

DEBBIE THOMAS

CLASS ACT





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MERCIER PRESS
IRISH PUBLISHER - IRISH STORY

For Grand Pat and Lovely Boy

MERCIER PRESS
Cork
www.mercierpress.ie

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Cover illustration by Stella Macdonald

ISBN: 978 1 78117 262 9
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Printed and bound in the EU.



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CHAPTER 1

POINTLESS



Have you ever wondered what's the point of you?

I bet you haven't. I bet you've never woken up thinking, *Why am I here again? There must be a reason but it's slipped my mind.*

And even if you have, I bet your parents soon told you. I bet, as you wandered down to breakfast, they said, 'Oh, there you are, Michelangelo,' or whatever your name is. 'What a relief you're here to fill our lives with joy and meaning. Have some Coco Pops.'

And even if they didn't, I bet your friends put things straight. I bet, as you skipped into school, they cried, 'Hey, Fantastica,' or whatever you're called, 'thank goodness you've arrived. Today was a waste of time until you came in to make our hearts do handstands and our souls play the banjo.'

And even if they forgot, I bet your teacher didn't. I bet he or she or it (it can be hard to tell) looked up and gasped, 'Oh, Chardonnay de Twinklehoops, what *would* I have done if you hadn't come, bringing eternal loveliness and the smell of fresh muffins into the classroom?'

Unless you're Brian O'Bunion. In which case the bet's off.

No one said those things to him. Not ever. Not even on cloudless Thursdays in August when the birds sang and ants played poker on the lawn.

Why would they? His teacher hated him. He had no school friends. And his dad had forgotten to buy Coco Pops for two years, one month and nineteen days.

‘What about his mum?’ you might ask. Well please don’t, because for the last two years, one month and nineteen days she hadn’t been to the shops. Or the hairdresser. Or the dentist or the school gates or even the kitchen.

The only place she *had* visited was Brian’s dream: the one he had whenever he felt worried or sad or scared. The one he’d had just now.

She’d been smiling down at him. Her face sparkled, as if a bucket of sunlight had been poured over her head. Her brown eyes creased at the edges. She opened her mouth in a grin – no a grimace – and now the creases were spreading, racing across her face like cracks across ice. Her cheeks splintered, her nose shattered. And then she was gone.

Brian sat up in bed. He drew up his knees and hugged the duvet, blinking in the sunlight that blazed through a gap in the curtains. The day rolled out before him like a mouldy carpet. June the ninth: the second worst day of the year, topped – or rather bottomed – by April the twentieth, anniversary of the Great Unspeakable. Today was the day when his pointlessness would shine for the whole world to see, if it could be bothered to look.

The school prize-giving always took place on the second Monday in June. And the last time Brian had won anything was ... hang on, let’s check, I’m sure I made a note of it. Ah yes, there we are ... never. In eight years at Tullybun Primary he was the only pupil not to have won a thing. That in itself was quite an achievement because there were

prizes for practically everything. Beyond the usual stuff – brains and sporting talent – there were awards for:

Neatest Handwriting

Tidiest Desk

Calmost Walking in Corridor

Most Opening of Doors for Teachers

Coollest Lunch Box

Cleanest Socks – teachers did random smell checks –

and

Most Popular Pupil – children handed in every party invitation they received over the year and the teacher put a tick by their name on a big bright chart on the classroom wall.

The list went on. But Brian wouldn't be on it. His handwriting looked like cartwheeling ants. He brought his lunch in an old ice-cream box. And the number of invitation ticks by his name was ... hold on, let's see. I know I wrote it down somewhere. Yes, there we go ... none.

Brian reached over and drew back the curtains. That didn't help. The sky was blue, for goodness sake, and a thrush on the window ledge was singing its beak off. Why couldn't a few rain clouds show up or the bird put a sympathetic sock in it?

Brian threw the duvet over his head. *Maybe I'll stay at home.* It would be easy to fake a cold or pneumonia or pretend his arm had fallen off. Dad was so distracted these days Brian would only have to hold it behind his back.

Except. A feather of hope tickled his chest. This was his last year at Tullybun Primary. Perhaps they'd invent a special prize for him: Quietest Pupil or Best Rescuer of Spiders from

Corners. Maybe he'd win the Skinniest Legs award or, at the very least, the Most Patient Waiter for a Prize prize. Gary Budget had won the Quickest Sharpener of Pencils last year; surely the school could rustle up *something*.

He swung his legs off the bed and threw on his uniform: a white shirt, dark blue tie, grey trousers and light-blue jersey with the school motto - 'Don't You Know *That?*' - embroidered on the breast pocket. He pulled a comb through his hair, the colour of used tea bags. It flopped raggedly round his ears. Then he went downstairs to the kitchen.

What he didn't say:

'Hi, Dad. Sleep well? I didn't. I dreamed about Mum because it's the prize-giving today and I'm scared I won't win anything yet again, so it would be great if you could just pop out and buy me a cool lunch box so I can at least win *that* prize.'

What he did say:

'Hi.'

Dad looked up from ... I was going to say 'his paper' or 'his coffee' because that's what most dads look up from at the breakfast table. But Bernard O'Union actually looked up from a slug that was gleaming on the floor like a wet wine gum. 'Hi, Brian. Sleep well?' If Dad's smile was a Maths test it would get '2/10. *Poor effort.*'

'Yep.'

Dad looked down again. He did a lot of looking down these days, and a fair amount of looking straight ahead. If Brian happened to be standing between Dad and the ahead, he told himself that Dad was looking at him. But it had been a long time since Bernard O'Union had looked - really looked - at his son.

'I've done your lunch.' Dad waved towards the ice-cream box on the counter.

'Thanks.' Brian knew he was doing his best. But ever since the Great Unspeakable, it had seemed as if Dad was walking through glue. Every conversation was short, every decision hard. He didn't know which potato to peel first, how often to change the sheets, whether to buy black socks or brown. Brian often ended up deciding for him, which was fine for pizza and toothpaste, but not so easy for plumbers or car insurance. And even when Dad did make an effort to do something kind, like pack his lunch, Brian usually ended up redoing it. Not right now, though. Dad would be hurt.

'What've you got today?' He really *was* trying.

'The usual,' said Brian lightly, taking a slice of bread from the counter. 'Maths. English. Geography.'

'Good,' said Dad. OK, now he'd given up – because if he'd been listening he'd know it was anything but good. The only lesson Brian enjoyed was break, when he could find a quiet spot to sit in the school garden, far from the terror of fractions and verbs and coal formation.

The garden was the school's crowning glory. As the first thing seen from the street, it was designed to create a good impression. A gardener had been hired at the beginning of the year to landscape the lawn, build a rockery and tend the flower beds. 'It only takes one small weed,' said the principal – and Brian had felt her glittering eyes on him – 'to lower the tone.'

Dad pushed his plate away. 'Have a nice day then,' he said, more to the slug than to Brian.

It had moved about a centimetre. *Poor thing*, thought Brian. *It'll take a week to get home*. He crossed the floor and crouched by the glimmering blob. Lifting it gently between

forefinger and thumb, he carried it to the back door and popped it outside.

Dad stared. He bit his top lip. Then he stood up, came over and patted Brian's shoulder. 'See you later.' His voice was tight. He opened the back door and crossed the lawn to his workshop.

Idiot! Brian stuffed a fist in his mouth. *Why did I do that?* It was just what Mum would've done. She'd been a sucker for - well, suckers. And crawlers and scuttlers, hoppers and buzzers. Every tiny creature was a work of art to her, never mind if it stung or squirmed. 'Look at that rhythm,' she'd say, as an earthworm gobble-pooed soil. 'Work away,' she'd tell a mosquito that feasted on her arm. It was their complexity she loved, and their frailty. Brian could see her now, rescuing woodlice before Dad mowed the lawn or scooping up earwigs from the pavement.

An ache pressed the back of his throat. Swallowing, he opened his lunch box. Ragged ham spilled from a sandwich. There was a banana and most of a cream cracker. He trimmed the sandwich and added a biscuit. Then he went into the hall, stuffed the lunch box into his rucksack and opened the door.

The air glittered as if sprinkled with sugar. A single cloud sat in the sky, lonely and sheepish as a lonely sheep. Sunlight discoed on the fence of Number Nine as Brian headed left down Hercules Drive.

Tullybun was a quiet, sensible village, the sort of place you might stop at on the way to somewhere else for a picnic of cheese sandwiches with tomato that stains the bread an alarming pink, but that you'll eat anyway because you're so bum-numbingly bored after sitting in the car all morning and there are still eighty-four kilometres to go. No film stars lived there but neither did any horse thieves. There wasn't a five-star hotel but nor was there a sewage works. While it

had never won a Prettiest Village award, neither had it earned an Oh-My-Goodness-What-a-Dump-Let's-Build-a-Playground grant from the County Council.

Because it was so small - a high street with shops, a library, a church and a few roads spidering off - everyone knew where everyone else lived. Those roads were named after famous heroes, as if to make up for the village's lack of them.

The one thing the village *did* go to town on was greenery. Tullybun was bordered by fields and, at the north end, Tullybough Woods. And nearly every building, apart from the shops, had a lawn.

Brian loved lawns. They were the kind old aunts of nature: neat and calm. Reaching the library on High Kings of Ireland Street (shortened by the locals to High Street), he slipped through the gate. He stood on the grass in front of the door and took a deep breath. 'Today will be fine,' he told a blackbird. It eyed him indignantly then hopped off in a huff, as if he'd just insulted its mother (which, as it happened, he had, because 'Today will be fine' means 'Your mother is a bearded sparrow' in Blackbirdese). When Brian had said it enough times to convince himself (and offend the whole blackbird and sparrow population of Tullybun) he headed out of the gate, along High Street and into school.

Where everyone else was arriving, high-fiving, joking and joshing, pushing and squashing and ignoring Brian O'Bunion.

And where, leaning against the pebble-dash wall, he realised which prize he really deserved. *Biggest Idiot for Daring to Think That You Might Win Anything at All.*

CHAPTER 2

FAIL



Mrs Loretta Florris hated one thing. That may not sound like much, but believe me it covered a huge area, like a single umbrella over Ireland. Because that one thing was failure.

The principal of Tullybun Primary hated pens that failed to work. She hated ties that failed to be straight and toilets that failed to flush. Light bulbs that blew, flowers that died, rubber bands that broke: she loathed them all.

Which meant, of course, that she hated Brian O'Bunion. She hated him with an extra-special, super-size, double choc-chip hatred because he was the biggest failure in her class. You name it, he failed it: geography tests, running races, knowing when the Vikings invaded or how to spell 'exceptional'. Worst of all, he failed to pay attention.

Or that's what she thought. In fact he paid fantastic attention - just not to her. Why would he, when there were so many more interesting things to focus on?

Like the fly that was bombing the window on his left. Compare that to the Maths sheet that lay in front of him. One was a matter of life and death, the other of mumbo and jumbo.

He looked at Question 4:

If Barry walks at 5 km an hour, how long will it take to reach his friend Zebulun's house, which is 6.3459287367298419373584928725645238373 km away? Give your answer to 14 decimal places.

Brian rubbed his forehead. *How do I know?* There wasn't enough information. What if Barry stopped at the Spar to buy a Yorkie? What if his Aunt Lettice drove past on her way to the chemist for a corn plaster and gave him a lift? What if it started to rain and he took shelter at a bus stop that turned into a flying saucer and took him to Jupiter where he spent five years digging for space turnips before returning to Earth to find that no time had passed at all? And what sort of name was Zebulun anyway?

The fly froze on the window pane. *Poor thing, it's exhausted.* Brian lifted the Maths sheet and held it horizontally against the glass. He eased the creature up and out through the little open window at the top. 'See ya.' He tickled the glass as the fly bounced away through the bright morning air.

'Brian O'Bunion.' Mrs Florris looked up from the front desk.

Twenty-four pens went still. Twenty-four heads turned. Forty-eight eyes fixed on Brian.

'May I ask *whhhat*,' the word whooshed out between tight lips, as if she was blowing dust off a teapot, 'you are doing?'

What he didn't say:

'Of course you may. And while you're at it, why not ask what my favourite pudding is, and why I hate Tuesdays, and where I keep my socks, and how many times I've seen you pick your nose when you think no one's looking? And it's very kind of you but you really don't need my permission

because you're the teacher, aka God, so you can do whatever you like.'

What he did say:

'Um.'

You'd probably have said that too, for Brian's teacher was an alarming woman. I say 'woman' and I almost completely mean it because, looking at her, you couldn't help wondering if one of her ancestors had been a cauliflower. I say alarming and I *completely* completely mean it. Her hair was a helmet of solid white curls. She had a bristly chin, a thick pale neck and light green eyes like the streaky bits in marbles.

'Um,' echoed the teacher. 'Ummm. What an *interesting* word. I wonder what it means. Alec Hunratty, get the dictionary.'

Oh no. Brian lowered his head and waited for the kill.

A plump, shiny boy with a brain the size of Canada got up from his desk. He fetched the dictionary from a bookshelf at the back of the classroom.

'Please look up the word "*Um*" for us, Alec.'

He thumbed through. 'Not here, Miss.' He grinned and glowed like a toad.

'What a coincidence.' Mrs Florris licked her teeth. Chipped and yellow, they reminded Brian of cheese triangles. 'Because neither is your brain, Brian O'Bunion. People with *brains* do not wave at flies. People with *brains* do not score a year average of *twelve per cent* in Maths.'

A hiss went round, as if the room had turned into a huge slithering snake.

'How dare you downgrade my class? How dare you lower my scores with your dozy daydreaming, your dim distraction and your dense ... your dense ...' She looked round for help.

'Dullness?' suggested Alec.

'Thank you, Alec. Brian O'Brainless.' She smacked the desk. 'Get,' *smack* 'back,' *smack smack* 'to WORK!'

Brian hunched over his desk. Words and numbers danced in front of him. *I'm not going to cry. I'm not going to cry. I'm not.*

And he didn't. Eight minutes, thirty-four sniffs and not a glint of a tear later, the bell rang for lunch.

The playground was buzzing. Literally. As Brian crossed the yard he heard a low hum. It was coming from the corner where the girls were huddled round Tracy Bricket.

'Umm.' The humming got louder. 'Ummm.' Tracy's head turned. 'Oh *hi*, Brian. We were just *ummmmming* and aahing about the prize-giving.'

Skinny Ginny Mulhinney made a sound like a balloon losing air.

Tracy smiled. 'Doesn't sound like *you'll* be winning the Maths prize.' Her eyes were so blue you could dip your toes in them.

Shoving his hands into his pockets and his chin into his neck, Brian crossed the yard. He went over the lawn to the rockery and sat down against the high-backed rock that hid him from the yard.

Worms of self-pity crawled into his mind. *Why does Florrie pick on me? Why do I care? Why can't I be tough like Kevin Catwind?* The top of his nose fizzed dangerously. He pressed his eyelids with his fingertips. *Don't even think of it*, he warned the gathering tears.

Opening his lunch box, he let out a long breath. Alone at last - or as good as. There was only the gardener pruning roses by the fence. Brian ate his banana. Checking that Mr Pottigrew's back was turned, he wrapped the skin round a