens his eyes. What have we here? You are thinking bad thoughts again. Come with me, we will talk. I will help you. Be quick. We must eliminate these bad thoughts before they affect all the other boys and hurt your father.

The boy hurries toward the end of the dormitory thinking all the time that his father will die in Africa, and his mother would not want to see him because of the evil things he is doing. Both his father and mother will then be gone. He will alone forever. The boy wants the other priest to help him. If he does not, his father will never return from Africa. He feels cold.

The boy sits on the big red couch in the bedroom of the other priest. He finds a cup in his hand. Drink, drink. Drink up, little Patrick. You will be all right. I will help you and your father will come back soon. We will get ride of those bad thoughts. The boy sips the warm chocolate. An arrow of warmth starts at his head to go through his body until it reaches the ground. He looks at the smiling face of the other priest. Little Patrick, little Patrick. I am sure you are a good boy, but now, I have to help you take that badness from inside you. When it is out, I will bless it and it will be gone.

The other priest is stroking and fondling Patrick. The boy thinks about his father. The priest's hand is moving quickly and the boy feels pain between his legs. Turn round, Patrick, whispers the other priest. Turn round. Let me go inside you and take away the evil. The boy closes his eyes as the pain becomes stronger. There is a cry from the other priest. It is done, it is done. I found it, my boy. Patrick opens his eyes and looks on the floor at the evil white liquid that has been inside him. He knows the other priest has helped him.

Will my father be safe? Yes, yes little Patrick, you have saved him. Perhaps, he might be back for your birthday. How old will you be this St. Patrick's Day, my little one? Nine years says the boy.

The boy is back to his bed, but cannot sleep. His body is sore. But his father is safe. He thinks of Bertram. His father is in Africa too. He falls asleep thinking about his father.

Nothing happens for a few days. Bertram and Patrick play together and talk about creating a special animal in your head. The two boys make a menagerie of new animals. Bertram creates a zeblion and Patrick makes a moonbird. Our new African zoo they call it. The boys talk about their fathers.

That evening it is time again for singing psalms in the church. Bertram and Patrick sit together. Both love singing. The boy looks at this best friend. He thinks their voices are birds. They rise high into the sky. The two boys are happy. At supper they eat and eat and after prayers go to bed.

The boy wakes. He hears something moving. He looks. In the dim light he sees the other priest walking with Bertram towards the door of the dormitory. For a long time the boy lies quietly. He waits until Bertram comes back to bed. He hears him sobbing.

In the morning Bertram is quiet. He sits next to Patrick but does not talk. He says nothing at lunchtime, or at dinner. When they go to the church to sing, the boy notices Bertram is shaking. The other priest is taking the evening service. He looks at Bertram and then at the boy then raises a hand towards them to make the sign of the cross. He looks again at both of them before turning back to the altar and tabernacle.

It is Saturday morning. The boys are free until lunchtime. After breakfast the boy and Bertram go to their special place near the tree. Bertram is quiet. The boy listens to the sounds of the birds and the trucks that pass along the road near the school. Bertram sits by Patrick. He asks, how far away is Africa from here?

That evening there is a catechism class with old Aloysius. The two boys feel happy and hold hands. The boys ask about eating the ants at dinner and old Aloysius tells the story but it has a different ending. He says his friend ate the ants, not him. Old Aloysius often mixes his stories up, but the boys enjoy them even more. Every lesson with old Aloysius is a happy one. Bertram asks questions about Africa – how far away is it? On a train and long ship journey croaks old Aloysius, giving him a big smile. How much did it cost you to go there? Nothing, said old Aloysius. God paid for me to go there - to eat the ants and to come back here to be with you curious boys, who ask questions about Africa and not about catechism. He laughs and speaks in a shaking voice, I once nearly got killed by two elephants. The boys are quiet as the elephant story begins. Later the bell rings and it is suppertime.

Next day the boy notices his friend Bertram is crying. He goes to talk with him but Bertram runs away. He is not at the table for lunch. The boy must find his friend. Bertram is near their tree. He has his ear to the ground. What can you hear, says the boy? Bertram turns his pale face to the boy. I am listening to sounds in Africa. I am trying to hear my father, but all I hear is a growling. It's a wild animal, but I don't know what it is. Perhaps, an elephant, says the boy. Perhaps, replies Bertram. Both boys put their ears to the ground and listen for a long time. I think the animal has gone away, murmurs Bertram. The boy nods his head. Perhaps.

Sunday evening is a busy time. All the boys gather in the church and wait for the service. Before the tabernacle the boys close their eyes and think about all the animals in Africa. The boy sees his father climbing onto the back of an elephant. He whispers to Bertram. My father is on an elephant. Bertram smiles. My father keeps two lions as pets. He is feeding them now.

When school begins on the Monday morning the first two lessons are with the other priest. He gets angry when the boy asked questions in class. You should know the answers, you stupid boy. I taught it last week. This week is revision. Next month the exams start. How will you pass anything? He looks at Bertram and the boy. Two useless boys. Stand up, he snarls. Look at these two boys, he growls to the class. Ignorant. A shame to your fathers who are fighting this war. You do not deserve good parents. Useless boys.

That evening the two boys sit together in the church. The other priest is taking religious instruction. He keeps scowling. When the singing time arrives neither of the boys sing. Both are upset and frightened. As the other priest shakes the great brass bowl with the incense in it, the boy notices that it is swinging wildly. The two boys look at each other. If the great gleaming gold brass incense carrier is thrown into the air it will surely hit them. Bertram ducks and hides his face. He is shaking. Patrick holds his hand. When it comes time to say Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus, the two boys are quiet. The hymn begins and the boy feels his throat hurting.

Eventually the service ends and it is time for bed. The boy cannot sleep for a long time. He was just going to sleep when he feels someone touch him. He awakes and is frightened. He says to himself, I don't want to go with him. I don't want to go there anymore. No, no, no.

Bertram is holding onto him and crying. He crawls in beside the boy and they hug each other. The boy knows why Bertram is crying. The boy begins to make plans.

I am stronger than Bertram, thinks the boy. I will tell the other priest that neither of us will go to his room anymore. He feels strong for a moment. Then feels afraid. What if the other priest lets the evil inside the boy grow so big, it kills his father? And it might also kills Bertram's father too. He shakes with fear. Bertram whispers. Patrick. Please help me.

The boy does not answer. He will help Bertram, but he does not know how to do it. That night the boy dreams of many things. He sees his mother singing to soldiers in the war. She finishes singing and smiles. I will come to see you. The boy sees his father in Africa. Two large strong hands hold him and he hears the voice of his father. When you arrive, Patrick, we will have an adventure. I will show you rainbow snakes that live in trees. I will show you monkeys with long tails that tie them around trees to stop themselves falling off when they sleep.

He has another dream. The other priest is panting and shaking. White evil liquid is coming from his mouth. The boy watches his dream happening. His father comes near the other priest, and changes him into a dark animal. His father takes a spear from the wall. The animal turns into the other priest and back again into an animal. The animal squirms on the floor and the white evil comes out. It forms a lake into which the animal sinks until it is seen no more. For a long time the boy watches the white lake and listens to the bubbles of the hissing white liquid. His father speaks. Go, sleep now. I will wait for you in Africa.

He wakes again. Bertram is asleep. The boy unclasp their hands and he takes Bertram to his own bed. He covers him with a blanket. The boy looks at his friend thinking about what his father had shown him in the dream. He is not afraid any more. He will tell the other priest he will never go to his room again. And neither will Bertram.

For several days the other priest is away. Old Aloysius takes the boys for several classes. The boy goes to his desk. How did you get to Africa? Oh, murmured old Aloysius. I had a map. I had food and drink. I did not need any warm clothes, as it was hot. I traveled only in daytime as some wild animals hunt for food at night. Nights in Africa are dark, except when the moon shines. Outside my tent there was a fire. It burned all night to keeps the animals away. I traveled for seven days and slept for seven nights. I came to a river, the Limpopo, and found a canoe. I stayed in the middle of the river and paddled quickly to avoid the crocodiles. Eventually, I came to a village. I was tired and hungry. Villagers gave me food and water and I slept. God said to me – Aloysius, you will be happy here. I woke in the morning and I was happy.

The boy looks at the tired old man. The boy asks – why are your eyes so watery? Old Aloysius smiles at the boy. When I think of Africa my eyes begin to water. Go and play now, I need a long sleep. I am tired.

From a place high above the school the boy sees old Aloysius walking to his room. He watches as the old priest stops, rests and then starts again. In the distance the boy sees Africa. It looks like a map. He tries to get closer to the land, but cannot. From high above the school church, the boy looks at the old fragile priest inching his way to his room and his bed.

The boy now begins his plan. He says nothing to Bertram. He will tell him later. When the time comes for banking he goes to the school bank and takes out his pocket money. It is not much, but enough to buy food for at least two days. He is sure that Bertram has a little money. With the two of them traveling together, they will share their food. When they are hungry perhaps they will buy eggs. Old Aloysius told them that when he lived in Africa he ate many eggs.

A few days later the boy decides to ask old Aloysius if he could see a map of Africa. The old man will ask him why? The boy knows he will have to lie. He will then steal the map. But it will only be a short time. When they get back from Africa the boy will give old Aloysius his map and apologise. Old Aloysius will understand. He knows how boys think and he is a kind priest. The boy will wait until he has a class with old Aloysius. He will steal the map after the lesson. It will seem less suspicious.

When the time comes for the lessons, old Aloysius does not appear. It is a new priest. He seems to be in a strange mood and leaves the boys to read their books. During the lesson two other priests and the Principal come into the room, talk briefly to the teacher and leave. All of them look upset. There is a Catechism lesson in the evening but old Aloysius is not there. It is the new priest and he makes mistakes during the service. He seems to be thinking of something else other than the benediction and the hymns. At the end of the service he asks all the boys to remain behind. The boy listens. As he hears what has happened he knows he has to made a decision soon. Evil is approaching him and Bertram. Old Aloysius is dead. The boy knows the other priest has deliberately killed old Aloysius to stop him from helping Bertram.

Next morning there is a free time. Bertram and the boy go to their secret place. The boy tells his friend what has happened and he says the other priest has killed old Aloysius. They talk about their two fathers in Africa. Patrick shows Bertram his pocket money. There is enough for food and eggs. The boy is sure he does not have enough money to get them all the way to Africa. But he knows about not paying for a train ticket. When the ticket collector comes round they will both go into the corridor. The boy will tell the ticket collector their parents are sitting in the carriage in front of them. This will fool the ticket collector. Soon they would be at the seaport. There are big ships there. They will hide in one and wait until they get to Africa. If they stay in the lifeboat they will be safe. Both boys have seen films where people hide in lifeboats. And, says Bertram, if the ship get into a storm and sinks we are already safe in the lifeboat. For the first time for many days the boys laugh and are happy. Soon they will be with their fathers and away from the other priest.

Saturday is a good day for the two boys to begin their journey. Much of the day is free and no one sees them leaving school. Both have a small bag with a warm jersey in it. They check they have paper and pencils to write down their adventures on the way to Africa. The boy gives Bertram a new notebook. Then he checks that he has his map of Africa. He put it in a bag in case it rains. Bertram knows about monsoons and rains in Africa. But, he murmurs, eventually the sky gets tired of raining and asks the sun to make the ground hard again.

It is easy to get out of the school grounds. The two boys link arms, sing softly and walk through back streets until they are clear of the town. It is a warm day and they carry their coats. Bertram shouts and jumps. In Africa, we will not need our coats and we will sell them to buy food. They reach the countryside, Bertram notices they are at a crossroads. He wonders which turning to take. The boy is more confident. There is more sun in Africa than anywhere else in the world, he thinks. So we will follow the direction of the sun. They go towards the glowing sunset. Both boys are happy. Before the sun turns red they sit down to eat. Both are hungry. They eat. Soon there is hardly any food left. The boy smiles at his friend. He tells Bertram that they will be at the seaport the next day and there will be many ships going to Africa. Won't it be fun to wake up tomorrow morning on a ship and to think we will soon be seeing our father? Our fathers will get a big surprise. Bertram nods. He knows the boy is right. In a few days time the ship will stop in Africa. When the boys get off the ship they will buy bananas, nuts and drink pineapple juice. After eating and drinking they will go to see their fathers.

Both boys feel tired. Bertram would like to rest for a while. They sit, have another drink and watch the sun turning red. I'm feeling cold, murmurs Bertram. The boy is cold too. They put on their warm jackets and lie on the grass to hear the birds sing their good night songs.

As the bird song fades and the sun too the boy notices Bertram is starting to shiver. He finds a biscuit and gives it to Bertram who eats it slowly and smiles.

The boy is looking for somewhere warm to sleep. He looks around, but only moves a few paces. He wants Bertram to see him at all times. The boy knows he is the stronger of the two. His body is strong. Often he looks in the mirror and thinks. I will be a weight lifter one day. Bertram will never be a champion. His legs are thin. So are his arms. He coughs even in summer and does not run fast. That is okay, thinks the boy to himself. He is my good friend. We are going to Africa together and his father will look after him. The sun will be good for Bertram. The boy knew that fact. He had read about the hot sun of Africa in the school library.

The only warm place is in a ditch near a tree. Branches hang low and stop the wind. The boy helps Bertram towards the tree. He pulls up the collar on Bertram's coat until it covers part of his face. He looks at his friend's eyes. He murmurs into his friend's ear that tomorrow they will be on their way to Africa. There is a smile from Bertram who closes his eyes. The boy holds his hand for a long time. Now the boy will sleep too. He thinks about his father. He thinks about the ship. Old Aloysius had talked about the ships that went to Africa. He said when he arrived there, he saw animals with long necks, with long noses, with teeth that killed in one snap of their jaws. The crocodiles of Africa are large. Old Aloysius told the story of teaching at school in Africa and how on one day a small girl went missing. She was eaten by the crocodile. We all cried. But one boy said the river god had taken her.

Old Aloysius told stories about birds. I have seen the nest of the weaverbird. So many of them. Africa is wonderful. In the evening the sun grows and grows. You think it is going to burst and shower you with red when all of a sudden it changes its mind and quickly runs over the horizon and is gone. Night is black. So black. But, soon you see the stars. They are bright too. Much brighter than here in school. Have I told you, boy? The stars of Africa are the floor of heaven. We will walk on that floor and see the whole earth.

The boy wakes. Bertram is holding his arm. The boy cannot see his friend in the darkness but he knows Bertram is crying. I want my mother, I want my father. The boy holds him tight. It's too late to go to Africa tonight, he says. In the morning, we will go quickly to the ship. Bertram is shaking and coughing.

The boy cannot sleep now. He holds his friend until the light begins to appear. He sees blood. You are bleeding, Bertram? Yes, replied Bertram. I feel sick.

The boy knows he will not go to Africa now. Bertram is sick. The journey is too difficult for him. The boy has seen films of people who die on journeys. He does not want his friend to die. He recalls the war films shown each Saturday evening in the school hall. Soldiers die after being hit with bullets. Sailors die too when their ships are hit with torpedoes. One soldier wrote a letter and gave it to a friend to take to their family. One sailor put the letter in a bottle and threw it overboard before the ship sinks and he dies. You see the bottle arriving on a beach in England. A child is walking on the beach with a dog and they find the bottle. The film ended then. What was the boy to do? He looked at Bertram. He opens the food box. It is nearly empty. He gives the last piece of food to Bertram, but he does not eat it. The boy has no idea where Bertram's home is. He looks at his friend who is coughing and letting blood fall out of his mouth. For a long time the boy sits there looking at Bertram and the place where they had spent the cold night. The boy shivers. He too is cold. He thinks of his home and his mother. But she is not at home. She had written him a letter saying she is nursing injured soldiers and singing. He knows she is putting bandages on broken legs and arms and singing songs to make the sick soldiers sleep. He knows the name ENSA. She is always going there to help people. It must be near the hospital where she works.

Bertram, he murmurs. Where does your mother live? I will take you home and she will look after you. I don't know how to get there. Bertram coughs again. The boy watches the watery red streak around Bertram's mouth turn a bright red.

He waits and watches Bertram as the blood dries. It begins again, stops and dries. Every few minutes there is more coughing. If the boy had any thought of getting Bertram to Africa, that thought has gone. The boy stares at his friend and consoles him as best he can. Both boys are wet. It has rained in the night and it is raining again. Both shiver. The boy waits. He hopes that the sun will shine, that he will get more food and help his friend. But, he knows this will not happen. He thinks. This must be the work of the other priest. Perhaps he found out that they were going to leave the school and he is trying to prevent it. The boy knows the other priest can see the thoughts of both him and Bertram.

The rain stops. The boy looks at his friend. Bertram is now ashen grey and as the boy helps him to his feet he finds that Bertram has become so heavy he can hardly hold him. Is this the power of the other priest? Bertram coughs again and the blood goes over the boy's shirt. The boy waits and looks. He will get help for his friend. Bertram is silent. He coughs. He looks at the boy. There are no words. The boy knows his friend needs him.

A bell rings from a long distance. It is from the town. The boy hugs his friend and tries to carry him. He cannot. He waits for a moment and tries again. Slowly the two boys can be seen moving from the safety of the tree to the open road. The boy does not know where he will get help. Bertram slips to the ground again and again. The boy lifts him and they move. From above it is possible to see a farmhouse in the distance. Eventually the boy is near the farmhouse. He sees a gate and gently lays his friend on the ground while he opens the gate. The boy goes inside and looks. There is a house. He goes back and talks to Bertram who says nothing. The boy leaves his friend and knocks on the door. A woman answers. He pulls her by the hand to the gate. She sees Bertram.

For the next week the boy is isolated in the school. He sits in the locked room and his food is brought to him. So are clean clothes. He looks out of the window and sees the school playground. All the boy can do is watch. The priest who brings food and clothing each day says nothing to him. He says nothing to the priest. It is a world of silence.

Gradually the boy builds up his own collection of sounds. He often hears footsteps. He tries to work out which priest is passing by. When food arrives, the boy knows there will be a silence as the tray is placed on the floor outside his door. Then he hears a key groan as it agrees to open the door. He hears the sounds of the other boys outside. When the school classes are over the noise is loud and happy. When the boys return to class the sounds fade slowly. He hears small noises from a long way off. Doors close and open and the sounds of boots on tiles become part of his strange symphony of sound. At night he hears the singing in the church. His own throat feels sore. He knows that the white liquid had stuck there. He will never sing again until it is gone.

On the fourth day he asks the priest if he can go outside for a walk. There is no answer, but some hours later another priest enters his room. The boy is seen putting on his shoes and going out of the room. He is being taken to the small garden where the school priests sit in the evening. He is told he can sit there. From the road of the church the other priest is seen entering the garden. He has no idea the boy is there and only realises who it is when he almost facing the boy. There is a long silence. The silence gets longer. A stranger looking at the other priest would notice that his cheeks are taut, his eyes are frightened and his mouth tense. The boy looks and looks. Finally the other priest plans to walk away. He turns. The boy is silent as the other priest turns and his flushed face explodes. He hisses. You evil boy. He will die. He will die. All because of you. You are damned.

A new priest takes the boy to benediction service that night. The other priest is conducting the service. The boy feels a pain in his throat. He does not like the other priest singing to God. He makes a promise to himself that he will not sing again until he sees Bertram and they are together again. Bertram is his best friend. He looks around. Bertram is not there.

Two days later the boy hears the sound of four shoes coming down the corridor. The boy rises from his chair and stands back from the door. He knows it is not a mealtime and he knows too that the sounds of the second pair of feet are different to those of the priests with their heavy black shoes. These are lighter and quicker. He waits. Once again the key groans and the door opens.

There is a woman standing there with the school principal. He recognises his mother and says nothing. He does not know why she has come to the school. She looks at him. In the silence he hears the school principal speak. Your mother has come for you, in a voice as if it is coming from a long distance.

From above the roof of the school the Principal is seen closing the door and going down the corridor. Inside the room the mother and the boy stand looking at each other. She quickly pulls and holds him and then sobs. The boy begins crying too, but he does not know why. He cries and cries. His mother speaks. We are going home. Where is your suitcase?

The boy did not say goodbye to anyone. He stands by his mother as she buys the tickets for the train. He listens to the approaching train. It screams. I want to stop. He counts seven train carriages and pulls his mother towards carriage six. There is no reason. He did not want to be in any of the other carriages. Another scream. I'm going now. A flag waves. The train takes him away forever from the school and the other priest.

He sleeps. Wakes. His mother is watching him. She holds his hand and smiles. He sleeps again. Wakes. His mother is sleeping. It is getting dark. He knows he will be home soon. The boy looks forward to watching his mother starting a fire in their big black fireplace. The wood will catch fire, crackle and he will laugh. He likes fires. They make him think of wonderful things. Dragons. Clouds. Animals. He decides he will look out of his bedroom window and see the oak tree and beyond to the huge house with a red roof. The boy does not know who lives in the red house. Perhaps it is a giant as the house is big. Big enough for a giant. He will explore.

The boy thinks about Bertram. He had not seen him since they arrived at the farmhouse. When the boy asked the priest who brought him food if he had seen Bertram, the priest just shook his head. That was strange, as all the priests knew all the boys. The boy had wanted to say good-bye to his friend and to make a promise to him about another plan to go to Africa. He also wants to tell Bertram that neither of them would ever go again to see the other priest. The boy feels strong now.

A cry. The train is happy and shrieks with joy as it brakes at the village. People watch as the boy and his mother get into a car. This is the biggest car in the village. Grant, the hotel manager owns it and it is the bus and taxi and ambulance for the village. Inside the car a stranger would have seen two people sitting, but not talking. The mother is quiet. Her eyes are looking into an unknown place. The boy says nothing. He looks out of the window and counts numbers in his head until he arrives home. Four hundred and thirty. Usually it's a smaller number. On the last holiday he only counted to three hundred and seventy nine. Other children in the street watch the car stop at the small cottage near the wood.

The boy does not watch his mother make the fire, although he loves fires and the way they make his head think. His bedroom is more interesting. His books are in the same place on the same shelf. He smiles at his brown torn teddy bear called Russia and a framed picture of Spotty, his dog who died last Christmas. He gives the photograph a kiss. Russia is hugged and his favourite book is opened at page one, then page two.

When dinnertime comes the boy walks to the table and eats. His mother is looking at him. You will not be going back to that school, Patrick. He knows. He nods. Looking across the room another person would see the mother is tense. Her posture is rigid, her eyes moist.

The boy looks at his mother's eyes. You are crying. Is it for me? She nods. Yes. Yes.

There is no more talk that night.

In the morning the boy wakes to hear his mother playing the piano. It is the best time of day. The sun is shining and the boy hears the different notes of the piano dancing under his mother's fingers. When she stops playing, he listens to the birds singing outside. Her playing begins again.

The boy thinks. She is not singing this morning. He is puzzled. His mother always sings when she plays the piano in the morning.

At breakfast he is quiet. His mother looks at him. He imagines he is outside the kitchen window standing by the oak tree. He does not look at his mother. She is looking at him. You must tell me, Patrick. You must tell me what happened?

He looks at her. His face is serious. We were going to Africa. Bertram and I were going to Africa. His mother is quiet. She waits. Bertram wanted to see his father. I wanted to see my father too. Both of them are in great danger. The other priest will hurt them. Bertram thinks his father will die too, if we don't get there soon. I promised Bertram we will go there. We will try again. Perhaps, this time you will help me? We need more money and warmer clothes until we get on the ship and arrive in Africa. Bertram and I must go to Africa soon. It's important.

The boy thinks about the piano. He looks at his mother. You did not sing this morning. You always sing in the morning. Why did you not sing? I like your singing. He watches his mother. He likes the way her dark hair curls over her eyes. When she laughs her hair jumps, as if it too likes to also hear her laugh. He asks the question again.

He watches her from various positions around the room and her answers bounce inside him. I am sad, Patrick. I am so sad.

The boy knows his mother loves him. She came to school to get him and take him away from the other priest. So, why was she sad? He is now happy.

The boy tells his mother. You are always happy in the morning. The sun is shining. I love you. I am happy to be at home away from the other priest who was hurting Bertram and me. I want you to be happy too.

The boy stands up and walks toward his mother. He tells her. I want to hear you sing. Bertram would like to hear you sing too. I told him you always sing before breakfast and you make the birds jealous, because they can sing but they don't know so many songs. Bertram loves singing, but we agreed not to sing anymore until we got to Africa. Then we were going to sing all day.

The boy feels her arms around him. He knows this time he cannot go to many different places inside his head. He looks at his mother. The boy feels her hair touch his face. She is sobbing. It becomes louder. He struggles to break away from his mother. He wants to hear her sing again, not cry.

Why are you crying? I want you to sing. Then I will be happy and I will think of Bertram and he will be happy too. We planned to sing songs about giraffes and their long necks. He had made up a song about zebras that want to change the colour of their stripes.

Patrick, I can't sing today. I don't want to sing today.

The boy is upset. His mother must sing. For a long time he has not sung a song because of the other priest. Bertram and the boy had made a promise never to sing again until they reached Africa. The boy looks at his mother's face and squeezes her arm. Please sing and come with me to Africa. We will all be together then – you, me, father and Bertram and his mother and father.

There was no reply from his mother. This time the boy sees his mother from many different places. He is above her, high in the sky where he sees down and his mother, and father are sitting on an elephant. He watches his mother and himself from the oak tree outside his window. From a long way down the street near the shops he hears his own voice asking his mother about singing.

The boy watches his mother. He hears her talking. Her voice is strange. He recalls a dream he had at the school after the other priest touched his body. He dreamed that he woke up and no one looked at him. In his dream his mother is looking at him. Her eyes look through him as if he is not there and she is looking at someone else. Who is it? He hears her cold voice.

Patrick, I thought you knew. Bertram is dead. He died the day after you took him to the farmhouse. Did no one tell you?

This is based on a childhood experience at boarding school during WorldWar Two. It is based on a real events.