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Opening extract from

ANZAC Boys

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Published by

Barrington Stoke Ltd

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For all the Barkers, wherever they may be

First published in 2015 in Great Britain by
Barrington Stoke Ltd
18 Walker Street, Edinburgh, EH3 7LP

www.barringtonstoke.co.uk

And the Band Played Waltzing Matilda – words and music by Eric Bogle. Used courtesy of Domino Publishing Company Ltd.

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library upon request

ISBN: 978-1-78112-434-5

Printed in China by Leo

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CHAPTER 1

When I Was a Young Man

The gluey grey porridge was growing cold in its bowl.

"Come on, Frank, eat up," I whispered. "We don't want to get in trouble again. Father Murphy said it's a sin to waste good food."

Me and my brother Frank were sitting at a table in the dining hall of the orphanage. It was a large room with a high ceiling and there were three long, narrow tables down the middle. A hundred boys in thick grey shirts and trousers sat on the hard benches that ran down either side. Most of us were spooning up porridge from our bowls as fast as we could, but Frank had barely touched his.

"It's slimy," he complained. "It makes me feel sick." He puffed out his cheeks and made gagging noises.



"Ssshhh!" I snapped. "Just swallow it before you get us both in trouble." I looked round, but Father Sullivan, the priest on breakfast duty, didn't seem to have heard.

"Stop telling me what to do." Frank scowled and chucked his spoon down. "I'm not going to eat this muck, and you can't make me."

That was the trouble with Frank – he could be dead awkward sometimes. Some boys near by glanced at us, and Father Sullivan turned to look as well. But at that moment the doors of the dining hall slammed open and Father Darcy strode in.

"Bert and Frank Barker?" he bellowed. His narrow eyes scanned the room. I jumped up from the bench and pulled Frank with me. Father Darcy's gaze locked onto us. "Father Murphy wants to see you," he snapped. "Well, what are you waiting for?"

Father Darcy turned on his heel and strode out. I was worried now. Father Murphy was the priest in charge. As I hurried after Father Darcy, dragging Frank along, I panicked but I couldn't

think of what we had done to make Father Murphy cross.

We'd been in the orphanage a month. Before that, we lived with our mum in Kentish Town. Our dad had died when Frank was a baby, and life had been hard ever since. Mum worked in a laundry, but her wages only just covered our rent. We were poor, but we managed. I did my best to help Mum – keeping Frank from under her feet and running errands. The three of us were happy. And then Mum got sick.

She got the sack from her laundry job, and then there was no money to pay for a doctor. Mum had done a lot of praying instead, and she'd dragged herself to Mass every Sunday. But she died anyway. God and His saints let her down. There was nobody to take in Frank and me, so our priest packed us off to St Patrick's orphanage. It had been a bit of a shock, to say the least. First our mum was torn away from us, and then we found ourselves dumped in this huge, cold building with a hundred other waifs and strays.



It was a terrible place. We all had to wear a uniform of grey shirts and trousers, and they itched like mad. We slept in cold, bare dorms with a dozen beds in each. They woke us at six every morning for Mass, and we spent the rest of the day in lessons. There were bullies, and fights, and anything we had got nicked. But the worst thing of all was the priests.

The priests prowled around at all hours of the day and night in their long black cassocks, like giant ravens who might eat you alive. Some of them enjoyed whacking boys on the backside or round the head. If a boy talked back or gave them cheek, they locked him in a cupboard for hours, or beat him with a heavy leather strap.

At night the dorms were full of the sound of sobbing.

So, I suppose it would be fair to say I didn't much like the orphanage. But Frank hated the place. I was old enough to understand I had to keep my thoughts to myself, but Frank couldn't keep his trap shut. He was always getting told off for complaining. He hadn't got the strap yet, but I knew it was only a matter of time before

he did. I spent my whole life making excuses for him and protecting him from the other boys – and the priests. And then I had to comfort him at night when he cried.

I didn't really mind. We were family, and we had no one but each other. We both missed our mum so much, and Frank couldn't help being the way he was. He hated people telling him what to do. He had this way of looking straight at you that really rattled the priests – and so they looked for any excuse to take out their anger on him. He was an easy target. I was 12, almost a grown-up, but he was only 9. I look tough – dark, with brown eyes, and small for my age, but stocky. Mum always said I wouldn't grow tall because we never had enough food. But that didn't seem to have held Frank back. He was already as tall as me, but skinny, and fair, and soft-looking.

As we walked along the corridor that day behind Father Darcy, I turned to look at Frank as he tried to keep up on his long, spindly legs. His bottom lip was trembling, and his face was pale. I had to do something to make him feel better. I



didn't know then that what I was about to say would come back to haunt me. To haunt both of us.

"Listen, Frank, don't worry – whatever happens I promise I'll always take care of you." I kept my voice low so Father Darcy wouldn't hear – he had a sharp tongue and a quick temper. "We'll be fine so long as we're together," I whispered.

Frank glanced at me and nodded, swallowing hard.

Just then we arrived at Father Murphy's study. Father Darcy opened the door and ushered us inside. The study was lined with glass-fronted bookcases full of leather-covered volumes, and it had a window with a view onto the garden. Father Murphy was sitting at his desk, a cross on the wall behind him. Below the cross was a jewel-coloured picture of Mary and the baby Jesus. It made me think of my mum and I bit my tongue, hard.

Father Murphy looked up. He had cold blue eyes and a thatch of silver hair brushed back from his forehead. His lips were thin and stern

and he never smiled. On bad days, I thought God himself probably looked like Father Murphy. Me and Frank stood before him and my heart hammered away in fear.

"Thank you, Father Darcy," Father Murphy said. His voice was deep, his Irish accent strong. "Well, boys," he said. "I have something very important to tell you. We've been thinking about your case, and it has been decided your future lies elsewhere."

"Sorry, Father?" I stuttered. "I'm not sure what you mean."

"It's simple," Father Murphy said. "We were more than happy to take you boys in here at St Patrick's when your poor mother died, God rest her soul."

"God rest her soul indeed, Father," Father Darcy broke in, and he crossed himself.

"But now we'll be sending you to another place," Father Murphy said.

"Another place, Father?" I said. "Where?"

"Australia," Father Murphy said. "You'll be leaving in three days."

