



# Mungret

Two Minds Are Better Than One

*Three year sentence.*

*No appeals.*

*I was fourteen.*

## Background

It began one evening when Father Hurley, a Jesuit priest in the seminary in Rahan, about 3 miles outside of Tullamore, rode his bike into town for his bi-weekly meeting with Pop. They met in the kitchen while Mom relieved Pop at the bar. Father had a few whiskeys while they talked or completed the newspaper crossword. At some time or other, the subject of the wonderful Jesuit boarding colleges arose and how Pat in particular could benefit from going to one of them.

I could not understand why I was chosen. I felt that I was a quiet, shy, diffident boy, afraid of the dark, somewhat cowardly, and in a fashion, obedient. I was very respectful. Called everybody in the bar, 'Mister' or 'Sir' and the women in the grocery 'Mrs' or 'Mam'. I had never mitched school, nor for that matter, skipped going to confession or mass, so why was I being sent away? I might have occasionally got into a little bit of trouble but nothing serious. There were no such things as counsellors at the time for me to consult. You had to overcome your handicaps on your own and accept the odd belt to straighten yourself out.

I suggested that John, who was two years older, would benefit far more than me but it didn't work. He had established himself as an excellent scholar and a paragon of virtues. Declan, seven years younger, was too

young and since the colleges were all boys, Myra was out of the question. Pop stayed firm and Mom was delighted at the plan because she had visions of the priesthood.

Mungret was the recommended Jesuit school for budgetary purposes. Parents could select a food menu and other extras suitable for their budgets. Father convinced Pop that most parents chose the lowest cost menu; there was no need to select a higher priced one.

Sending a child to a boarding school at that time was a major accomplishment by Mom and Pop. It raised the status of the family. Everybody within 3 miles of the town heard about it. It was still only six years after the war. Food and petrol rationing had not long ended and money was still scarce. Neighbours and customers were very impressed.

“Did you hear that Barney is sending a son to boarding school?”

“I did and it is a Jesuit school at that.”

“Which of them is being sent?”

“Pat.”

“Those Jesuits will soon straighten him out.” I heard an old one remark.

## First Day

So six years after the war ended, Pop drove me to Mungret, located 3 miles outside of Limerick city, 70 miles from Tullamore. We were greeted by two Jesuit priests and I was passed on to another student to show me where I would be sleeping. He brought me down a long wide hall with a stone floor and tall narrow windows on one side. We climbed up big wide stone stairs into an enormous room with four rows of cubicles, two rows against the outside walls and two rows in the middle back to back. A similar layout was on another floor for junior students.

Cubicles were about 6 foot high on 3 sides, a curtain provided privacy on the fourth side. Each cubicle contained a narrow bed and a wash basin and water jug rested on a pedestal.

I was not a happy camper.

## Organization

Priests and a few brothers ran the college with the help of lay staff principally to work the farm. The CEO was the rector. One of his duties was to select a captain, vice-captain and four prefects from the final year fellows. Their responsibilities were vague but I was sure they got perks.

They had their own table in the center of the dining room and always seemed to get the full menu.

## Typical Day

7 AM every morning a priest walked up and down ringing a bell. We were expected to immediately jump out of bed, pull the curtains, wash and dress. I tried to get a few extra minutes in bed by pulling the curtain and then using the shoe laces to move the shoes up and down. It worked for a while until one morning Father flung the curtain aside and yelled "Cash, Get up". I got a docket for two.

We went downstairs to chapel for mass at 7.30 and then to the dining room for breakfast. After breakfast, we were allowed to walk outside around a quadrangle, or if the weather was bad, go to the library or the sports room. Classes started at nine o'clock and finished at three o'clock with an hour break at noon for lunch. Everybody had to do sports - the major one was rugby - and then showers followed by dinner at five. Study period in the great hall was from 7 to 9. Lights went out at 10.

## Freedom

Freedom was Christmas, Easter and summer breaks when we could go home. Long walks to a nearby village on Sunday afternoons helped a little. Otherwise, unless you had special permission, you were confined to college grounds under pain of expulsion. Sometimes a fellow couldn't take it and would run away. Shora did this after two days at his boarding school. His Mother opened the pub door one morning and there was Shora. She decided to let him stay home and work in the pub. I never contemplated running away but I had other plans.

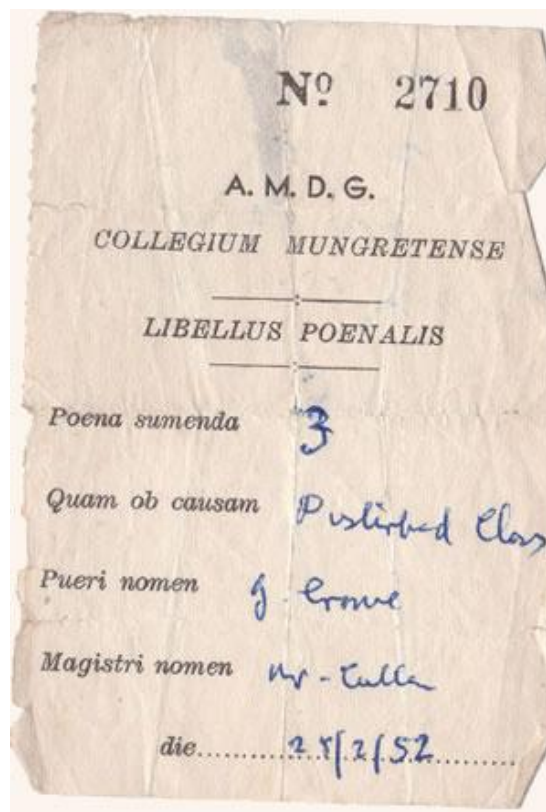
## Dockets

The priest in charge always carried a docket book and upon an infringement, would record the culprit's name, the date and punishment. He handed the culprit the top copy keeping a carbon copy for checking later.

Once the study period began, fellows with dockets lined up outside the sports room where they entered one by one to get their punishment. Most punishments were four slaps on the hands with a thick leather strap.

I had already mastered the drop at the Christian Brothers. It was all a matter of timing, dropping your hand at the moment of impact. This reduced the sting but still gave the priest the feel and sound of a good slap. Thank God for all the practice at the Christian Brothers School; I knew it would stand me in good stead one day.

Initially in Mungret, I yelled to distract the priest from the drop. One priest gave me a warning. Another gave me a new docket, and I had to report again the next night. I must say, however, that I never had more than one docket at a time.



## Strategies

After the first few weeks, I decided to formulate a few strategies. The first year I would investigate how to gain more freedom, how to smoke without being caught, how to get the same food as the rest of them and how to get out of study periods. The second year would be experimental and testing. The final year would be implementation without getting expelled. It was a successful project but I did come near expulsion a couple of times.

## Multi

In my second year I met up with Jim Mulcaire, a big tough farmer's son built like a brick house, terribly smart and not afraid of anything or anybody. Great on the rugby field when he was interested in playing.

I don't know why Multi joined up with me. Maybe he saw a kindred spirit. We never talked about it. Most of my projects could not have been completed without him.

One day a priest was playing handball against Multi. He jostled Multi and said something. Multi immediately gave him a box knocking him to the ground. He was going to give him a bit more but a few of the older fellows intervened. We were sure Multi would get a docket, might even be expelled. The priest took no action but we never did see him on the handball alley again. Everybody was extra careful around Multi after that. He was great.

## Food

The menu differences concerned breakfasts. Every morning we all received porridge. A priest or brother would hand a plate of porridge to each of us. We sat in tables of 10, five students each side. Many students also received a fried egg. Some of these received a sausage with their egg on Sundays. I was not one of them.

I never said anything to Pop but in my final year, I too was getting sausages and eggs. The server carried three or four plates at a time and handed them out against a check list. He then went back for more plates. Once he turned his back, I simply swiped a plate or two and put them on my knee covered by the table cloth and told the relevant recipients to shout that they had been missed. It was one of my better achievements and very successful.

## Sodality

First time students were expected to become members of the Blessed Mary sodality. You had to give an appearance of piety and attend special prayers for 30 minutes during study period once a month. Members voted on your suitability. The reward was that you could spend each anniversary day in Limerick.

I was denied the first year but got in the second year. Multi was denied both years. Everybody kept out of his way for at least a week.

## Relatives

Relatives could invite students out for a meal and if they lived in Limerick, could request in writing that they visit occasionally. Once when I came home for the holidays I met Michael Bracken and discovered that he had a sister married in Limerick. I persuaded him to get his sister to write to the college asking for me to be given permission to visit implying that I was a relative. I was amazed that permission was granted. It was good for one Saturday afternoon once a month. It was great. I never did meet the sister.

## Feast Days

Seniors were permitted to go into Limerick city unaccompanied on feast days. These did not happen very often and we were delighted.

Multi and I joined a few other fellows and after gandering around the city, we went to a cinema. We met some girls from a local school and arranged to see them inside.

Once the lights went down, we all made a beeline towards the girls. I sat beside a good-looking one and after a while I snuggled closer and put my arm around her shoulders. I started to give her a kiss or two and everything was going great until the dirty devil stuck her tongue in my mouth. I was shocked. I couldn't believe what happened. I jumped up and rushed out of the cinema and ran the three miles back to the college, spitting all the way. I ran upstairs to a bathroom and grabbed a bottle of Jeyes Fluid and started to gargle and for safety sake swallowed a few drops. The disinfectant started to burn. Harkness and a few other boys came into the bathroom and asked what I was doing. I told them and they started laughing.

“Put the bottle down,” said Harkness. “And drink some water.”

It took me a while before I believed that I wasn't full of germs. I'm still not sure if I got rid of them all.

## Smoking

Seniors in their final two years could smoke for a half hour each evening conditional on the Rector receiving permission for them to do so in writing from their parents. They were the envy of the rest of us smokers. They smoked in a hut in a garden area off the quadrangle and they always appeared superior to the rest of us. Multi and I had no hope whatsoever of getting permission so we had to resort to other means. We were so successful that by the time we left we could smoke outside anywhere and anytime we wished.

We started in the obvious places like climbing a wall into the orchard or sneaking out to one of the fields. Eventually however we ran out of places to smoke until one day we noticed that the area in front of the building was surrounded by bushes and trees and little traffic. Who on earth would expect us to smoke right in front of the college? Sunday afternoons we watched parents driving up to bring their children out for a drive and a meal. One afternoon, a woman spotted us and started to come over. We waved her away but she kept on coming. Couldn't she see that we were OKay?

"Are you alright?" she cried out still yards away.

"Oh, we are fine, Mam," said Multi.

"Doing a bit of nature study" said I, but she persisted in approaching us. What kind of eejit was she?

"I should make sure," she said.

By this time she was drawing attention to us. I saw one or two parents making a move in our direction so we got out of there fast before a priest appeared. We returned to smoke there a few other times but it was getting risky.

New locations were getting scarce until one day we came up with the brilliant idea to use classrooms after classes finished. Unused classrooms were a waste of resources in our opinion. We selected a different classroom each day, opened the windows, put our feet up on the desks, and either read a book or just talked while we had a decent smoke. It was all very peaceful until one afternoon when the door burst open. There was Father Joy, the Rector, with two older men. They never said a word and backed out.

The college building was strictly non-smoking and we learned later that the Rector was demonstrating it as such to two insurance men. Another troubled sleepless night.



Father Brennan called me over after breakfast the next morning.

“The Rector requests that you do not smoke inside the building,” he said.

“Sorry Father,” I said and moved away fast before he caught on to what this meant. I was delighted. It meant that we could now smoke where and when we liked so long as it was outside the building. I couldn't wait to join the fellows in the hut that evening.

## Sports

Mungret was a rugby college and everybody had to participate. It was my first introduction to the game and I loved it. I never became good enough to represent Mungret in the intercollegiate tournament. Multi had the ability but wasn't interested.

The handball alley was always occupied as was the sports room which had a full sized snooker / billiards table and a table tennis table. I got very proficient in all four.

We played soccer and hurling amongst ourselves after the rugby season closed. I was once chosen as goalkeeper for a hurling match. Multi played fullback.

“Multi,” I said, “you keep the forwards out and I'll stop the puck.”

And he did and we won.

Each year before the three-day silence retreat began; we were allowed to play blackjack for about two weeks. Only a few fellows played but as dealer, I made enough to fund me for the first term.

## Classes

Classes were divided into two streams, A and B, with around 16 students to a class. I was in stream A for Latin, mathematics and geography and stream B for history, English, religion and my worst subject, Irish.

Father McDonald was our mathematics teacher. He was an old priest with a bald head. He had lived in China for many years and he was alleged to have composed a Chinese English dictionary. He was a great teacher and made every concept simple.

Our Latin teacher was a very stern priest but had a gift at explaining the Latin structure. Once I mastered this, I took to the subject at once. Prior to that, Latin was hard going and way above my head.

I never did like an Irish teacher; they all seem to be full of themselves. The rest of the teachers were fair to middling. They never gave me any trouble.

Exam tests were held every Sunday morning, a different subject each time. The Prefect of Studies, Father Murphy, read out the results at class on Monday morning. Those who got first, second or third received a small certificate. I did get a few firsts for mathematics which I immediately sent to Pop and got 10 shillings in return. I also wrote to Aunt B and got another 10 shillings. I didn't write to anybody else; money was tight, there was no point.

## Studying

Two hour study periods were hard on me. I usually finished the homework in an hour. I tried to read a novel or doze off but had to keep one eye on the priest in charge. He sometimes walked up and down and you got a docket if he caught you.

Avoiding part or all of a study period was difficult. The priest in charge sat up in a pulpit and could see at a glance if anybody was missing. In addition you had to get permission to be excused. I upset him once by arriving late one evening with a crew-cut --- unseen before then. It caused uproar. He banged his gavel but didn't give me a docket.

Claiming to be sick was not an answer. The matron was smart and could detect malingerers pretty quickly. I was really sick once and was sent to the sick bay. I decided afterwards that it was not worth it to fake an illness - no visitors, no sympathy, no gifts. Other avoidance methods were necessary.

I found that the Vocations Director interviewed potential candidates for the priesthood in their last year. I made an application; the reward was not only getting out from studying but the priest was a smoker. He was usually good for two and sometimes three cigarettes each session. However, he told me at the end of the third session that I should wait a few years before applying again. I next tried the stage.

The drama group presented an English play and an Irish play each year and once I found out that the Irish play would also be presented in a Limerick theatre, I applied for a part and was accepted by Father Curran, a wonderful priest and a fluent Irish speaker. Why he accepted me I don't know.

Training was during free time but rehearsals were held in the evenings. I had only one line ... 'Shin Aye Aye' phonetically, meaning 'there he is'. I was a gardener and had to point out the criminal in a crucial part of the play.

The big night arrived and of course the whole school and most of the priests were in the audience. At the appointed time, somebody told me to go on. I rushed out and came to a dead stop. There was Keyes' head

protruding up through the stage floor. Nobody told me there was going to be a prompter; in fact I didn't even know such a person existed. Everybody started laughing and then it got worse. In the shock of seeing him, I forgot my line, and Keyes had to call it out and everybody heard him. It got worse still when I shouted in English "OH, Yes" followed by 'Shin, Eh, Eh' in Irish. There was uproar. Fellows the next day said it was the best play ever.

A bus brought us to Limerick a week later to a theatre. The audience was sedate and quiet as I ran onto the stage; not a murmur. Father Curran on the way home was very pleased. It was only then that I learnt that we were in a competition. We didn't win but Father congratulated us on a great performance and always smiled afterwards when he saw me.

## Dances

Fellows taking the Leaving Certificate got very anxious at the start of their last term. This was evident on their faces and their attitudes to one another, more solicitous for one thing. Multi and I decided we needed to vent the pressure and relieve stress so that we would be relaxed at exam time. We came up with the idea of going to a dance in Limerick. Dances at the time went on to two and three in the morning every Saturday night. This therefore provided us with a wonderful venting opportunity if we had the nerve.

One Saturday evening we decided to go. We got into bed fully dressed and once everybody had quieted down - and gone to the toilet located opposite my cubicle - we waited until they were asleep. We got up just before midnight and shoes in hand, crept by the priest's bedroom, down the stairs and along the long corridor. Thank God for stone floors. The moon was full so we had plenty of light. We went into one of the classrooms at the end of the building facing a garden and opened a window. It only opened about 10 inches or so but we felt that was enough. We threw out our shoes and I went first, sliding out head first with Multi holding my ankles. He let me go and I fell to the ground. I picked myself up, put on my shoes and looked up to find Multi stuck in the window; he couldn't get through. I told him to go back in and take off his shirt and coat. He threw out his clothes and tried again. I jumped up and grabbed his wrists and using my legs against the wall as leverage, I pulled him inch by inch until he squeezed through. We both fell to the ground but weren't hurt. We would worry about getting back in later. We got dressed and ran across the fields until we came to the main road where we hitchhiked into Limerick.

We entered the Stella ballroom and paid our money. Nobody said anything. We were very excited. The music was loud and lots of people

dancing. We went up to the balcony to watch the dancers. The bar was open and we got two lemonades. Multi wanted a bottle of stout but I stopped him saying that the last thing we needed was to have him sloshed. It was great and after about 20 minutes I noticed that Multi had disappeared. I assumed he'd gone to the bathroom but when I looked down again at the dancers, my heart nearly stopped. 'O'Shea.' I nearly panicked. There was O'Shea dancing and laughing with some girl. I never did like the bastard. He was vice captain my first year in Mungret and a more toffee-nosed, snobby bastard never existed. He was bound to recognize us; we had to leave fast.

I spotted Multi at the edge of the dance floor asking girls to dance. The ruddy nerve of him. I ran downstairs. Thank God – nobody would dance with him.

“Multi, O'Shea is here,” I shouted.

He turned a bit pale but not as white as me. We snuck out and ran back to college. Crossing a field next to college we had to stop when a dog started barking. We hunkered down and waited until it shut up.

The window opening was about a foot above our heads. We took off our shoes and Multi undressed down to his underpants. He gave me a leg up and I pulled myself into the classroom. Multi handed me the shoes and clothes and then I leaned out. He grabbed my wrists and rappelled up the wall. He got his head and shoulders through the windows but no further. I had to pull him the rest of the way with him complaining about scraping his chest and back. We crept back upstairs. I told Multi to forget dressing and that if a priest sees him, he is to say that he was sleepwalking and that I was trying to rescue him before he did himself harm. I fell into bed fully dressed and I was hardly asleep when the bell rang.

I searched the faces around me during mass. Nothing suspicious. After a while I became less nervous and less paranoid that we were caught and they were waiting till mass had ended before the execution. By the time that mass did end however, I had started to feel more secure and a bit self-satisfied. I felt a sense of achievement, had accomplished something that had never been done before – like climbing Mount Everest for the first time really. I went to breakfast and celebrated with a triple sausage and egg.

We did go out once more but we were better prepared. One day when classes were finished, we searched for the classroom window with the widest opening and then forced it upwards as far as it would go. An extra inch made a big difference. Soaping Multi's body was out of the question.

Multi wanted to go a third time but I said no. Word had got out that some fellows had done a moonlight flit. No mention of dances but I did

overhear a prefect talking to a priest and the words 'stake out' were mentioned. They could've been talking about a movie but I became suspicious and cancelled further dances. Multi could go with somebody else but he wasn't interested. However, we did try another outlet to vent the pressure and it nearly ended in disaster.

## Exams

June was exam time. Those not taking exams went home first and were soon followed by the Intermediate Certificate (Grade 10) fellows. The last to leave were the seniors taking the Leaving Certificate exams.

Rules were relaxed; no regular classes, only reviews of past exam papers each morning and of course we had the usual study periods in the evenings. Fellows were getting stressed out and to escape the tension, Multi and I went to study in a field where we could smoke and relax. One day we decided to continue our studying in Limerick and to relieve the stress further, we went to a matinee. We took a bus back to college and strolled up the avenue. One fellow came running and shouting that we had been reported missing and that Father Brennan was on the warpath.

"Where were you," Father asked when we reported in.

"Studying, Father," said Multi

"Where exactly?"

"Out in Kelly's field."

"You're lying. I'll see you both tomorrow morning."

No docket. We knew we were in trouble. Nobody would talk to us in case something might rub off on them. Later during study period two priests came in to talk to the priest in charge. Expulsion was obviously being considered. Maybe the priests saw their chance to catch up.

I was sweating bullets. Four days before the exams and I might be sent home in disgrace. Three years of hard labour gone down the drain. The exams were held only once a year and I could not sit them in another school; registration had to be completed months in advance.

The potential effects on my parents were unthinkable, devastating. A major disgrace; their status in the community would plummet. Distant and immediate family particularly his siblings in Killoughey would be very sad - they were very proud of Pop's accomplishments and would feel sorry for him that he had been let down. Our customers would also feel disappointed. They were always asking how 'Pat' was getting on. Attending boarding schools was unusual and they took a sense of pride that they were involved.

That night the school captain went by in the study hall and whispered that Father Curran, the Irish dramatist, was in my corner.

The next morning during a rehearsal class, the door opened and Father Brennan beckoned me out. I followed him upstairs to the Rector's office. Father Joy gave me a mini lecture and then told me to drop my trousers and bend over. He gave me six hard belts with the leather – and since I hadn't trained for this, I couldn't synchronise moving forward with the arrival of the strap. Bad planning on my part. He told me that I was lucky that I wasn't expelled. No one dared look at me when I returned to the classroom.

The irony was that I felt the misdemeanour was very small compared to what we got away with in the past. Maybe it was just as well that we were never caught or we would have faced a firing squad.

Multi was in a different class room and told me later that he was also called out and given a telling off and a warning. He didn't mention any posterior effects and I didn't say anything either. He probably got off; they were a bit afraid of him.

The atmosphere was not good and not conducive to studying and preparing for exams. In fact, it wasn't really fair for the priests to expect Multi and me to concentrate under the circumstances.

From then on till the exams were finished, I managed to keep very quiet, my head down, and I saluted as much as I could. In the end I sat the exams and thought that I did alright in most of the subjects.

## Goodbye

Some fellows cried when leaving the college. They all congregated with the priests in the entrance hall, saying goodbye to one another and the priests. I kept out of the way and nobody approached me. I stayed near one of the windows and once I saw Pop's car, I grabbed my suitcase and was out at the car before it stopped.

“Am I not supposed to say thank you to the priests?” asked Pop.

“They are all terribly busy and want us to keep moving.” I replied

I jumped into the car and Pop immediately drove away, Thank God.

And so I left Mungret, a little under a cloud, with some academic knowledge but no knowledge of botany, zoology, chemistry or physics, and utterly no knowledge at all of the physiological makeup of girls. I also promised that no child of mine would ever be sent away to a boarding school.

I was seventeen.

## Multi

I never saw Multi again.

We shook hands the previous evening after the last exam. I had walked him down to the main entrance gate where somebody came and picked him up. We corresponded once the next year. He was at University College Dublin to study Veterinary science. He only did the one year and went back to farming. I tried to call him a few times but to no avail.

He was great.