

PADDY CLARKE

*Ha Ha Ha*

RODDY DOYLE

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VIKING

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PADDY CLARKE  
*Ha Ha Ha*



**By the same author**

*Novels*

**The Commitments**

**The Snapper**

**The Van**

*Plays*

**Brownbread**

**War**

This book is dedicated to

*Rory*

We were coming down our road. Kevin stopped at a gate and bashed it with his stick. It was Missis Quigley's gate; she was always looking out the window but she never did anything.

—Quigley!

—Quigley!

—Quigley Quigley Quigley!

Liam and Aidan turned down their cul-de-sac. We said nothing; they said nothing. Liam and Aidan had a dead mother. Missis O'Connell was her name.

—It'd be brilliant, wouldn't it? I said.

—Yeah, said Kevin. —Cool.

We were talking about having a dead ma. Sinbad, my little brother, started crying. Liam was in my class in school. He dirtied his trousers one day – the smell of it rushed at us like the blast of heat when an oven door was opened – and the master did nothing. He didn't shout or slam his desk with his leather or anything. He told us to fold our arms and go asleep and when we did he carried Liam out of the class. He didn't come back for ages and Liam didn't come back at all.

James O'Keefe whispered, —If I did a gick in me pants he'd kill me!

—Yeah.

—It's not fair, said James O'Keefe. —So it's not.

The master, Mister Hennessey, hated James O'Keefe. He'd be writing something on the board with his back to us and

he'd say, —O'Keefe, I know you're up to something down there. Don't let me catch you. He said it one morning and James O'Keefe wasn't even in. He was at home with the mumps.

Henno brought Liam to the teachers' toilet and cleaned him up and then he brought him to the headmaster's office and the headmaster brought him to his auntie's in his car because there was no one at home in his own house. Liam's auntie's house was in Raheny.

—He used up two rolls of toilet paper, Liam told us.  
—And he gave me a shilling.

—He did not; show us it.

—There.

—That's only threepence.

—I spent the rest, said Liam.

He got the remains of a packet of Toffo out of his pocket and showed it to us.

—There, he said.

—Give us one.

—There's only four left, said Liam; he was putting the packet back in his pocket.

—Ah, said Kevin.

He pushed Liam.

Liam went home.

Today, we were coming home from the building site. We'd got a load of six-inch nails and a few bits of plank for making boats, and we'd been pushing bricks into a trench full of wet cement when Aidan started running away. We could hear his asthma, and we all ran as well. We were being chased. I had to wait for Sinbad. I looked back and there was no one after us but I didn't say anything. I grabbed Sinbad's hand and ran and caught up with the rest of them. We stopped when we got out of the fields onto the end of the road. We laughed. We roared through the gap in the hedge. We got into the gap



and looked to see if there was anyone coming to get us. Sinbad's sleeve was caught in the thorns.

—The man's coming! said Kevin, and he slid through the gap.

We left Sinbad stuck in the hedge and pretended we'd run away. We heard him snivelling. We crouched behind the gate pillars of the last house before the road stopped at the hedge, O'Driscoll's.

—Patrick——, Sinbad whinged.

—Sin-bahhhd——, said Kevin.

Aidan had his knuckles in his mouth. Liam threw a stone at the hedge.

—I'm telling Mammy, said Sinbad.

I gave up. I got Sinbad out of the hedge and made him wipe his nose on my sleeve. We were going home for our dinner; shepherd's pie on a Tuesday.

Liam and Aidan's da howled at the moon. Late at night, in his back garden; not every night, only sometimes. I'd never heard him but Kevin said he had. My ma said that he did it because he missed his wife.

—Missis O'Connell?

—That's right.

My da agreed with her.

—He's grieving, said my mother. —The poor man.

Kevin's father said that Mister O'Connell howled because he was drunk. He never called him Mister O'Connell; he called him the Tinker.

—Will you look who's talking, said my mother when I told her that. And then she said, —Don't listen to him, Patrick; he's coddling you. Sure, where would he get drunk? There's no pubs in Barrytown.

—There's three in Raheny, I said.

—That's miles away, she said. —Poor Mister O'Connell. No more talk about it.

Kevin told Liam that he saw his da looking up at the moon and howling like a werewolf.

Liam said he was a liar.

Kevin dared him to say that again but he didn't.

Our dinner wasn't ready and Sinbad had left one of his shoes back in the building site. We'd been told never to play there so he told our ma that he didn't know where it was. She smacked the back of his legs. She held onto his arm but he still kept ahead of her so she wasn't really getting him properly. He still cried though, and she stopped.

Sinbad was a great crier.

—You're costing me a blessed fortune, she told Sinbad.

She was nearly crying as well.

She said we'd have to go out and find the shoe after dinner, the both of us, because I was supposed to have been looking after him.

We'd have to go out in the dark, through the gap, over the fields, into the muck and the trenches and the watchmen. She told us to wash our hands. I closed the bathroom door and I got Sinbad back for it; I gave him a dead leg.

I had to keep an eye on Deirdre in the pram while our ma put clean socks on Sinbad. She wiped his nose and looked at his eyes for ages and pushed the tears away with her knuckle.

—There, there; good boy.

I was afraid she'd ask him what was wrong with him and he'd tell her. I rocked the pram the way she always did it.

We lit fires. We were always lighting fires.

I took off my jumper so there wouldn't be a smell of smoke off it. It was cold now but that didn't matter as much. I looked for somewhere clean to put the jumper. We were at the building site. The building site kept changing, the fenced-in part of it where they kept the diggers and the bricks and the shed the builders sat in and drank tea. There was always

a pile of bread crusts outside the shed door, huge batch crusts with jam stains on the edges. We were looking through the wire fence at a seagull trying to pick up one of the crusts – it was too long for the seagull's beak; he should have grabbed it in the middle – when another crust came flying out the shed door and hit the side of the seagull's head. We heard the roars of the men's laughing from inside the shed.

We'd go down to the building site and it wouldn't be there any more, just a square patch of muck and broken bricks and tyre marks. There was a new road where there'd been wet cement the last time we were there and the new site was at the end of the road. We went over to where we'd written our names with sticks in the cement, but they'd been smoothed over; they'd gone.

—Ah gick, said Kevin.

Our names were all around Barrytown, on the roads and paths. You had to do it at night when they were all gone home, except the watchmen. Then when they saw the names in the morning it was too late, the cement was hard. Only our christian names, just in case the builders ever went from door to door up Barrytown Road looking for the boys who'd been writing their names in their wet cement.

There wasn't only one building site; there were loads of them, all different types of houses.

We wrote Liam's name and address with a black marker on a new plastered wall inside one of the houses. Nothing happened.

My ma once smelt the smoke off me. She saw my hands first. She grabbed one of them.

—Look at your hands, she said. —Your fingernails! My God, Patrick, you must be in mourning for the cat.

Then she smelt me.

—What have you been up to?

—Putting out a fire.

She killed me. The worst part was waiting to see if she'd tell my da when he came home.

Kevin had the matches, a box of Swan ones. I loved those boxes. We'd made a small wigwam out of planks and sticks and we'd brought two cardboard boxes with us from behind the shops. The boxes were ripped up and under the wood. Wood by itself took too long to get going. It was still daytime. Kevin lit a match. Me and Liam looked around to see if there was anyone coming. There was no one else with us. Aidan was staying in his auntie's house. Sinbad was in hospital because he had to get his tonsils out. Kevin put the match under the cardboard, waited for it to grab the flame and let go of the match. We watched the fire eat the cardboard. Then we ran for cover.

I couldn't really use matches properly. The match broke or it wouldn't light or I'd pull it along the wrong side of the box; or it would light and I'd get rid of it too quickly.

We waited behind one of the houses. When the watchman came we'd run. We were near the hedge, the escape route. Kevin said that they couldn't do anything to you if they didn't catch you on the building site. If they grabbed us or hit us out on the road we could bring them to court. We couldn't see the fire properly. We waited. It wasn't a house yet, just some of the walls. It was a line of six houses joined together. The Corporation were building the houses here. We waited for a while. I'd forgotten my jumper.

—Oh, oh.

—What?

—Oh janey.

—What?

—Emergency, emergency.

We crawled around the side of the house; not all the way because it was taking too long. There was a barrel over near where I'd put my jumper. I ran for cover. I crouched behind

the barrel and breathed in and out real hard, getting ready to go. I looked back; Kevin stood up properly, looked around and got back down again.

—Okay, he hissed.

I took a last breath and came out from behind the barrel and dashed for the jumper. No one shouted. I made a noise like bombs exploding as I grabbed the jumper off the bricks. I slid back behind the barrel.

The fire was going well, loads of smoke. I got a stone and threw it at the fire. Kevin stood up again and scouted for a watchman. The coast was clear and he signalled me to come. I charged, crouched down and got to the side of the house. Kevin patted me on the back. So did Liam.

I tied the jumper around my waist. I put the sleeves in a double knot.

—Come on, men.

Kevin ran out from behind our cover; we followed him and danced around the fire.

—Woo woo woo woo woo —

We put our hands to our mouths and did the Indian stuff.

—Hii-yaa-yaa-yaa-yaa-yaa —

Kevin kicked the fire at me but the pile just fell. It wasn't much of a fire now. I stopped dancing. So did Kevin and Liam. Kevin pushed and pulled Liam to the fire.

—Lay off!

I helped Kevin. Liam got serious, so we stopped. We were sweating. I had an idea.

—The watchman is a bas-stard!

We ran back to behind the house and laughed. We all joined in.

—The watchman is a bas-stard! The watchman is a bas-stard!

We heard something; Kevin did.

We escaped, dashed across the remains of the field. I

zigzagged, head down, so no bullets would get me. I fell through the gap into the ditch. We had a fight, just pushing. Liam missed my shoulder and punched my ear and it stung, so he had to let me hit him in the ear back. He put his hands in his pockets so he wouldn't try to stop me.

We got out of the ditch cos the midgeys were landing on our faces.

Sinbad wouldn't put the lighter fuel in his mouth.

—It's halibut oil, I told him.

—It isn't, he said.

He squirmed but I held onto him. We were in the school yard, in the shed.

I liked halibut oil. When you cracked the plastic with your teeth the oil spread over the inside of your mouth, like ink through blotting paper. It was warm; I liked it. The plastic was nice as well.

It was Monday; Henno was in charge of the yard, but he always stayed over at the far side watching whoever was playing handball. He was mad; if he'd come over to our side, the shed, he'd have caught loads of us in the act. If a teacher caught five fellas smoking or doing serious messing he got a bonus in his wages; that was what Fluke Cassidy said and his uncle was a teacher. But Henno only watched handball and sometimes he took his jacket and his jumper off and played it as well. He was brilliant. When he hit the ball you couldn't see it till it hit the wall; it was like a bullet. He had a sticker in his car: Live Longer, Play Handball.

Sinbad's lips had disappeared because he was pressing them shut so hard; we couldn't get his mouth open. Kevin pressed the fuel capsule against his mouth but it wouldn't go in. I pinched Sinbad's arm; no good. This was terrible; in front of the others, I couldn't sort out my little brother. I got the hair above his ear and pulled it up; I lifted him: I just wanted to

hurt him. His eyes were closed now as well but the tears were getting out. I held his nose. He gasped and Kevin shoved the capsule half-way into his mouth. Then Liam lit it with the match.

We said we'd get Liam to light it, me and Kevin, just in case we got caught.

It went like a dragon.

I preferred magnifying glasses to matches. We spent afternoons burning little piles of cut grass. I loved watching the grass change colour. I loved it when the flame began to race through the grass. You had more control with a magnifying glass. It was easier but it took more skill. If the sun stayed out long enough you could see through a sheet of paper and not have to touch it, just put down a stone in each corner to stop it from blowing away. We'd have a race; burn, blow it out, burn, blow it out. Last to burn the paper completely in half had to let the other fella burn his hand. We'd draw a man on the paper and burn holes in him; in his hands and his feet, like Jesus. We drew long hair on him. We left his mickey till last.

We cut roads through the nettles. My ma wanted to know what I was doing going out wearing my duffel coat and mittens on a lovely nice day.

—We're doing the nettles, I told her.

The nettles were huge; giant ones. The hives from their stings were colossal, and they itched for ages after they'd stopped stinging. They took up a big corner of the field behind the shops. Nothing else grew there, just the nettles. After we hacked them over with a sideways swing of our sticks and hurleys we had to mash them down. Juice from the nettles flew up. We built roads right through the nettles, a road each because of the swinging sticks and hurleys. When we were going home the roads had met and there were no

nettles left. The hurleys were green and I had two stings on my face; I'd taken off my balaclava because my head was itchy.

I was looking at crumbs. My da put his hand on the magnifying glass and I let him take it. He looked at the hairs on his hand.

—Who gave you this? he said.

—You.

—Oh, that's right; I did.

He handed it back.

—Good man.

He pressed his thumb down hard on the kitchen table.

—See if you can see the print, he said.

I wasn't sure.

—The fingerprint, he said. —The thumb.

I shifted my chair over closer to him and held the glass over where his thumb had been. We both looked through the glass. All I could see was the yellow and red dots of the table-top, bigger.

—See anything? he said.

—No.

—Come on, he said.

I followed him into the living room.

—Where are you two going when your dinner's just ready? said my ma.

—Back in a sec, said my da.

He put his hand on my shoulder. We went to the window.

—Get up there till we see.

He dragged the armchair over for me to stand on.

—Now.

He hauled up the venetian blinds. He spoke to them.

—Out of the way and let the duck see the rabbit.



He locked the cord and held it for a while to make sure that both sides of the blinds stayed up.

He pressed his thumb on the glass.

—Now, look.

The smudge became lines, curved tracks.

—Do yours now, he said.

I pressed my thumb on the glass, hard. He held me so I didn't fall off the chair.

I looked.

—Are they the same? he said.

—Yours is bigger.

—Besides that.

I said nothing; I wasn't sure.

—They're all different, he said. —No one's fingerprints are the same as someone else's. Did you know that?

—No.

—Well, now you do.

A few days later Napoleon Solo found fingerprints on his briefcase.

I looked up at my father.

—Told you, he said.

We didn't do the barn. We didn't put it on fire.

The barn had been left behind. When the Corporation bought Donnelly's farm he bought a new one near Swords. He moved everything out there except his house and the barn, and the smell. The smell was really bad on wet days. The rain freshened up the pigshite that had been lying there for years. The barn was huge and green, and great when it was full of hay. We crept in from the back before the new houses were built. It was dangerous. Donnelly had a gun and a one-eyed dog. Cecil, the dog's name was. Donnelly had a mad brother as well, Uncle Eddie. He was in charge of the chickens and the pigs. He raked the stones and pebbles of the driveway in