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Opening extract from

The December Boys

Written by

Michael Noonan

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1

'Have you anything more to confess, my son?'

The husky whisper came from the dark shape behind the metal grille, the head of the priest.

Yes, I had but I was having trouble getting it off my chest.

So far my sins had been routine and unspectacular: swear words; the name of Jesus Christ taken in vain; laughing in church; telling lies about washing my feet at night, and behind my ears; morning and evening prayers ignored. Yet I felt I had an excuse for abandoning prayer since I was already treading the strands of what seemed tantamount to anyone's paradise – Roman Catholic, Protestant or whatever.

'Speak up, my son.'

How could I explain? It was no fault of mine that I had come by the information. It had been thrust on me, a sort of forbidden fruit. Yet I had been given no choice but to partake of it.

'I've got a secret,' I said at last.

'A secret, my son?'

'Yes, Father.'

'And it troubles you?'

'Yes, Father.'

'Perhaps you have been tempted by bad thoughts?'

My acquaintance with the world of the flesh had not yet begun in the way that he suggested, but I had most certainly been having bad thoughts of a kind. In fact, for some ten days my life had been one long bad thought. The information I had overheard was precious, and I had been obsessed with thinking how to stop it from reaching the sunburnt ears of my four companions.

'A secret can be a sin, my son.'

I was afraid of that.

'It will ease your mind to unburden yourself?'

So I told him. I revealed how I had been an eavesdropper, quite unintentionally, to a conversation between a man named Fearless Foley and another called Shellback O'Leary, and how the woman Teresa was involved.

It set him a problem not frequently posed by a customer aged just twelve. He pondered in that curtained box where the dark birds of conscience were uncaged and vanquished. As I knelt in the confessional, the silence

outside was choked with prayer. It was broken only by the clatter of the forgiven and the about-to-be-forgiven in and out of the pews.

'My son,' came the whisper, 'in keeping this knowledge to yourself are you being fair to the others? By remaining silent it is possible that you are being selfish, and that in itself can be sinful in the eyes of God. Surely, then, for your own peace of mind it would be best for you to tell the other boys all that you overheard. Share the secret with them, my son. The good things of life, and the burdens, are all the better if they are shared.'

He droned absolution in mumbo Latin. Penance seemed to range in those days from three Hail Marys to a decade of the Rosary, depending on the frequency and magnitude of sin confessed. I was spared this, but I knew enough about my religion to understand that the cleansing of my soul would not be final until I had carried out the priest's prescription and given those eight sunburnt ears something to set them tingling.

'Pray for me, my son,' he murmured as he slid a wooden panel across the grille and opened up for business on the other side of the box.

Pray for him? Surely, after having been set this task, I was going to be busy enough praying for myself.

2

Just over two weeks earlier we had come to the place called Captain's Folly and looked down on the sea (and the scene of my unwitting sin) for the first time in our lives.

We had nine eyes between us for the event, nine good eyes, all as bright as quicksilver that morning: the usual two apiece for Spark, Maps, Fido and me, one only for Misty. His right eye did not work properly and he kept it hidden behind a clouded spectacle pane.

Until now the earth's surface had been pieces of pie-crust shaped like continents and islands, all surrounded by water. Not ordinary water. Water with power: the power to inspire men to sea-shanties; the power to cast others away under lone palm trees while it took years to

deliver their bottled messages back to civilisation. And what a wonder it was. Sheer immensity. Sky distilled to liquid. As we stood on a hilltop yellowed by summer, it was a Friday morning, and our sockless toes curled and flared in our Sunday boots.

'There it is, boys,' said Mrs McAnsh. 'The Pacific.'

'That's right. The Specific,' murmured her husband, introducing us to the odd distorted echoes of her statements that became more pronounced when he had been imbibing.

Our glimpses of the sea up to this time had been highly artificial. There was the oil-painting in the visitors' room at St Roderick's, a murky seascape freckled with full stops dropped by the outback version of the common house-fly, and at one time or another we had all fixed our eyes on it while married couples decided that their childless lives were not so dismally unfulfilled after all. Now not a single fly-spot marred our view. Only the hovering motes of our own dizziness lay between us and a gloss that was the glaze off a billion beautiful blue-green tiles.

No glimpse had prepared us for this. Certainly not the azure pond behind Our Lady Star of the Sea in the big print in the chapel at St Roderick's. That was a dull imitation. Nor were the travel posters around the railway station equal to what confronted us now, no matter how tantalisingly their headlands and their surf had beckoned to us through the heat-waves that pulsed off the bricks.

Fido, much the smallest of the five of us, so slight that

his bones might have been thin steel rods and fence wire, now had one of his seizures.

'Crumbs!' he twanged. 'It's gotta fire under it.'

'A fi-er?'

The crack-voiced warble came from behind us, from the knuckle-ankled, double-shafted, black-frocked stand for a hat that looked like a secondhand wreath, the petals of its satin roses dog-eared, flattened and faded.

'A fi-er?' repeated Mrs McAnsh, the female section of the kind couple in whose charge we were to be. '*Under* it?'

'Lady, just look!' cried Fido, skin and fence wire trembling down at the snowy flummeries that clumped into shape and rolled, shrinking, to the sand. 'It's on the boil! Boilin' over! Gotta fire under it!'

Hullo, I thought, Fido could be right. This so-called sea is molten glass frothing along the edge. It's hot up here, too. That's why.

The male hatstand spoke up: 'Upon my wretched soul, Cynthia, this time we surely have a bright lot of distress signals in our safekeeping.'

Distress signals! Us? What did he mean by that, this ageing hatstand?

He had thick bow legs to upholster baggy trousers that wrinkled over unpolished brown boots. His moustache was untrimmed and untrained and grinned on behalf of the mouth it partly hid. His hat looked as if it might have a lively hard-luck story to tell. For instance, it could have been blown a hundred miles across the sharp edges of a

stony desert, then carried out to sea, sodden, salted, hurled ashore, there to be snatched up by a crazy beachcomber of a dog, shaken and wrenched, perforated by teeth and abandoned at death's door. The brim drooped all around and looked as if it would collapse altogether when the sun worked up to its full thump.

Another of the alleged distress signals fluttered. It was Misty this time.

''Sa flood!' he yelled suddenly. 'A flood!' He lapsed into the sort of talk we heard from the stock saleyards next door to St Roderick's. 'It's the biggest damned almighty flood ever there was!'

'Upon my very wretched soul!' muttered Mr McAnsh.

'Language! Language!' cried his wife – at us, of course.

Mr McAnsh used a cuff to wipe the mouth of a bottle of ruby wine and handed it to his wife. A swig left her short of breath. 'Come along, boys,' she gasped. 'Come along down.'

'Up down,' muttered the other hatstand.

Mrs McAnsh's ankles wobbled as she trod over the rubble surface. Perhaps a nut in them wanted tightening, or a race of ball-bearings needed replacing. As we followed, Mr McAnsh shoved the wine-bottle in his hip pocket. It poked up through the cloth of his jacket and wagged at us like a sly forefinger.

3

Spark became vocal as we reached the end of the first leg of the zigzag road.

Probably the briny smell of the sea triggered it, somehow reminding him of the pungent animal odours that swamped through our classrooms and lingered in the dormitory on sale days. Sheep and cattle were sold once a week, and sometimes wild horses and goats. The bawling jangle of the auctioneers intrigued him, and one day he planned to join them. He was the only one of us certain of what he wanted to be; he was sure it would come to pass, and we believed so, too. He often imagined himself on an auctioneer's rostrum, and he had trial runs without anything particular to sell, indulging in a sort of inarticulate warming up, a flexing of his vocal cords, a

performance akin to the *do-re-mi* wails of the choir ladies who came to St Roderick's for what were supposed to be singing lessons.

Down the stretch of road he went. 'Hurrum! Hoo! Hee! Haw! Haw-hah! Haw-hah! Boing, boing! Bong! Old!' All of which we took to mean. 'One hundred! Two! Three! Four! Four and a half! Four and a half! Going, going! Gone! Sold!'

Spark was ginger and well freckled, his eyes milky blue. On a visit to St Roderick's the bishop had asked him what he did before going to sleep every night. Spark gave a prompt and canny reply: 'I pray for the Pope.' The bishop chortled and said that here was a bright spark, and thus a nickname was born.

We picked up the cheap suitcases containing our few belongings, and in the wake of the McAnshes and the wagging wine-bottle we descended into the mouth of a valley that ran into the sea. The formation was that of a headless torso, arms divided, wrists scarred by cliffs, and hands dipped into the ocean. At the foot of a steep hillside opposite were two cottages, one painted light blue, its garden ablaze with a species of ice-plant that opens by day and encrusts the ground in silken-surfaced sheaths of deep scarlet, magenta, buttercup, lavender and tangerine. Here and elsewhere on the hillside it was in patches so dense and glistening that each might have been some exotic tapestry laid out in the sunlight. The other cottage was white, its path marked by white-washed stones, and

in its garden was a phrase picked out in bleached shells:

THERE IS
NO JUSTICE

Another leg of the road took us to a point from which the full sweep of the beach lay revealed: sandhills with long grasses faintly tinged with green, dry yellow sand pocked like pewter, darker damp sand, smooth, except for a lone set of footprints down to the water.

The line of these footprints took our eyes through the waves to something that was bobbing towards the shore. A red ball? No, we saw a face under it. Someone was riding in with a wave. Presently, in the shallows, where the foam wove brief patterns of lace, a figure in a glistening green bathing-costume rose to her feet.

At a distance toddlers recognise fellow toddlers, small boys other small boys, dogs other dogs. We saw at once that this creature from the sea was a grown woman. She splashed through the thin foam to the wet sand, where she laid a second set of footprints. She used both hands to press the water down over her breasts and hips, and then she tugged off the red bathing-cap, letting loose a small flaxen shower that settled over her shoulders, until she brushed its flow to the back of her neck. She crumpled the bathing-cap as she walked and threw it up the beach. She moved forward at a run, checking herself with a slight dancing hop, and then she executed what must always be the most perfect and most beautiful cartwheel I have ever seen. She hung momentarily upside down on

the palms of her hands, her hair touching the sand; then her hair streamed back over her shoulders as the cartwheel landed her on her feet again. What a treat for our nine eyes. The distance seemed to make that cartwheel exquisitely slow, and every phase of it is impressed on my mind, a flower preserved with its original brightness between pages of memory.

Such was our first glimpse of Teresa.

She was beside the bathing-cap now and stooped to pick it up. As she reached the soft sand her walk changed, each step becoming a sort of downward jab. It puzzled us why she should suddenly seem to be marching, but we were soon to learn that the dry sand could retard footsteps and that this walk made crossing it easier. She was a grown woman, as we had been quick to decide, but that cartwheel seemed to tell us that part of her was still somewhere in our world.

The two hatstands were making fast time downhill and we hurried along after them, the ice-plants like brilliant banners opposite, the sea booming chords of greeting, and some two months of freedom ahead – a freedom which, because the means of an even greater escape was dangled in front of us, we were doomed to abuse.

4

Our bathing-costumes were designed and fashioned by the nuns in their workrooms at St Roderick's, but Old Nick had apparently taken a hand in their making, despite the presence of holy pictures and medals and other religious items that might have been expected to warn him off. They were cut from flour-bags and dyed black. The brand marks were still faintly discernible, and some of us wore them to the front, some to the back, as we trooped down from the McAnsh headquarters to inspect those feminine footprints. They were still the only marks on the wet sand, and since the tide was going out there was now a gap between the point where they ended and the edge of the water.

In a sense our bodies bore brands. We were burnt by

the outback sun, but only in parts. Our skin was pallid above the knees, around the neck and shoulders, and above the elbows, and the black of the costumes sharpened the whiteness as we stopped beside the footprints.

'Hasn't got very big dogs,' observed Spark, fitting a foot into the outline in the sand. He had caught this expression from Sister Ursula, who was always telling us that her poor old dogs were barking. She had bad bunions, yet outwardly she was the happiest nun, and since she could be cheerful even though suffering we came to regard her as the only truly saintly woman in the convent.

'Got wallopin' big 'ands, though,' said Fido, as usual dropping the tail of one word and the head of another, as he went down on his knees to spread his thin fingers like crow's feet in the imprint of one of the hands.

'She must have got herself left behind,' said Misty.

Our demands for enlightenment overlapped.

'Left behind?' ''Ow?' 'When?' 'You're barmy!'

'By the circus.'

'Whatcha talkin' about?' 'What circus?'

'She must be one of them acrobats. Probably from a circus. Got herself left behind.'

'Arr, you've got some of your behind stuck where your brains ought to be!' jeered Maps.

No one took up Misty's theory. He had been obsessed by circuses ever since the Rotary gentlemen took us to a matinee of the circus that had stayed a week at the rear of the saleyards. I remember it mainly because the local

kookaburras used to start their cackling at the first wink of dawn, and from the racket let loose by the lions it was clear that the noblest of beasts took the jackass laughter as some sort of Antipodean insult.

Spark examined a footprint nearer the water. 'Haw! She's got corns!'

'Whereabouts?'

'You got eyes!'

With his forefinger Spark whisked inside the curve at the base of the big toe. There was a distinct bump in the imprint, but how could the feet of a person capable of such a supple and carefree cartwheel be marred by corns of any consequence? Spark was being disdainful just to avoid any suggestion that he had been impressed by anyone of the female sex. We had heard him already in the sleeping-hut adjoining the McAnsh cottage as we changed into bathing-costumes: 'All she was doing was shaking the ants out of her hair.'

Corns or no corns, we followed the footprints down to where they finished, and then we stood facing the sea.

Dare we venture into it so soon?

'C'mon! C'min!' yelled Maps. He had the sharpest voice among us, and in fact he was the sharpest in looks and in ways. His nickname had arisen from his early habit of peering into atlases and slowly tracing routes across land and ocean with his finger. Thus he had a certain acquaintance with the sea and had reason to lead us into it.

We advanced behind him into the shallows where the stampeding high-dazzlers of waves feebly hissed their last. We fingered the water with our toes, curling them, sheathing our feet and ankles in cool transparent boots. The water magnified and distorted our toenails and they wiggled up at us even when we did not move them. There were many times when we shared the same emotion, and this was one of them. We were deeply aware of the ocean's might, its beauty and its mystery, as we moved farther into it, little by little, letting out cries of mingled fright and ecstasy as the first waves struck our shins and the leaping spray speckled our bathing-costumes with wetness. It roared out enough sound of the sea to fill thousands of shells, and we shouted against it.

'It's fizzin' like lemonade!'

'Pity there isn't a fire under it. I'm froze.'

'It's mad!'

'Hey, it tastes like holy water!'

'Wow, it's strong. It's trying to push me over!'

This was our first communion with a great entity. God had created the world and its waters, yet was not the sea in its turn responsible for the existence of so much else? For the exploits of Vasco da Gama, Magellan, Columbus, Sir Walter Raleigh? Without the sea what reason would we have for remembering these adventurers? It was responsible for trade winds, Trafalgar, pirates and press gangs, the fingerprint whorls of ocean currents on world maps, the giant hair of the Sargasso, the *Flying Dutchman*

and the *Fighting Temeraire*, jellyfish, flying fish, whales, sharks, the confusion over the plural spelling of the octopus and the trials of trying to rattle off *She sells seashells on the seashore* . . .

Maps took the first plunge, backing into a wave and sitting down in its path, his guarded eyes all staring for once, his cockscomb of black hair briefly enveloped in an outsize Dominican cowl. He vanished for some moments, then stood up blowing hard, his hair flattened, his bathing-costume stuck to his body like a skin of new lacquer. One by one we dipped ourselves, Misty taking care to keep his head well clear of the water, and soon we were all spluttering and hollering, so much so that we collected a small audience.

Above the rocks either side of the bay there were ledges, and above these were shacks half-built into the cliff-face, making homes out of caves. On the left was a yellow-fronted shack, and set against this background was a squat, bald man with skin the colour of vinegar, roomy shorts dangling at an angle from his hips, and his hands forming a double brim over his eyes. To the right, in front of a shack painted grey and partly glassed-in, was a lean, tall, man, who smoked a pipe and seemed to be slowly unlimbering the joints in the fingers of his free hand. And on the beach, a little down from the gap in the sandhills, the cartwheel lady was watching us, a wide-brimmed hat on her head. The McAnshes had warned us not to go too far out into the

surf, and as we began to withdraw so did the three watchers.

Misty was first to leave, partly because a splash hit his spectacles, partly because his fingers had become bloodless and cold. The rest of us were close behind him. I mentioned that Old Nick had been in on the making of our bathing-costumes. He was due to have a most satisfying time in Captain's Folly. Now was his first chance to smirk behind the prongs of his pitchfork. The water around us seemed to be dusky. We were emanating blackness. And as we came out of the water and onto sand we found that the dye was running, striping our legs.

This was not the only humiliation. The flour-bags were holding water. We floundered around with its dead weight caught in the backsides.

'Hey, look! We've been turned into bumble-bees!' yelled a delighted Sparks.

Fido let go a few thin chirps of laughter. Misty was terrified. I think Maps must have suspected some Satanic conspiracy, and I remember being embarrassed. But, as the water drained away down our legs, there was no one watching, except an aged grey horse not far from that yellow-fronted shack. In the workrooms at St Roderick's the nuns might be experts at making gorgeous vestments for the priests and turning out exquisite embroidery, but they were poor hands at bathing-costumes.

Hot sand soaked up the wetness as we settled ourselves near the mobile life-saving reel, a sort of

two-wheeled chariot, all ready for use with its canvas belt balanced on top of what looked like a mile of strong bleached cord. Our feet were towards the sea, and up in front of us was the weatherboard pavilion with a painted notice under the eaves:

CAPTAIN'S FOLLY
SURF AND LIFE-SAVING CLUB

The thud of the waves came up through the beach under us. To me it was a great fist wearily pounding to emphasise something it had been preaching for aeons, something to do with fate or destiny, some stern warning. I did not view the sea in terms of a flood, nor could I imagine that there was a fire under it. I was wary of it and reminded of something, but as yet I had not defined what that might be. At least it was not the clutching monster that Sister Agnes had warned us to expect.

She was a lay nun, one of the black-aproned worker bees in that stern hive, and she had entered the convent as an act of thanksgiving after being rescued in her girlhood from drowning.

What girlhood? We were entitled to ask that. It was beyond any of us to believe that the shrivelled and desolate beak poking out of that starched white wimple had ever glowed with the pink of youth. It was a thing of stale and hardened putty. It could never have been young enough to twitch at the fragrances of, say, its eleventh summer. And what an odd way to react to being rescued, committing oneself to a lifetime behind those joyless stone walls. If

Sister Agnes was capable of such imbalance, then surely her views on the sea were open to doubt.

About the time we were brushing chunks of old dry sand off our fronts, Fido suddenly curled up on knees and elbows. He was the first of us to spot the cartwheeling woman coming at that jabbing walk through the gap in the sandhills. She wore the same green bathing-costume, dry now and without any glisten, and balanced on her head was the wide-brimmed hat, of untinted straw with a cluster of knotty flowers made of raffia. We were able to identify the material because we used it at St Roderick's to make napkin rings that were sold at church bazaars or given as presents to patrons.

Sand spurted with each jab of her feet, happy feet, with bulges at the bases of her big toes certainly, but definitely no ungainly corns. She carried a bottle of thick liquid, cloudy and pink, and a smile began at the corners of her mouth as she stopped and looked down at us as we rose by way of hands and knees onto our feet.

'Who's the boss here?' she asked, singing it a little, making it a musical question.

We hesitated. We were not a gang with a recognised leader. We were lumped together and known as 'the December boys' because it was believed our birthdays were in the same calendar month. If we were to choose a leader, it would be either Sparks or Maps.

'Never mind, I'll be boss. Line up.'

What did she mean by this?

'Look at those shoulders,' she said. 'You'll burn yourselves red raw. Line up. That's the idea. Now who's first? You'll do. Just stand still.'

Maps had this honour. He narrowed his eyes when foxed or on guard, and they were like that now, while his top lip was cocked up to one side in a startled half-smile, half-grimace. Teresa shook the bottle and held the screw-on stopper between her teeth as she poured some of the pink liquid into the shallow of her palm and slapped it over Map's shoulders and began to spread it. Fido was wrong about her hands. They seemed an appropriate size for a grown woman and no more. They had something of the grace in their movements of that first cartwheel. Her breasts quivered as she rubbed, and her skin, although a seasoned brown over her shoulders and most of her arms and legs, was a honey tan around her throat and on her face. Her hair hung either side, paler than her high cheeks, and her eyes were a different hue to the hard jade of her bathing-costume, a sort of liquid golden-green.

'Where are you kids from?' she asked, trying to speak with the stopper between her lips.

'S'int Roderick's.'

She seemed to realise that we were a little dismayed by the way the stopper distorted her speech – to say nothing of the shape of her lips – so she gave it to Maps to hold while she started on Spark. From nervousness he began to gabble. Far from asserting that he knew that she was left over from a circus, he began to inform her how we

had travelled all yesterday by train after a dawn start and had arrived in the city shortly before another dawn when the big station was clanging with the sound of milk-cans being unloaded, and how we had mounted a bus and finished the journey cross-country to be met at a lonely stop by Mr and Mrs McAnsh. Misty was next, but Spark kept rattling out the talk. It was our first look at the sea, he said. We were here by courtesy of the titled lady who lived up there on the hill in the mansion that was enclosed by a high wall and topped by a glassed-in turret-room, itself topped by the gold glint of a weather-vane.

'That's Lady Hodge,' said Teresa. Without being told, she knew what we were and why we were here.

'Yes, and she's paying for our fares and our eats.'

'You kids sure could do with a good feed,' she said, completing the oiling of Misty and grasping my shoulder. 'You're all just skin and bone.'

The sunburn lotion was smooth and cool and strongly perfumed. The hills shimmered before my eyes as Teresa rubbed. I was afraid that I might somehow become magnetised. I had once seen someone rub the composition holder of an Eversharp pencil on rough cloth and so give it the power to make confetti-sized pieces of paper fly to it and stay stuck there. Too much of this rubbing and I would repeat that sort of thing on a much larger scale. Just a few scraps of newspaper lay half-buried, but perhaps they would break loose from the pocked dry sand and hurtle at me and paper me all over. Near the pavilion

there was a noticeboard on a pole carrying a printed sheet of the by-laws of the district. It was curling away at the top corners and it, too, might come flying through the air to hit me between the eyes with the regulations (ignored by all) stating that mixed bathing was prohibited and that costumes must cover the body entirely from neck to knee. Meanwhile, I felt I was being anointed, receiving a sacrament not listed among the seven in our catechism, a sacrament that brought about a sort of investiture in a new life, the direct opposite of the Extreme Unction given at the time of death.

Fido jumped his turn by bolting.

'Quickly!' cried Teresa. 'Grab him! Bring him back!'

Spark and Maps saw to this, catching Fido near the notice and dragging him on his behind so that he left a long gutter in the sand.

He remained in a sitting position for his oiling, but under Teresa's touch he became pathetically tame. He just stared up at her and responded with a quick, goofy grin each time she smiled at him. He lifted a smear of the lotion with the tip of a forefinger and sniffed its perfume. He was the most likely lap-dog amongst us: he had been nicknamed after the mosquito-like pet dog in a comic strip.

'Why'd you do that cartwheel?' he sprang with innocence.

'A cartwheel?'

'When you come outa the water?'

'Did I?'

'Did'n she?' Fido whirled on us for support, and we all nodded a grave agreement.

'Well, I expect I did. Yes, of course! I always feel like doing cartwheels on Friday.'

She laughed as if amused at herself for having such an enchanting eccentricity. She took the stopper from Maps and screwed it back on to the bottle.

'Don't stay too long in the sun today. Tomorrow I'll give you another dose all round.' She pointed through the gap in the sandhills to what we had already identified as a combined shop and cottage. 'You'll find me up there. If I don't seem to be around, just ring the bell, or bang the counter. 'Bye now.'

Her fingertips glistened with oil and she twinkled them at us and started up the beach, her flaxen hair jogging over her shoulders under the straw hat, while the calves of her legs – with the same fresh tint as her cheeks – quivered like her breasts.

For the second time she had taken us by surprise. The cartwheel had drawn us to her. The sunburn lotion was a transparent net that had captured us.