



## **Trapped Between Two Worlds**

by **Maeve Clarke**

***shortlisted for the 2024 SI Leeds Literary Prize***

Sister Martha has a stick that she uses to hit the bell which is nailed to a post outside the school door. She hits it like she is beating our bare bottoms when we come to school with shoes red with dust from our walk, or when our hair is not combed to her pleasing, or if we do not know the answer to 12 x 14, quick-quick.

We march single file into the cool, white-washed classroom. Its two windows face each other and are covered in chicken wire, so that when the sun streams in, the walls are spotted with tiny circles of dancing light. There is a picture of the Queen of England on one wall, and when this happens it looks as if she has freckles. She has been in the sun for so long that her skin is pale and faded, and one corner of the picture has curled in the heat.

Facing the Queen is a large colour photograph of our President, taken on the day of our country's independence. His big, gleaming face is set in a large shiny frame. Our happy-looking president gives a huge white smile to the Queen of England who offers a polite, closed mouth response. I sometimes wonder if her half-smile reflects her displeasure at not being number one anymore or, if it is being moved from her shaded position above Sister Martha's desk to a wall where her importance fades a little more every day. The president's expression tells us that he is confident that our now independent country has a future as big and as bright as his smile.

Our desks are old, at least as old as Sister Martha, and supported by strong metal legs. The wooden lids are pock marked, as if burrowed into by tiny, sharp-nosed insects rather than the rhythmic jabbing of compass points by bored students. When opened, they smell of unaired rooms and reveal a space where we can put our books and pens. The desks were donated by the same volunteers who came to help build the school. They gave us books and writing materials and promised they would send new desks and chairs to replace our broken benches. We got many books, all used, such as *Scouting for Boys*, *Greek Myths* and three out of the seven *Narnia* books – but not in the order of the stories. Some, if I am honest were of no interest to us, like the one about fly-fishing or the cooking book by a lady called Mrs. Beaton. I am not sure I would enjoy many of her meals, she does not use enough chilli or spices for a start, but I would very much like to try her jam roly-poly simply because the name makes me laugh. The truth is it didn't matter what the books were about. We were grateful for these gateways to different worlds. Everything we have is always second-hand: our books, our desks and, at one point, even our Head of State – the Queen of England. At least our president is our new. Our choice and unused.

We waited months for the new desks and were so disappointed when they finally arrived. Only then did we realise that when the volunteers said 'new' desks, what they meant was that the desks would be new for us. Soon enough though, we were happy with our desks that carried the history, hopes and disappointments of the children who had sat at them before us, and to which we would eventually add our own.

We schoolgirls are the special ones – girls lucky enough to attend school. It is a simple one-room school, brick built, not bush – but we are not simple girls. Sister Martha tells us this every day. Beats it into us, and not always with words.

'Who are you, girls?'

Sister Martha raises her stick like a baton and marks the rhythm to our answers. If we do not answer quick-quick, she will beat the rhythm on our legs.

'We are the chosen,' we chant.

'Why are you chosen?'

'We are special.'

'And why are you special?'

'We are the future.'