

# CHAPTER 1 OUR HERO ARRIVES

‘Mrs Byrne, you’ve a beautiful, very pale, ginger-haired baby boy with a wonky eye.’

As she was handed me by the midwife, my mother wept for all the wrong reasons. She could have shagged a platypus and I still would have come out better than this.

My mother later admitted to trying to tilt newborn me slightly, like one of

those hand games we had as kids with the small steel ball (‘steelie’) you had to get around a maze and into the hole at the end. She basically tried to roll my wonky eye back into the middle, where it should have been, but as soon as she stopped tilting me, the eye wandered back towards the nose area.



People tried to be kind when they looked into the pram. They’d manage to smother the ‘sweet suffering Jesus’ that bubbled up and instead say things like, ‘Isn’t he ... a lovely boy? He’s the image of, he’s the image of, he’s the image of ... a baby.’

They brought me to the doctor when I was four years old. The doctor said my eye was lazy and needed to be made work. The correct term is Amblyopia. Sounds fancy, like I had super powers from a nuclear explosion, but the doctor lacked imagination and preferred the more offensive names: lazy eye, or squint.

### **Squint (*strabismus*)**

'A squint is a condition where the eyes do not look together in the same direction. One eye looks straight ahead, while the other eye turns to point inwards, outwards, upwards or downwards. As the eyes are not straight (aligned), they focus on different things. The result is that the brain ignores the signals from one of the eyes to avoid seeing double,' the doctor said to my mother.

There's no getting away from it: no matter how you try to dress up a squint, it's just hilarious every time. I mean, how could you rattle out that explanation and not fall around laughing?

My mother tried to make me feel better by telling me I had a magic eye, or a special eye as she called it. No one else had a special eye, only me, which meant I was very special. I felt great about that, for a short while.

The bottom line was that I had a wonky, lazy, gunner, cock, turned-in, broken eye. So how did they fix this? At the age of four I already had big glasses that magnified my eye. But the good doctor, summoning all his skills as a surgeon or optometrist or torturer or whatever, decided to add a patch over my good eye. My *good* eye. Now I didn't even have one straight eye to

aim at people. I had a turned-in eye, accompanied by a massive patch with bottle-end glasses over it – you couldn't have made it more comical if you'd tried. People were looking at me now, with my wonky eye, the patch over it and just in case people couldn't see it from a distance ... *it was all magnified by thick as shite glasses!* Jesus God, help me.

You can understand why I struggled through my early years. I was forever trying to hide my glasses so I wouldn't have to wear them.

## TIPS ON WHERE TO HIDE YOUR GLASSES WHEN YOU'RE FOUR



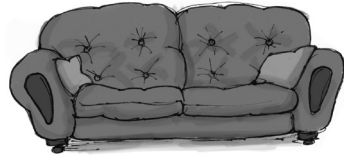
1. In the toaster



2. Inside a large sliced pan



3. In the dog's basket



4. Behind, under, in or down the couch



5. Under your pillow

I know they're crap places to hide things; I was only four.

Despite being an odd-looking chap, I got on well with my brother and sisters. When I was four, I had one older brother, Eric, who was two years older than me. Two sisters, Rachel and Eithne, were to come later.

One day, when I was five or so, I got quite ill and started to vomit a lot. My mother was worried because she couldn't work it out. She asked me if I had eaten anything bad. 'No.' She asked again: was there anything at all I had eaten that she should know about? She was suspicious because I had a reputation as a kid for putting anything into my mouth. The word 'repulsive' didn't exist for me, everything on the planet could be on the food pyramid if you were hungry enough, or gullible enough. My mother was well used to sitting me on the potty and going through my poo to find the one pence piece I had swallowed.

## THINGS I SWALLOWED

1. **A penny**
2. **Flat Lego piece (two-square)**
3. **Flat Lego piece (one-square)**
4. **Lego man's head**
5. **Moth balls**

This was different. Whatever I had swallowed this time wasn't going to be coming out so easily into the potty. She walked me around the kitchen to see if I'd point out what had made me ill. I knew exactly what it was, but I didn't want to get my

brother into trouble. Eric had said he'd kill me if I ever told on him. My mother kept at me, though, asking over and over again if I'd eaten anything weird. She kept at me because she knew I was lying. She knew I was lying because whenever I told a lie, my wonky eye would turn in. It gave me away all the time.

## CAUSES OF EYE TURNING IN

1. **Lying**
2. **Tired**
3. **Angry**
4. **Sneezing**
5. **Coughing**
6. **Excitement**

My mother wouldn't stop with the questions about what I'd eaten and my eye was flying around in my head like Mad-Eye Moody from *Harry Potter*. Eventually I cracked and screamed that it was the caramel wall.

'The caramel what?' my mother asked.

I let it all out in floods of tears. 'Eric told me not to touch the caramel that you make on the wall like Willy Wonka's magic walls, but I couldn't help it, the caramel was just too nice, Mammy. I'm sorry for robbing your caramel!'

Mam had no idea what I was talking about. ‘Caramel? Where?’

‘Behind the cooker.’ I pointed to the thick grease that gathered on the wall behind my mother’s 1970’s death-trap of a cooker.

‘The grease on the wall?’ she yelled.

I was chased up and down the house by that woman while she slapped me bum with a slipper. I only got some respite when my brother passed me on the stairs and she went after him, for telling me it was caramel. The two of us couldn’t sit down for days. I continued to eat off the caramel wall for at least another year. I was hooked on the stuff.

## THINGS NOT TO EAT IN THE 1970S, DESPITE YOUR OLDER BROTHER TELLING YOU IT’S OKAY

1. Grease behind the cooker: it is not caramel.
2. Chewing-gum off the ground: it is not kept out there to stay fresh.
3. Dried dog food mixed into your cereal: it is not Coco Pops for dogs.
4. Scented soap: it is not French white chocolate.
5. Licking the back of the cat: it does not give you climbing powers.

(P.S. Do not use white dog poo as chalk for hopscotch either.)

So, a pretty eventful little life I was having, helped along by my special eye and my brother, Eric. If my mother had a womb for a handbag, I'd be still in it. I was with her all the time. The first time I was separated from her for a long period was when I was sent to crèche, or playschool as it was known then. 'Only posh people and Italians go to crèche,' my dad would say. He was a man of few words but when they did come out, they were pretty strange words.

The crèche was at the top of our road – in fact, everything was at the top of our road.

## TOP FIVE TOP-OF-THE-ROAD PLACES

1. **Crèche**
2. **School**
3. **Church**
4. **Swimming pool**
5. **Top of the road**

Yes, most importantly, at the top of the road was the top of the road, and that was where most people met. It was like our very own Clery's clock. 'Meet you at the top of the road.' It was always there, and it would be the top of the road forever. It's still there now, at the top of Ludford Drive, but funnily enough it had no bottom because our road curved around at the end, so there was never, technically, a bottom of the road. We had to make do with a top of the road.

So me and Mam went to the top of the road, up to the crèche. It was called ‘The Rec’, which is short for recreational building. It was a rectangular red-bricked ’70s yoke, plonked beside the school like a bad cousin nobody spoke about. They had 21<sup>st</sup> parties in there, birthdays, all type of recreational activities. It was about a fiver to rent and it smelt of the swimming pool, which was at the back. In fact, we could see them all swimming while we sat in the crèche, smelling of chlorine.

My mother brought me inside and dropped me into the sandpit. There were mothers dropping kids all over the crèche, like the Luftwaffe sheet-bombing Britain – there were kids launched into the building-block area, drop and cry; the plasticine section, drop and cry; the fuzzy felt area, drop and cry. Little bundles of weeping and sniffing kids, with their arms outstretched for their mothers to pick them back up and take them home. Some mothers had to jemmy their children off their legs with umbrellas. The teacher was doing her best to help, but it was chaos.

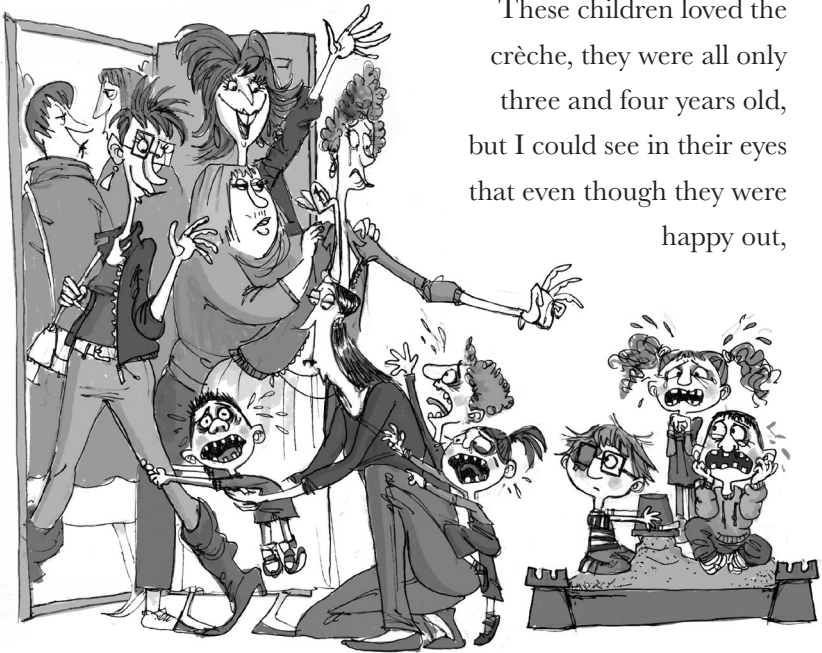
At one stage I saw a kid holding onto his mother’s legs, and the teacher had the feet end of him, and the kid looked like Stretch Armstrong as the mother forced her way out the door, until suddenly the child recoiled into the teacher’s arms with a thud, almost knocking her over.

I was the only one not crying. I was sitting in the sandpit with my huge glasses and my special eye beside Kenneth Cook, who was crying so hard his eyes bulged as he pushed out the tears.



My mother was wailing like a banshee as she was guided out by the teacher. I later found out that she was crying because I wasn't crying, and she thought that meant I didn't love her. But truth be told, by then I had learnt not to cry unless totally necessary because it either filled up my patch or fogged up my glasses. By the time the mothers left, the whole place was red-eyed, even the teacher. Although the red-eyed teacher was due to the fact that the crèche was joined onto the swimming pool, separated by a window that wasn't floor to ceiling, so the chlorine would creep over the top and burn the eyes off the poor teacher.

As soon as the last parent left and the door closed shut, all the children stopped crying, turning off the water-works like a tap. Even I was confused.



These children loved the crèche, they were all only three and four years old, but I could see in their eyes that even though they were happy out,

this was something they did every day and that they knew what they were doing. They cried just to upset their mums. Evil! It was like looking around a room full of Stewies from *Family Guy*. I liked it, I liked it a lah (silent T, à la Jim Carrey in *Dumb and Dumber*).

So I played in the sandpit with a now non-crying Kenneth Cook. He didn't want to share the sandpit and kept trying to edge me out. I got angry. He stared at me in the eye and said, 'Get out of the sandpit' and gave me a hard push. But the more angry I got, the more my eye turned in, and he watched the eye going from middle to nose from middle to nose as I tried my best to control it. I was seeing two Kenneth Cooks. But just as I was about to push him back, he started to get dozy-looking, his eyelids got heavy and he lay face-down into the sand and fell asleep.

My eye had somehow hypnotised him. I had no idea how this had happened, but I made my way through the whole crèche that morning, putting children into a trance as I stared at them in the face with what I now believed really was a *special eye*. I had everything to myself, whatever toy I wanted, until I came across David O'Connor, the only other human being I'd ever seen with class-A special eyes. *Both* of his eyes turned in and, as only one of mine did, we put each other to sleep as we fought and stared for territory over the toy boats in the basin of water.

I was woken up by the cries of a room full of toddlers as the door to the outside was opened again and the mothers came running back in, full of guilt because their children looked like they'd been crying for the whole two hours of crèche. Little bastards,

but clever little bastards, I thought to myself, if I had known that word then, but I thought clever little somethings as I tried to cry as my mother carried me out. As the crèche and David O'Connor disappeared into the distance, I stared at both of them, mentally preparing to fight another day in crèche!

'Happy Birthday, dear Jason, happy birthday to you!' My little sister Rachel, who was now three, leaned in and blew out my candles. Hell was starting for me because I was now the *dreaded middle child!*

It's an awful feeling being in the middle, you're neither here nor there. You're not the youngest or the oldest. Your mother shouts at you when you get in trouble with your little sister because 'you should know better, you're older than her'. 'I'm only five, for God's sake.' On the flip side, 'No, you cannot go to the shops on your own until you're old enough, like your older brother.' *Arghhhhhhh.*

## THE CURSE OF THE MIDDLE CHILD

1. Not many photos of you anywhere.
2. Too young to go out.
3. Old enough to stay in and babysit.
4. 'Should know better, she's younger than you.'
5. 'Grow up like your big brother.'
6. 'Make the tea.'
7. 'Change the channel.'
8. 'Answer the door.'
9. 'Close the curtains.'
10. 'Open the curtains.'

Rachel was getting all the attention and Eric was getting all the clothes. So that was that, time to run away – they didn't need me anymore and wouldn't miss me and my special eye, with the stupid patch.

So I packed my Action Man backpack, which wasn't even mine but a hand-me-down from my *older* brother Eric. I put my dad's lighter in there, four Fig Rolls and my Action Man's eagle eyes, as he had a telescope in the back of his head and I would sometimes use that to help me see better, especially when I had the patch over my good eye. That was all I could fit in.

## TOP FIVE THINGS TO TAKE WITH YOU WHEN YOU RUN AWAY, IF YOU COULD FIT THEM ALL

1. Action Man's eagle eyes (as above)
2. Ten cooked sausages (to put bloodhounds off the scent)
3. A Stretch Armstrong (as trip-wire)
4. Bed sheet (to make yourself into a ghost to scare away police)
5. Pet dog (for protection and warmth)

And off I went. Goodbye stupid big brother, little sister, mother and father.



The hours passed. I looked around with my Action Man eagle eyes to see if anyone was coming. Not a soul. I had done it, I had run away and they'd *never* find me. Suddenly I heard a door slam. Then I heard my dad calling my name. Then my mother said, 'I thought he was with you?'

'No,' said my dad.

I munched down on a Fig Roll as my mam and dad started to shout my name. I didn't answer, I stayed put. I had run away for a reason, and that reason was to never come back. I was five, I had my whole life ahead of me and I would never come back.

More time passed and I have to admit, I was boiling hot in my new home. The Fig Rolls were all gone, but they had made my mouth dry. I could hear my mother crying to a couple of our neighbours. They were saying things like, 'You'll find him, he can't have gone far.' That's told them, ha, now I'm getting notice, I will not come home, but damn I need water.

I heard my dad say, 'I've looked everywhere, me hair is soaked from standing in the rain looking for him, I'm going to get a towel.' I heard his footsteps getting nearer to me, suddenly I could see his shins, he opened the door to my new home, pulled out a towel, all the other towels fell out, with me in them. *THUD!* I hit the ground right at his feet.

'You little bollix yeh! I found him.'

He dragged me out of my hiding place and down the stairs to my mother. My mother and her friends were so happy to see me that my mam took off her slipper and slapped the arse off me.

MAM: (*weeping*) Thank God (*slipperslap*) we found you (*smile, weep, slipperslap*). You gave me the fright of me life (*slipperslap*). I thought I lost you (*slipperslap, hug, kiss, slipperslap, smile, weep, collapse*).

She was too tired to keep going, so she passed the slipper to one of the neighbours.

JOAN: You frightened (*slipperslap*) the life out of your mother (*slipperslap*). Don't do that again (*hug, slipperslap, hug, slipperslap, lights fag*).

MAM: Where was he?

DAD: In the hot press, the dozy little bollix.

My mother cried as she gave me one last slap of the slipper. She was more furious now that I had ruined her weeks of washing and ironing. 'My good hot press, yeh little brat.'

### **Hot press description for people who do not live in Ireland**

A hot press is a cupboard used by the Irish mammy to dry or air towels, sheets or clothes. All these things are stuffed into the so-called hot press and jammed in all sides of a boiler that is used to heat the water. This activity is no doubt dangerous, as I'm sure boilers need a bit of space to breathe and operate properly.

There is normally a switch in the hot press, labelled BATH and SINK. Please, for God's sake, always have it on Sink – unless it's a special occasion, then leave it on Bath, but only for a few minutes or else your dad will need to take out a second mortgage on the house to pay the bill, or so he says.

## ITEMS THAT COST A FORTUNE, OR 'AN ARM AND A LEG', TO RUN IN THE '70S/'80S HOUSE, A.K.A. THE I'M NOT MADE OF MONEY! LIST

1. Telephone (had a small padlock on it. In case of emergency, jump out window and forget about calling for help).  
DAD: 'If you stay on the phone any longer, I'll chop your arm off. I'm not made of money.'
2. Kettle (boiled 743 times a day, more when Mam involved in major neighbourhood gossip).  
DAD: 'If you boil that kettle one more time, I'll chop your hand off. I'm not made of money.'
3. Hot blanket (put on most nights, took three hours to heat up, then it was too hot to lie in the bed anyway).  
DAD: 'Don't leave that blanket on or I'll chop the hot legs off yeh. I'm not made of money.'
4. Immersion (i.e. Bath or Sink switch, always to be left on Sink).  
DAD: 'Leave that immersion on Sink or I'll chop yeh all up and leave your bits in the bath. I'm not made of money.'

**5. Sockets and lights (unplug every plug, switch off all sockets, even if plug not in socket, whole house to be in darkness at night – unless on holidays, then landing light to be left on, so the robbers think you're home, clever Daddy).**

**DAD: 'Unplug the telly, lamps, switch off all the lights or I'll poke your eyes out. I'm not made of money.'**

NOTE: my dad threatened us all the time with the above and he wasn't even a butcher. I'm sure he wouldn't even know where to start with the chopping and if he was made of money, he'd be an art installation in Paris somewhere. Which is where my mother wished he'd go.

Anyway, back to the runaway story ...

I was sent to bed early that night, my brother grinning as I passed by him, my sister hugging my mother's neck. I'd get them back, I was thinking, I'll get them all back, every one, yes I will. Then vengeful thoughts were interrupted as my dad shouted after me, 'Don't have that bedroom light on all night up there, or I'll dig the eyes out of yeh. I'm not made of money.'

### **Primary school**

First day of primary school, September 1977. No barrage of bawling kids, as most of them have been found out at this stage and that 'play-acting' gets them nowhere. So we all waited outside the school with our mothers, not a dad in sight. My mother said they had to work.