

**CHEESEBOY**  
**GRAHAM MASTERTON**

“Ah, look, here he comes now! Stick your clothespegs on your noses, everybody! Hold your breath until he’s gone past! What’s the story, Cheeseboy? How many years is it now since you last saw a bar of soap? As if you’d even know what a bar of soap looks like!”

Aidan walked past his tormentors with his head down and the collar of his shabby grey jacket pulled up to stop the rain from running down his neck. As usual Michael O’Reilly and his gang were clustered in the alcove on the right-hand side of the main doors into St Jerome Bunscoil, sheltered from the drizzle by the overhanging roof.

While the pupils were all waiting for the doors to be opened, Aidan had to stand on his own close to the wall on the left-hand side, although that gave him very little protection from the rain, and the occasional splatter of water that dropped down from the overflowing gutter.

“What kind of cheese are you today, Cheeseboy?” called out Sinead Buckley. “Carlow or Gubbeen?”

“Something extra-ripe, I’ll bet you,” said Michael O’Reilly. “Just don’t expect me to stand close enough to smell it. I’ve just had me breakfast and it’ll give me the gawks!”

Aidan looked the other way, across the glossy wet asphalt of the high-walled playground. He had learned from his first term at St Jerome’s not to answer back to Michael O’Reilly or any of his cronies – not even to acknowledge that he had heard them. He was bigger than all of them, because he was a year behind in his schooling, He was ten and they were only nine and individually he could have given them a beating, but when he had tried to claim Michael O’Reilly, six or seven other boys had jumped on him, too. They had pulled him to the ground and kicked him, so that one of his front teeth was knocked loose, and then they had stamped on the packet of Taytos that his mother had given him to take to school.

He endured it. It was the only way. Nothing was ever going to change, as far as he could make out. He had tried hopping off school and he had wandered around the city all day, growing increasingly footsore and hungry, but in the end there had been nowhere else for him to go but

home, back to the mobile home at the back of the Spring Lane halting site.

End of excerpt

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