

*A bright, naive 12-year-old boy enters a boarding school. His challenges are not only academic, sporting and relational; he must find his own identity. And he must expose a powerful, abusive adult who controls a secret society of students.*

## **The Schooling of David Kelly**

By Michael Kehoe

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A young boy with short brown hair, wearing a dark grey hoodie and a green backpack, is seen from behind. He is looking towards a large, multi-story brick school building with several arched windows. The scene is set outdoors, likely on a school campus, with a clear sky. The overall tone is contemplative and hopeful.

THE  
SCHOOLING  
OF  
DAVID KELLY

*A Novel*

Even a young boy or girl can make a  
monumental impact

MICHAEL KEHOE

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## 1. A cry in the night

Ireland sometimes experienced an ‘Indian summer.’ Such was mid-September in 1968, but the fine day changed its mind late afternoon. It became overcast and broody, yet shed no rain, as if sulking without a tantrum, leaving the air chilly and foreboding.

David stared up at the college administration building. He felt small, vulnerable, exposed, dwarfed by the grey-stoned mammoth towering over him. He hugged his younger sister, said goodbye to his older brother and parents, and met St. Paul’s president in reception. Fr. Greene, dressed in cassock and collar, probably sensing the flock of crows in David’s stomach, spoke kindly, realizing it was David’s first long-term stay away from home and family. The secretary pressed a buzzer; a sturdy well-built man, wearing blue-grey workman’s overalls, entered the room.

“Dan Breen is our handyman, our jack-of-all-trades,” the president intoned. “Dan, meet David Kelly, Sean’s younger brother. A late enrolment. It’s almost 7:30; evening study is about to start. Find David a seat with the first-years; take his suitcases to the tower bedroom.”

“To be sure, Father,” Dan smiled. “Come along, Master Kelly.”

Hoisting the two cases, Dan negotiated several steps and corners and a long corridor with walls covered in former class photographs before coming to a room marked 1A. Stepping inside, he indicated a free desk in the middle of the front row. “You’ll be fine here, Master Kelly. Our top students are in 1A.”

David nodded. “Thanks, Mr. Breen.”

Filled with promise and possibilities, he entered the room, wondering what lay ahead. Meeting new, different people was like

trying on shoes that didn't quite fit. All boys were seated and chatting quietly. David scanned the room: light green walls, thirty battered desks, five across, six deep. He sat in front of an adult's table that faced students. His desk's lid was pitted with the initials of former students. On either side were boys who didn't look Irish. Three were olive-skinned, short, dark-haired. The fourth boy, on his immediate right, looked taller—about David's height. Blond, arrestingly good-looking. David's eyes opened wide at the fervent blue eyes of infinite depth, the lovely nose, the statuesque neck, the natural beauty. He introduced himself. The four boys were Italian: Riccardo, Giuseppe, Carmelo, and blond Angelo.

"David," Angelo said, "where are you from?"

"I live in Wicklow, the *Garden of Ireland*, Ireland's most scenic county." David smiled. "And you? From a sunnier clime?"

Smiling, Angelo sang:

*"I came to this isle, from a faraway city,  
Milan or Milano, far north of Rome;  
It's large, it's busy, and yet it's so pretty;  
It's Italia, David, and it's my home."*

David raised his eyebrows. Not only had Angelo adapted some tale—was it *Aladdin*?—but he'd cleverly included David's name.

Suddenly David felt someone poke him in the back. Turning around, he faced a short, dark-haired boy extending his hand.

"Hi *Wicky*, I'm Mogue Malone from Dublin's fair city ... and, yes," he wrinkled his nose, "they call me *Molly*." His smile was a blend of delight, scrutiny, and mirth; his voice had a winged, ethereal lightness. His white skin and black hair were typical of *that black Irish look*.

“Ah ... *where the girls are so pretty!*” David smiled. “I’m David Kelly. Just arrived, and already caught myself a nickname ... Dublin’s one big place; which part?”

“I’m a Blackrock boy myself. There’s a few of us *jackeens* here.” Then, with a mischievous grin, Malone said, “One’s from Ballsbridge; another from Stillorgan! They’re in the back row. We’ve got one Kildare lad from Kilcock, but no one from Bangkok! The *Ellies* are in the front row. With your dark hair and good looks, I thought you were an Ellie.”

“*Ellies?*” David frowned. “Who or what are Ellies?”

“Exchange students, here for a year to experience our food, music and dance as well as our literature and theater, myth and legend. Some of our Irish lads spend a year in Italy.” Mogue deepened his voice, mimicking a husky male tone, imitating the Minister for Education, “*It’s a valuable cultural experience, you know!*”

“But why *Ellies?*”

Mogue puffed up his cherub cheeks, spoke in a lilting Dublin accent. “Their names: Borcelli, Pacelli, Pastorelli, not to mention Rancelli, Morelli, Garofelli-”

“Okay! Okay! I get the idea.” David compressed his lips.

“Most Ellies come from southern Italy. We’ve had non-Ellies, but Angelo is our first blond Adonis.”

A tall boy in the back row called out, “Hey, Molly. You’re not trying to corrupt the new boy, are ya?” David observed the half-smile that failed to reach the crystal blue gaze.

Mogue swiveled round, his voice as bright as brass. “Beaky will kill you if he catches you talking like that, *Still-organ!*”

“And don’t forget,” Stillorgan gave a half-withering, half-amused smile, “we don’t have our Farinelli ...” His voice tapered off as he shot his hand to his mouth.

David wondered if Stillorgan regretted what he'd said.

Mogue ignored Stillorgan with a glitter of annoyance.

David raised his eyebrows. "Who's Beaky?"

"Our prefect, from the *far-side*; in his fourth year of priesthood studies. We're the *lay-side*; they're the ecclesiastics or seminarians."

Mogue glanced towards the door. "Where *is* Beaky? It's after 7:30." He tilted his head. "His desk is right in front of you. Hope you're good at bobbing, at weaving. Last time I saw such a large proboscis was in the Phoenix Park Zoo—attached to an elephant."

David liked Mogue; thought he might be more than class-clown. He was still smiling when the class rose; silence descended. He turned, beheld Beaky, as large as life, minus a nasal trunk.

"Good evening" pleasantries were exchanged. All sat.

David introduced himself; Mr. Friel introduced him to the class. Mr. Friel realized David had no books: paired him off with Angelo. "Angelo's modern languages and classics are outstanding."

David wanted to devote himself to his studies; he knew *attention* was the key. The two boys began working quietly. David learned the singular and plural cases of *mensa*, and the persons of *amo*. Though whispering, he strove to enunciate vowels and consonants correctly. He observed Angelo's delicate hands, a sign of good breeding.

Next, they tackled the Greek article: masculine, feminine, neuter; all cases, singular and plural. Once, as he was trying to increase his recall speed, David said *tonto* instead of *ton*, *taen*, *toh*. The two boys looked at each other, smiled, and whispered *The Lone Ranger!*

Sharing *An Anthology of English Poetry*, they learned verbatim a verse from "The Lady of Shalot," David's favorite elocution poem. *Had St. Paul's tower ever experienced anything similar? Elaine shut away in her father's cold beautiful castle? Did she experience wild Irish winds?*

David ran fingers through his hair as he discovered that Tennyson's famous poem, *The Charge of the Light Brigade*, contained inaccurate figures; in reality, only about 110 died, not 600-plus.

Hooked on his chair leg, David's foot fell asleep. He began slapping it gently.

"It's called paresthesia," Angelo nodded.

"In Italian?"

"No, English; sometimes happens to me too."

David's eyes widened. *How brilliant is this person? Just thirteen years; he understands a word probably unknown to most adults.*

Then, sharing a map of Italy, Angelo revealed different regions, physical features; briefly explained the musical, the artistic importance of key cities. His sister performed with the Youth Orchestra at *La Scala* in Milan.

In a short time, David realized he could handle the first-year subjects; not have to complete the preparatory year. Angelo spoke with Mr. Friel; said David was catching up really fast.

The study period was near ending; close to nine o'clock; bedtime and lights-out at 9:30.

A smiling Angelo said he'd heard of leprechauns; wanted to meet one. David chuckled, pointed to Mogue.

Then Angelo explained two Italian superstitions: charms that offered protection. One was to carry a nail in one's pocket. Another was to touch part of one's body one is particularly proud of; Angelo touched himself. A smile fluttered to his lips and died away.

David was about to smile when he detected apprehension in Angelo's eyes.

"Angelo, is something wrong?"

"Yes, David, very wrong." He shifted uneasily. "I must talk with you first thing tomorrow morning. It's vital."

“Sure, Angelo.” David nodded. “Straight after breakfast.”

The bell rang. Mr. Friel led the prayer; bade the boys good-night.

David and Angelo shook hands saying *Ciao* as they went to their dormitories; David towards the tower; Angelo, like most of the other first-year boys, to St. Peter’s dorm.

David wanted to discuss Angelo’s concern tonight, but St. Peter’s seemed far away. He was unsure how to get there; didn’t know Angelo’s bed. It was now too late to be adventurous; too early to break the *no-talking-after-lights-out* rule. He pondered what it was that troubled the young Italian. Angelo seemed to have so much going for him; just turned thirteen years, he had already visited several European countries. Intelligent, outgoing, confident, a good social mixer, a quick learner. A talent for languages, uncommon handsome looks, blond hair, a musically talented sister, a privileged exchange student, a comfortable family. He’d shown no sign of homesickness when discussing Italy. David felt a special bond had been forged between them. Angelo obviously felt likewise: he was willing to confide in David.

As he entered the tower door, its dry hinges squeaked like a little far-off scream. He donned his pajamas, went tired to bed. But sleep did not come. The day’s memories flooded his mind.

It had been a long day. He’d started out full of joy at his acceptance as a boarder. Very glad to leave his national school one year early. His old headmaster was not only a hopeless teacher, David felt; he was a bully. He might have been a crusty schoolmarm wearing a stiff shell like an exoskeleton. David’s jaw clenched as he recalled Master Dinny Corcoran picking on the poorer boys and girls. *The Master* even dared once to try to humiliate David who’d challenged a wrongful detention.

David's brother Sean, older by two years, was already a student at St. Paul's. Although Sean wasn't strong academically, he shone at hurling, Gaelic football, athletics. David hoped to get along better with him now that they would be sharing boarding experiences. Sean said little about his first-year ordeals, but David never failed to empathize when he saw, during term breaks and calls-out, how badly cut Sean's hands were from hurling. Sean once complained to their mother about the harsh treatment of one priest, the son of his primary schoolmaster.

"Fr. Paddy Corcoran teaches Christian Doctrine, and he's our football coach," Sean grumbled, "but he's a bully, like his father."

Today, the football team was without Sean's service. He'd been taken suddenly to Naas General Hospital with a burst appendix; had gone under the scalpel; would remain hospitalized for several days.

David had visited the hospital, after he'd spent an enjoyable day in Dublin with some of his family, buying his school uniform at Roche's Stores—white shirt, gold tie, green school jacket, jumper with gold trim, shiny black leather shoes, black socks. Regulated uniformity. He'd chuckled at the Moore Street vendors squawking their various wares: "Git yer luvly bananas ... two bunches fur fifty pee, five fur a pahnd!" Such a gas! He'd enjoyed a meal at a new Thai restaurant, sauntered through St. Stephen's Green and Grafton Street; took in a movie at the Savoy. Goosebumps slid down the back of his neck at the challenge of entering an unfamiliar atmosphere, a totally new environment, a bell-clanging world he was determined to make his own. Whatever challenges lay ahead, whatever fate had in store for him, he believed that a lively classroom dynamic would give him leverage, that a good schooling would provide an arabesque of possibilities.

It was September the seventeenth; two weeks *after* the first 1968-1969 school year began. He smiled at being addressed as *Master Kelly*.

At night, the weather suddenly took a turn for the worst. Awesome thunderclaps crashing, ripping, banging. Lightning blazed in sheets, whitewashing the landscape; buildings appearing as bright, flickering images. Swirling winds pounded rain against houses in the town below; winds roared in the woodland at the rear of the college. Rain pounded the college buildings; pounded the high tower, sullen in its silence. Rain penetrated the tower's partially open windows. The hollow metal pipes amplified the howling winds. The scaffolding, erected to facilitate repairs, rattled precariously.

Inside the room were six beds, five occupied by students aged twelve to seventeen. David, the youngest, occupied the least privileged bed, positioned too close to one of the six windows. Bedsprings cried out if he moved. Rain droplets and spray wet the quilt. The twins lay face-to-face together, their single beds so close they formed a twin. David lay on his back, feeling the cloying dark atmosphere.

He thought of his siblings, of his farming parents who accepted so calmly the unpredictable weather changes and the inevitable machinery problems. He recalled with joy the young lambs gamboling as they frolicked in the fresh springtime grass; their zealous sheepdog "Spotty" chivvying the flock of sheep into a corner of the field. And other joys. Crops successfully harvested, farm animals snug in their outhouses. *But what of birds in hedges? Are they any better off than me? Rain always threatens in Ireland, no matter what the season. But never this bad ... my first night away from home and friends! Why is God so angry?*

From time to time, David caught glimpses of the room's interior as another lightning flash pearly everything before him; a single unlit naked bulb dangled from the high ceiling; cobwebs—like tattered miniature drapes—hung in one high corner. The large Sacred Heart picture, blood dripping from the crown of thorns, dominated the opposite wall. Hung lower were three smaller paintings, perhaps by a former student of St. Paul's, David guessed. This unholy trinity was predominantly dark in color: blacks, blues, some reds, somber cloudy skies. *The Hunt*, depicted a fox chased by a pack of beagles and Redcoats. To his right, two greyhounds pounced on a cornered rabbit. Its title? *The End*. Above his head, the strobe lightning revealed an Irish setter retrieving a shot pheasant. Reading upside-down he deciphered *The Kill*.

*And nearby is my brother's empty bed ... And Sean? Snug, warm, and cared for by a diligent medical team, and an attractive nurse at Naas General. Sean has all the luck!*

The rain, bad as a tropical storm, continued to pound the earth; except for the occasional creaking of mattress springs in the ghostly darkness, all other noises were humbled, stifled, silenced by the booming thunder, the never-ending noise of the winds, the rattling pipes. A hellish night. *Why were tower repairs left so late? Why hadn't someone—the senior boy, a prefect—stuffed some blankets into the window gaps and pipes?* Desperate for sleep, David decided to do something.

Sean's bed had blankets and sheets. His fees were paid in advance and those blankets needed to be used, even if David had to answer to the prefect, Tom. That would be later: this was now. Quiet as a nun, and detecting a mild moldy odor, he stuffed the quilt and a pillow into the two front windows, straining to reach the high sills. He jammed corners of a blanket into pipe ends. *Much better*. He looked

desolately out the window. A spray of ivy hung against the pane; seemed to tap at the glass. If it made some faint whisper against the pane, its voice was unheard, drowned out by the pounding rain. Then it obeyed the wind and danced blindly on the air.

David borrowed another of Sean's blankets, placed the spare pillow at the foot of his bed, crept under the blankets, heard the bedsprings cry out again, curled up into a fetal position, and ground his face into the pillow. *Much, much better.*

Suddenly he thought he heard a shriek followed by a hollow wailing as of a night creature, a banshee, a sound no less disturbing for its faintness. Next was a loud human cry, soon stolen by the wind. *From the front of the tower? Is my imagination playing tricks?* He sat up like a spooked rabbit, the security of his fetal curl-up shattered. His knowledge of Irish lore and legend triggered. This female spirit's wailing meant only one thing: a death in the house. *What is that cry in the night?*

David tried to shake the legend from his mind. *It's only an old wives' tale; I must have courage. I'm here to learn, to rise above old fairy tales, folkloric country stories, centuries-old superstitions.* Just six days ago, in perfect autumn weather and surrounded by family and friends, he celebrated his twelfth birthday. *Now I'm a young man, my own man—Master Kelly. I must stand on my own feet. My Locheen home's umbilical is severed. There's an explanation for everything. Perhaps this wild weather is the wake-up call I need, to transform me from my quiet, rural, culchie upbringing.*

That mournful wail *and* the loud cry troubled him. Had to check. He arose, stood tip-toe on the floor, looked out the window but saw little. Had to get higher. He stepped on the bed, pressed his nose to the window-pane and found he could look down the scaffolding to the ground. Suddenly a flash of lightning revealed something white,

something crumpled at the base of the scaffolding. *Are my eyes deceiving me? Is it moving or just an image created by the rain dancing in the wind? Must be sure.* The loud cry roiled in his mind. What to do? He thought of his cousin Kevin, the brilliant lawyer. Kev would know what to do. He'd *act!*

David would rather be wrong and look foolish or be punished than ignore his suspicions. Now his instincts took hold; he'd wake the prefect. He shook Tom Anglim's shoulder.

"Who ... wha ... what is it?" an annoyed Anglim said.

"It's Da ... David, the new boy," David stammered. "Sir, I thought I heard a noise ... a loud cry ... from the front of the tower ... I think there's something moving down there."

"It's pitch-dark, Kelly. How could you possibly see anything?" Anglim yawned. "Go back to sleep! And keep it quiet; we don't want to wake the others."

"A flash of lightning ... here, see for yourself." David urged the reluctant senior boy from his bed.

They both stood on David's bed waiting for the next inevitable lightning strike.

"God, you're right, Kelly. There *is* something down there and it doesn't look like a bag of mortar."

"Let's report it." David wasn't sure who to tell.

"I'll inform Dan Breen."

In the darkness David saw Anglim move for his dressing-gown. "I'll take care of it, Kelly. You go back to bed; get some sleep."

David felt reassured but couldn't sleep. He stood up, gazed out the window. Soon a car arrived; the ground object was lifted onto the back seat. The car sped off down the driveway; its red tail lights quickly swallowed up in the night gloom.

Anglim returned.

“What was it?” David asked.

“Everything’s all right now,” the prefect nodded. “You took the proper course, Kelly. Now get some sleep. It’ll soon be morning.”

David frowned; scratched his head; pressed his lips together. The torrential downpour seemed endless, and the day’s many memories crowding his mind were not measured chronologically. Lost in time, he drifted into a fitful, restless sleep, his brain twitching.

Clang! Clang! Clang! David felt he’d just nodded off when the loud tinging metallic noise jerked him awake. Six-thirty.

Tom Anglim urged everyone, “Up, up, up. Get dressed.”

David stretched, yawned, looked around. Sean’s spare blanket on the floor. He felt dry, but cold. Outside, the sky was cloudy; the downpour had stopped. He felt he had a bad nightmare.

“Move! Move! Move!” the prefect urged. “You must be in your study for morning prayer at 6:45. Come on! Move it!”

David recovered his uniform from the shared wardrobe. The boys trudged downstairs to a central area at the end of a large dormitory with many wash-basins, sinks, and toilets. Restrained pandemonium. He’d forgotten his toiletries and towel, but one of the twins, Pat, offered him soap, towel, comb. The splash of water had little impact on David’s sense of sleeplessness. He dried himself, combed his hair.

In a dream-like state, he reached the 1A room. Twins Pat and Matt continued on to their 1B classroom. Other 1A students arrived, many yawning. Soon all were assembled—all except Angelo, the boy David most wanted to see. Whispers, murmurs, questions punctuated the air.

Everybody wanted to know.

“Where’s Angelo?”

“He *did* go to bed last night; I saw him! His bed is quite close to mine.”

“Perhaps Sister Maggie gave him a sleep.”

“His bed *was* slept in. I wonder if he’s just late.”

“Maybe he’s run away from our crazy Irish weather!”

“Perhaps he didn’t like our Irish accents, especially the *jackeen* accent!”

“Maybe he went straight to the chapel; he might be an altar-boy.”

“Is he *fecking* a sleep?”

All agreed Angelo wouldn’t sneak a sleep.

The Italian boys muttered in Italian; exhibited flighty hand movements.

David, now fully awake, smoothed and resmoothed his uniform. *Does Angelo’s absence relate to my overnight experience, that cry in the night?*

“So, what have you done with our lovely Adonis, Wick?” Mogue was looking at David with a sly grin, tilted head, raised eyebrow, expressions that quickly disappeared when he saw the concern on David’s face. “I’m sorry, David ... just trying to cheer us up.”

Mr. Friel entered, looking out of sorts. Apologized for being late and set the class stone-silent. “Angelo will not be joining the class this morning. There’s been an accident. I don’t know anything further at this point. Dr. Sternward will address the school at breakfast.” He then led the class in morning prayer, adding “that we keep the sick and dying in our daily prayers,” words that gave David a bad feeling.

Mr. Friel entered David’s name in pencil in the roll. “David,” he said, “you may stay in 1A for the remainder of the week.”

David felt relief at this news, but his thoughts quickly returned to Angelo. He was certain his new friend must be in serious trouble. And his gut cried out: something was wrong. What could have happened?

## 2. Refectory

Class 1A moved as an orderly unit to the chapel. David blinked at its layout: five rows deep, pews arranged in a U-formation; ecclesiastics closest to the altar; midway up the chapel the youngest boys faced each other on opposite pews. Behind them were seniors. Second-years, third-years, and fourth-years occupied pews near the entrance, farthest from the altar. Beaky joined the clerics.

A priest entered; mass began at seven, two altar-boys serving. An ordinary mass in Latin; this surprised David. Whatever happened to changes brought by *Vat Two*, the Second Vatican Council? He concluded the college was upholding tradition. All the clerics and most of the lay-students received Holy Communion. David liked the taste of the wafer but regretted the lack of wine. Mass ended at 7:40; lay-students, closer to the door, exited first. David anticipated a hearty breakfast.

Just inside the refectory door he detected an odor—tangy, sharp, and musky at the same time. *Surely not cats!* He followed the others up the aisle. To his left were lay-students. He counted fourteen tables perpendicular to the long-windowed wall. Each table seated eighteen boys, plus one senior, who stood at the end. To his right, parallel to the opposite non-windowed wall, were two long elevated tables. For the clerics? Seniors who were not prefects occupied a regular table at floor level near the kitchen entrance. Directly in front of him David saw a small elevated pulpit. Standing in front of the pulpit was a severe-looking priest reading a book and wearing a long-sleeved black cassock. Almost completely bald, thick-set, six feet tall, about fifty years. David was quite sure a glance from this man would wither a mature oak tree. Was this Dr. Sternward? He searched for an empty

seat, but the first-year tables were full. Mogue pointed him to the end table where younger prep boys stood. The chairs were bare-backed, designed, David thought, to be uncomfortable. David's mouth watered at the smell of bacon rashers and sausages sizzling in the kitchen area behind the pulpit.

The clerics arrived; one of them took his place beside the pulpit. The priest now stood with his hands behind his back, his face as expressionless as a slab of stone. All waited in silence, standing frozen like ancient Chinese warrior figurines, a terracotta army of sculptures needing to be restored to life. But no magic wand was at hand.

Directly in front of David stood three attractive prep boys. One smiled and nodded. Another, short, pale and frail, dark-haired, striking, gazed at David with twinkling eyes and an infectious smile.

The third, blond and personable, wringing his hands, looking desperate, stared at David. Suddenly, in a high-pitched voice, the non-Chinese artifact said, "Are you going to join the SPC?"

Eyebrows raised, shoulders and open palms elevated, David silently mouthed, "the what?"

Looking more desperate in his urgency, the boy blurted, "The Shavers' Protection Club."

"What's the Shavers' Protection Club?" David whispered as he turned his head to see the senior prefect, a forefinger pressed to his pursed lips, glare down the table.

Suddenly, *Baldie* turned, stared at David; the cold dark eyes bore into him as if they could read his thoughts. With a flick of his right index finger, the priest signaled him forward. David felt like a lamb just fallen into the sheep-dip. He almost tripped as he dragged himself from his table as if moving through water; the other boys stared. He finally stood before the priest and looked up, feeling as

helpless as a baby bird in a raging rainstorm. His heart thumped in his chest like a trapped animal.

“You know the rule!” the priest said, his probing eyes settled on David.

“Wha... what rule?” David said, his throat as dry as toast, but his tongue no longer welded to the roof of his mouth.

“No talking!” the priest’s eyes narrowed to slits as he studied David ankle to eyebrow. “Your tie is crooked! This is a private school. You’re not in a farmyard now.”

“Fa—farmers don’t wear ties in fa—farmyards, Fa—Father,” David blurted out.

“You address me as *Doctor!*” The priest’s eyes held him as if his head was gripped in a clamp.

Unable to stop himself, David felt his voice quiver, “So-so if I’m not well I can-can see-see you, Doctor?” His stomach did a nervous flip-flop as he tripped over his words.

“Doctor of Divinity. Put your arms down by your sides—now!”

David was unaware he’d crossed his arms. He unclenched his fists. Heard indistinct noises in the kitchen. Heard his heart pounding; otherwise, the silence was deafening.

“I ... I’m a new boy,” David persisted. “This is my first morning. Nothing was explained about—”

“Late-comers must catch up! Why didn’t you enroll on time like everybody else? You’re here to learn, not make excuses.”

“I ... I was expecting some guidance about the rules, and what’s expected.” David noticed the severe ceiling lighting reflecting off the priest’s bald head. He blinked. Wanted to run, wanted the floor to swallow him. Felt three hundred pairs of eyes burning into him. Cold sweat on his brow.

The priest's dark eyes burned with a kind of cruel energy. "You'll learn like everybody else. You've already said enough for one day, *potato boy!*" The sneering words came at David out of the bone-hard face.

David glared at the priest, before lowering his eyes to the man's cassock. He squinted at what he thought was a food stain directly in front of him. A vision came. In his mind's eye he imagined a bald baby wearing little other than a napkin that collected food particles as his mother tried to spoon-feed him. Wanted to smile. "I'm not a pot—"

The priest cut in. "The rule is *no talking! Silence* till after grace-after-meals. Right?"

Suddenly *WHAM!* Stars exploded in David's head at the lightning sharp blow. Legs crumbled; he hit the floor like a puppet with the strings cut. Sprawling, he tried to get to his feet.

"Get him back to his seat," the priest, his features scrawled with cruelty, barked at the prefect at David's table, "and don't let it happen again!"

David was shocked, confused. Humiliated before the whole school. Head spinning, right ear ringing. Felt he was going to throw up. Dizzy, his stomach discomfited, he leaned on the chair to support himself. A burning sensation stung his face. He felt like a scorched scrap of paper.

The priest said grace. All sat. The cleric took his seat in the pulpit and began reading aloud from his breviary. The priest walked up and down the aisle, silently reading the book used to slam David.

Waiters came; waiters went. The table prefect dished out the oatmeal.

David tried to focus. Tried to breathe deep, breathe slow. The porridge looked uncooked, even flaky. Couldn't eat. He recalled his mother's words: *A nice cup of tea will cure anything.* This wasn't nice

tea! Tasted like dish-water, and the toasted white-bread was burned. David was no *Oliver Twist* begging for more; he didn't even want a first helping. Bacon rashers, tomato, sausages were served only to the ecclesiastics, prefects, seniors.

A helix of emotions spiraled through him: fear, anger, shame. But one feeling overwhelmed all others: something new ... hatred. He pressed his face into his hands, squeezed his temples as if he might literally control the direction of his thoughts. Took more deep breaths, felt calmer.

He looked across the table; the small boy who'd asked the question was in tears, his hands shaking, his eyes darting.

Breakfast seemed to take an eternity. At one point, David noticed the priest glaring across at David's table, but was surprised he wasn't looking at him; he was staring at the tearful boy.

Breakfast dragged on. In reality, only twenty minutes had passed when the priest signaled to the pulpit cleric to stop, to join the other ecclesiastics. He dismissed the waiters, said grace-after-meals, and addressed all present. "There was an accident overnight. A first-year student was found injured under scaffolding in front of the tower's exterior entrance. He is now at Naas General Hospital in intensive care. If anybody knows anything about the circumstances of this accident, he should see me immediately after breakfast."

David detected coldness in the priest's tone and delayed announcement. He doubted students would want to approach this man. Everybody was chatting now, the no-talking rule ended; the clatter of tongues overwhelming the clatter of culinary utensils.

David tried to regain control of his emotions. After about five minutes, the priest approached the prefect at David's table. David, scared, thought it wasn't over yet. The priest spoke a few words as he looked directly at the small boy who looked pale, head downcast,

arms folded. A tidal wave of relief hit David as the priest exited the refectory; the chatter of voices reached a crescendo.

The prefect addressed the small boy, "Niall, go directly to Doc Sternward's office after breakfast."

David didn't like or understand what was happening. He was horrified at the cruelty inflicted on himself. Now the terrified prep boy appeared to be in deep trouble. His question led to David's rule-breaking. *What is going on? Dr. Sternward seems soulless and cruel. Shows little love, understanding, or caring. Is he a cuiteog, a left-hander? Why didn't Sean warn me about this man? Did he want to protect me from knowledge of such cruelty? Or because I wasn't expected to enter St. Paul's for another year? Why had Sean, who so often talked past me as if I were invisible, been silent?* David had mixed, confused feelings.

The prep boy picked at his food, turned over a piece of burned toast with his knife. He poured some salt on his plate, swirled the tines of his fork through it, examined the designs created. David felt he was playing for time, trying to postpone the inevitable, something unpleasant, the upcoming meeting with Doc.

From scrunching his brow he mustered a smile, reached across the table, said, "Hello! I'm David ... David Kelly. I'm sorry I got you in trouble."

"Er ... Niall ... Cu ... Niall Cul ... Cullen ... pleased to meet you ... I'm truly sorry I got you in trouble ... please forgive me." His voice shaking, his eyes clouded over like the translucent film of cataracts, his head dropped forward.

"Of course I forgive you." David noticed the lack of firmness and Niall's cold hand. Claspng it felt like squeezing tofu. "Lovely to meet you, Niall ... and I actually got myself into trouble by opening my mouth ... who is that priest?"

Niall, barely audible, said, "Sternward ... We call him Psy ... Psycho ... he's dean of discipline." In a louder voice, looking David in the eye, he added, "I hate him!"

David looked into the boy's eyes. "Has he hurt you, too? Has he hurt others? Will he punish you now?"

"He hurts everybody. Now I must go to his office, and ..." Niall's eyes darted about like a frightened rabbit, his voice tapering off as he spotted the prefect staring at him.

David observed some students leave the refectory. He thought that all walked differently! He turned back to Niall but opted not to ask about the SPC. He noticed Mogue moving from his table and decided to leave. Turning to Niall, he smiled. "I'll see you later today. We'll talk. Take courage, Niall. You're not alone," he said, punching cheer into his voice.

Niall smiled nervously; resumed playing with his food.

Hearing his own words, David began to take heart himself. He smiled at Niall's two companions, left the hard chair, moved to the aisle, fantasizing a sumptuous lunch preceded by mouth-watering, rich, welcoming odor of cooking meat permeating the refectory and ending with chocolate mousse in crystal dessert glasses, and the arrival of an amuse-bouche. *As if! I'll be happy with corned beef and cabbage.*

He quickly caught up with Mogue. "Where to next?"

Mogue looked intently at David. "Back to the dorms, bed-making and tidy-up; our first lesson is at nine." He gave David a warm but sympathetic smile. "Crikey, David, you took it like a man! You had real guts talking back to Psycho. Thought you'd heard of him. Sorry I didn't warn you about Psycho's take on that *silence* rule. What a horrible way to find out."

“It’s okay, Mogue, I’ll survive,” David said with a sideways glance. “Is Psycho always in such a foul mood? How does he treat the older boys and the ecclesiastics?”

“I’m not sure ... I keep out of his path. He’s a terrible man altogether; bad cess to him! He has favorites, I’ve heard. Been here for donkeys’ years. Very powerful; will be the next president, I’m told. I heard some of the clerics say he’s a wonderful man” Mogue’s mischievous smile was back. “Don’t s’pose you share that view, Wicky?”

“The jury’s out on that one, Molly!” David smiled, his spirits more buoyed, the nasty ref incident receding, though far from forgotten. His face still stung; he knew it was red and swelling. He also heard a crackling in his ear.

“The great advantage of taking an instant dislike to somebody, Wick,” Mogue said matter-of-factly, “is that it saves time.” He smiled. “David, you won’t just survive: you’ll *prevail!* I firmly believe it.”

As they exited the refectory, David again sniffed the cat odor. He turned to Mogue. “What’s that awful smell? Do they let cats inside here ... apart from Kilkenny cats?”

“Crikey, David, you have a sharp nose,” Mogue chuckled, eyebrows raised. “Must be all that sensitive farmyard material!”

David shook his head. “Hah! There’s little sensitivity in farmyards.”

Mogue chuckled. “That corner is Cat-shit Alley. I’d never have noticed if I hadn’t spotted a cat on the inside window ledge last week.” Mogue wore a quizzical expression. “David, you proved you can dance on the rim of the volcano ... what else will you sniff out at St. Paul’s?”

David smiled. “Do you think more sniffing out is needed?”

"I don't doubt it." Mogue gave a glimmer of a smile. "But I hope you make a good bed, Wicky, in case that Nazi Psycho checks out your bedroom!"

David assumed Mogue was joking again. How on earth would Psycho have time for such trivia if he was so busy and powerful, *and* taught on the far-side? But he'd make sure his and Sean's beds were made right. There was no telling what turn Psycho might take; he didn't want to see that expression again, a look that could curdle milk. "What does the word Psycho mean, Mogue?"

"He's a nut-case, a dangerous nutter!" Mogue approached the stairway to St. Peter's. "See you in class. English first with Mr. Bush. He's quite a different case. Not a *nut* so much as a *fruit*. He's also the elocution teacher, but reads a poem as if it's a cookbook recipe. No authority. You'll soon see for yourself."

The boys parted, each heading towards his dorm. David wondered what else was in store on his first full day. His mam had advised him to make the world his oyster; now he was determined to make his boarding school world his textbook.

In the tower, David observed how the others made their beds. Did his best to imitate them; the twins helped. Tom Anglim seemed genuinely concerned for David, advised him to steer clear of Dr. Sternward, and "see Sr. Margaret now about your ear."

Matt took him to Sister, a nun.

"What's the matter, child?"

"I think my right ear may be damaged, Sr. Margaret. There's a crackling sound, a bit like water in your ear after swimming."

"How did such a thing happen, child?"

How to explain it? He decided honesty was best: he said Dr. Sternward hit him because he was talking as they were about to say grace-before-meals.

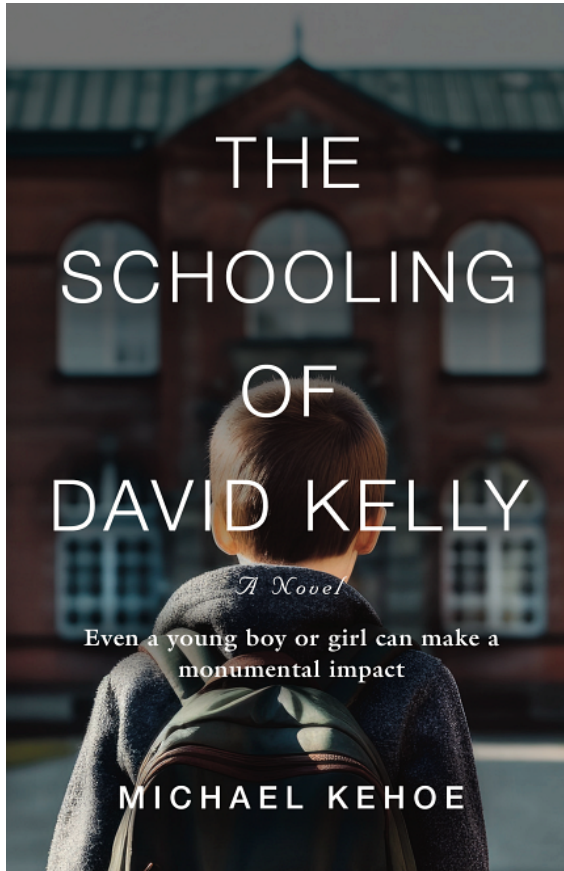
“Oh, child,” Sr. Margaret said, “I can’t help you a-tall, a-tall. If you talk and delay Father’s grace rising to heaven, there’s nothing I can do for you; absolutely nothing a-tall.” She drew herself up more erect. “And sure, isn’t Dr. Sternward such a lovely man. Speaks several languages, you know. Cousin a medical doctor, brother a pharmacist, his uncle is Garda Superintendent, you know, and then there’s Sr. Eileen, Mother Superior. He’s also related to the bishop, you know. Wouldn’t hurt a fly ... but he will squash a bug. The heart, the soul of the college. He’ll thrash the badness out of you.” She smiled. “Lovely man, altogether. Now run along, child, or you’ll be late for your lesson.”

David’s anger rose. “Sr. Margaret, are you a *religious* sister or a *nursing* sister, or both ... or *neither*?”

She motioned as if to strike him. “You cheeky brat! Maybe I’ll have our dear Dr. Sternward answer that one for you! He’ll set you on the right path. Now, be off with you, you impudent pup!”

David, bewildered, went to his classroom. *What have I let myself in for? Am I in the right place? Perhaps I should have finished my final primary school year? Old Corcoran was biased and couldn’t teach, but he was certainly more decent than archenemy Psycho, or this so-called nurse, this so-called bride of Christ. Can things get any worse?*

David, though feeling powerless, made a resolution: *this enemy is within the gates and needs to be dealt with*. There was a time when not knowing what tomorrow brings was one of life’s good feelings; now he wasn’t so sure. Of one thing he was certain: a major battle lay unerringly ahead. Ignoring it was not a bad approach, but he’d fall off the high wire sooner or later.



*A bright, naive 12-year-old boy enters a boarding school. His challenges are not only academic, sporting and relational; he must find his own identity. And he must expose a powerful, abusive adult who controls a secret society of students.*

## **The Schooling of David Kelly**

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