

## After the Swelling Subsides

"Lynch, what is an acute angle?" Mr Meehan bellowed.

"Ah, ah its over 90 degrees sir," I uttered, in that nervous speech that always accompanied my unpreparedness.

Less than two years at St Columb's College and I was already on my way to the nothing place that Meehan and his compatriots at St Columb's had prepared for me. We just called it the college because it was the only Catholic college in Derry and we didn't really know any Protestant schools.

"Lynch, why did you pick that answer?" he sneered.

"Sir, I got mixed up and thought it was an angle over 90 degrees," I reasoned, as only the wrong can do.

"So you had two possible answers and you picked the wrong one, you corner boy cretin. How did you ever pass the 11 plus? How did your parents not know to send you to the CBS Tech where you could learn how to dig holes or stack shelves like the rest of you losers?" I could see his eyes bulging and the veins on his neck straining as he got angrier and more sneeringly self-righteous by the second.

"I mean, look at the cut of you. It's obvious you'll never make a doctor, a lawyer or a teacher. Anyway, let me give you some valuable advice for your future. For the rest of your life, whenever you have to make a decision between two options, always choose the option that you think isn't right, because your choice will always be wrong. In the meantime, come up to my desk and I'll give you a little reminder that might sting you into remembering, for the rest of this class at least, that an acute angle is always under 90 degrees.

Even at the age of twelve I had a visceral sense that this was an exceptional attack, even by his standards.

I nervously approached his desk and watched as he slowly and menacingly produced his leather strap, flailing it a few times in the air as I approached.

I had felt this weapon before and it was some tool. Meehan must have partnered with Cripps in the science laboratory and chemically mixed the leather with steel, because six of the best with this strap left sustained welts on my hands well into the next couple of periods. But that pain would eventually dissipate and the marks and swelling would subside. Yet, the mental scars and lacerations of his 'pastoral' words were to haunt me forever.

1965 was a bad year for me at St Columb's. My choir teacher, Mr Harney, took a fancy to me and auditioned me for the college musical. That year it was the Mikado and I was chosen as Peep Bo, one of the three little maids.

Mr Harney was known for casting his perverted eyes and slimy hands over boys as much as he was for casting school shows. Fifty five years later I still haven't been discovered by Broadway or Columbia Records, so I have deduced that his choice of me as one of the maids wasn't all about my dulcet tones. It was, perhaps, more about his warped mind and wandering hands. Decades later he was outed in-house and had to quietly resign from the college. But in my time, saying nothing was the only option and I innocently complied.

As if Harney's 'grooming' session wasn't bad enough, Meehan was directing the Mikado, so I was doubly cursed to be back in his clutches too. And worse still, I had lost the script.

"Lynch, not only are you academically useless, but now you can't even look after your script." At that he punched me just below my right shoulder. His nasty knuckles chiselled into my arm and I winced sharply.

All my efforts were devoted to holding back the tears, but it was a battle that I was losing fast. "We are back here for rehearsals on Thursday at half four and you better have found that script or got a new one," he yelled. "So just get out of my sight."

Derry in 1965 wasn't populated with a profusion of libretto laden bookshops. One newsagent sarcastically asked if I was referring to a medical condition, such was the ignorance of the Mikado script. However, the fear in the pit of my stomach ensured that I scoured the city. I may as well have been searching for the Holy Grail.

I visited every shop in Derry that remotely had an association with paper, even the seedy ones that kept magazines on the top shelf that 12-year-old boys could only aspire to reaching.

The rain infiltrated the hole in my right shoe and I could hear the squelch of my sodden sock as I trudged around for hours. And so Thursday came tumbling in and I timidly entered the recreation hall and climbed the stage steps to be greeted immediately by Meehan.

"Well Lynch, where's the Mikado?", he asked with that trademark smirk that indicated he got off on bullying boys. The burgeoning cynic in me felt like telling him to try Japan, but my terror put paid to that bright idea.

"Sir, I couldn't find it and I searched this whole city looking for a copy, but nobody has it. My mother said she will pay for a new copy if the school can order one for me." I responded nervously.

Meehan didn't like that. I assumed that my response was probably too logical and reasonable to be coming out of my particular mouth. He just lit on me, roaring and punching with both fists, calling me every word in his vocabulary that equated to stupid and useless.

That few seconds of fear and pain was interrupted by Tom and Martin, two senior boys, who had starring roles in the Mikado. They somehow got between Meehan and me and

tried to reason with him. He wanted none of it, but when Tom, a burly seventeen year old, said he would loan me his script so that I could copy my lines out, he reluctantly stepped back.

Still bellowing his bile, it appeared that the fight was over for now. It wasn't a real fight, as only one protagonist was violent and only one could win. My main battle was how to cope with this man for the rest of the rehearsal and again the next day in class without running out or wetting myself. I wondered how he would have advised me on those two 'obtuse' options!

And so the terror continued in class and at rehearsals. That Christmas, the Mikado was performed by us college boys to great applause from the packed recreation hall brimming with fellow students, our parents and siblings.

Speeches from Meehan and the college president referred to the great effort that everyone had put in to make the Mikado another glowing success story for the college. No mention of the thuggery that accompanied it. To top it all, I narrowly failed my Christmas maths test. Not much chance of Meehan giving me the one mark needed for a pass as a gift for my 'acclaimed' performance.

"The fucker probably took two marks off to fail me," I comfortingly rationalised.

After the Christmas break everything returned to normal. Meehan continuously spewed his sarcasm with an accompanying alacrity that no doubt justified it all for him.

As I grew older, I found out that he wasn't the only one of his ilk. Parliaments throughout the world were filled with such vomit-strewn prose across the party benches. It was no mystery to me that there were always wars going on. Wars started with language and ended with language and in between ordinary people died. Meehan would have made the perfect general, always talking but never dying.

Meehan died the other day. The local radio and newspapers gushed with glowing tributes about his literary achievements and his legacy to the Derry arts scene. They virtually whispered that he was once a teacher of maths in the college.

I had no reason to doubt those who treasured him, but I had an experience to remember him differently. My thoughts went back ten years to when I was behind him at a cash point in the Strand Road. A 56-year-old man feeling the fear of a 12-year-old boy and the rage of the last 44 years all in an instant. In a split second, I decided that I would pull him aside, tell him who I was, remind him of his abuse of children and then lay one on him as an equaliser for all those punches, slaps and mind-altering insults that he had 'donated' to us boys.

In another instant, I saw his hunched back and frail body in front of me. Meehan was an old man and although the hurt boy wanted retribution, the grown man no longer needed it. I didn't think that forgiveness was an option. I was in too deep for that. Meehan didn't even know I was there, so there was no chance of him doing a retrospective mea culpa. Moments later, he pocketed his money and slowly walked away. With each step he took I could feel my fear subside until he was gone and I was restored to whatever semblance of sanity and normality that I had become.

Now he was dead, yet his influence on my soul was still very much alive. I considered my life after Meehan and in particular the big decisions I had made. All roads led me back to the acute and obtuse angles.

My senior years at St Columb's certainly gave some credence to his low opinion of me. I had virtually downed tools at thirteen and left school at sixteen. From there I lived wilderness years fighting causes into my thirties, some lost and some worthwhile.

I married the right girl who possibly married the wrong man. I became a father and latterly a grandfather. There was and still is, so much joy there. Lack of academic qualifications meant that I started my working career at the lowest level. However, within

a few years, promotions seemed unstoppable and I eventually ended up in a senior management position. A few people got helped over the years without conditions or need for acknowledgement.

Some addictive behaviour got in the way, much of which I could trace back to my legacy from the college. That too was overcome. Throw in a post graduate diploma obtained in my forties and membership of a professional institution and, for a write off like me, it seemed that my life had some impact and was worthwhile.

Many 'either or' decisions were navigated without reverting to Meehan's template for living. His poison still occasionally infiltrated my mind, but over time I learned that it was his venom and not mine.

I closed my eyes and saw my hands marked and swollen. I closed my eyes again and saw him dominating and abusing us boys in the class. Finally, I saw that frail old man in the queue outside the bank. It was pathetic in many ways just how insignificant he had become.

I decided that he had to live with his contribution to the education of young boys and perhaps he died with much of that legacy unfulfilled. His intellect was undoubtedly enormous but he just should have been kept away from us. It was interesting that the anointing media tributes did not emanate from former students.

I looked at my hands again and they had no marks and no swelling. Then the indelible memories of decades that had imprisoned my mind and spirit began to evaporate and I saw Meehan's fierceness transform to that of a writer, a father and a husband.

His life wasn't all about who he was then, but about who he became. All of a sudden the contemporary eulogising seemed okay to me. My last thought became my redemption.

"Maybe he had a choice to make between two options all those years ago and he picked the wrong profession. Rest in peace, sir."

