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Opening Extract from...

Requiem

Written by Berlie Doherty

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Requiem

Berlie Doherty

Part One

Sacrament

It is quiet in the early fields. A bell begins to toll for Mass, and from all over the village dogs set up their baying. A priest in his long skirts stands on the steps of the church. People are coming, clutching their missals. The priest goes inside. He is old.

Latecomers shuffle in the porch. Men in their shirtsleeves stand leaning on the glass at the back of the church. Their shadows hunch about. The voices of the faithful rumble after the priest. A baby's hand taps on the glass.

Outside, the streets are empty. A rook on a post clucks to itself and squawks down, loud beaked, to its fellows.

Chapter One

How clearly I remember the day Mr Devlin nearly murdered Angelo Caravelli in class; Angelo who had the looks of a cherub on a holy Christmas card, and who had no sense at all about keeping still at his desk. I remember my particular terror because Angelo was my friend and because he sat in front of me, which meant that I saw the look in Mr Devlin's eyes just before he did. Like a cat he pounced as the boy turned round to talk to me, and all our chatter flew away up and into silence like birds scattering into treetops, and in shock we watched as the boy was lifted from his chair and flung onto his desk-top and pummelled many times; and all the while this was going on we could only stare, locked in terror, till Mr Heaney from the next classroom came through and spoke quietly and released us all.

Mr Heaney was the one who started the term by breaking his cane across his knee and throwing it into the waste basket; and because we didn't understand this we watched in the same fearing silence. And when Thomas Smiley, the grey-skinned boy from the top year was stripped of his trousers in the yard and tied to a chair by the headmistress, and left out to be taunted through playtime, and still left out when we lined back up to go to our lessons, wondering whether the crows would come down and peck at him, it was Mr Heaney who hurried out to him and untied him and found him something he could wear so he could run home without shame, though his disgrace was never to be forgotten while he lived in our village.

But for all that, the truth is that in my last year at that small school it was quiet Mr Heaney who committed a terrible act of violence against himself. He killed himself. Some said he did it by slitting his wrists in his bath, till the water was cold and crimson with his own blood; so it wasn't he who gave me the news but Mr Devlin. He made me stand up in class while he told me that I had passed the scholarship to go to the convent school.

'Well, it's an honour, that's what it is,' said my Uncle Rory, who had hair like a lion's, red and silky and loose to his shoulders. 'You'll be off with the toffs now, Cecilia. Mixing with the young ladies from the convent school.'

'Did you thank the Lord for this gift?' my Aunt Bridget asked, removing her teeth to search out a strip of apple skin that was bothering her. My little brother Terence watched for her to slide them back in again, and screamed as she dropped the top set back down again and lowered her head at him like a grinning skull. 'Where's that child? Let me eat up his bones!' she cackled.

'Don't give her ideas yet about going, Rory,' my mother said. 'We've no money for this. Why can't she go to Geraldine's old school, and be satisfied?'

'Because Geraldine is only a soft lump, and you know it,' said Aunt Bridget. My big sister, laundry girl at the local hospital, getting on and still in white socks, smiled at my aunt and folded her red hands on the table to show that her meal was finished. 'Whereas Cecilia has brains, and many of them. She shouldn't waste those brains. They're God's gift.'

'Brains are one thing. They're handed out quite free of charge. But I'd like to see God handing out school uniforms.'

'I should be careful what you're saying there, Nancy,' Aunt Bridget warned her. 'There might just be a touch of blasphemy in that. Don't you think, Rory?'

'To hell with blasphemy,' said my mother, reckless.

My aunt pushed back her chair and scraped the meal's leftovers onto one plate for the hens. 'You have no real faith, Nancy,' she suggested. 'You must trust that God will provide. Remember the child's first communion day?'

'I do,' said my mother. 'It was a humiliation, Bridget.'

'Which is good for the soul,' Aunt Bridget reminded her. 'But the child would have gone to the altar in her street clothes if I hadn't thought about the curtains and made a white frock for her out of them in the nick of time. The child should never have fussed in the way that she did.'

'You left a pin in the armhole. No wonder she cried. There was blood on her! Blood on her first holy communion frock, Bridget!'

The women were grim in their clearing up. Uncle Rory leaned back in his chair and grinned. My sister Geraldine laughed across at him, her face rosy from the fire. Little Terence ran out with the plate for the hens.

'Can't I go, then?' I asked at last.

'We'll see,' my mother sighed. 'Wait till your father comes in.'

But Uncle Rory rolled a bright coin across the cloth to me and winked. 'That's for being so clever!' he whispered, and put his finger to his wet red lips.

When my father came in with dry soil still powdery on his hands he kissed my hair and sent me skipping off to see Father Carolyn, and because it was like a holiday in our house that day Geraldine and Terence were sent with me too. On the way we met our big brother Michael coming home from the milking and we shouted out our news to him as we ran down the lane towards him. He whipped me up in the air and swung me round till my hair tangled in the hawthorn bush and I screamed out for mercy. When he set me down again Geraldine grabbed my hand in hers and pulled me over to the stile that would take us down and across the fields to the church and the presbytery. And there was the sea, the great long gleam of it pink with the evening, and the red sun dipping down into it, and as we raced down into the valley the colour deepened and spread till at last the sun gave itself up to drowning.

Father Carolyn and his housekeeper were in their garden. She bent over, stiff legged, to pluck out dandelions, and I pulled Terence behind me so he wouldn't see how her skirt rose wantonly over the backs of her knees. Father was clipping lilac for the altar. The air was sweet with the scent of it as he plunged his fists into the tree to find the finest heads.

'What's this?' he said, seeing us. 'Not sickness in your house?'

Geraldine pushed me forward, her fat fist in the small of my back.

'My daddy said I was to tell you I've passed the scholarship to the convent school.'

He held his hand out to me, soil stained as it was from the gardening, rough-skinned like a farmer's, and as I slipped the tips of my fingers onto his palm he squeezed them till I could feel the nails going in. 'That is good!' he whispered, and I could smell his breath, sweet and sharp. 'That is going home for you, Cecilia Deardon. Come with me now, and give thanks.'

He led us into the church, holding still to my fingertips and clutching his spray of lilac in his other hand like a bride, and he took us up the choir stairs to the organ. He nodded to Terence and Geraldine to tread the pedals for the wind to come, and he dabbed his fingers over the keys till he found the chord he was after.

'Sing for me, Cecilia, and give thanks!' he said, and my tiny voice came like a small bird in the church, and he joined in, deep as dogs and rumbling, and down in the aisle the housekeeper stood with her white face turned up to us and put her wandering harmony in, and I wanted my voice to soar then, the way the skylark takes herself up and spills her singing over the fields.

'Was there any other message for me?' Father Carolyn said, as the last notes died and Geraldine wiped her armpit sweat on her skirts.

'Yes,' I whispered, timid after that glory. 'My mam said I was to tell you we can't afford the uniform.'

When we got home to the house there was a row going on. We could hear my mother's voice raised, rough and railing in temper, and my father laughing, mocking her, riling her on with his calmness. It wasn't dark, though the sun had long gone down; the sky was heavy and sultry, and against the side of the white house the poppies were hectic in their blowsiness, blown out too big for themselves. We waited by the porch for the rowing to finish.

'How many brains have you got?' Terence whispered to me, and I said I had about three, but I wasn't sure: one each side and one in the middle, maybe, and then the shouting stopped and we went in, with Geraldine hanging behind us as though this was a house she was a guest in.

My mother's cheeks were flushed and her hair was loose about her face the way my father loves to see it, and she was leaning down laughing to him as he lounged on the sofa, his hands up around her waist and pulling her down to him.

'Get on up to bed!' he shouted to us without taking his eyes off her, and we scampered past them to the stairs.

'Cecilia, what did the Father say?' my mother called up sharply.

I hung back, not looking down at them. 'He said I'd be going home,' I said. 'What did he mean, Mam?'

'How should I know? It would be a bit of piety, coming from him. What about the uniform?'

'He said there'd be no trouble about that, none at all.'

'Oh, Nancy my girl, my love,' my father crooned, his voice soft and thick and growly. 'Oh, my Nancy.'

'Off you go, then, Cecilia. Off to bed.' But her voice was as soft as his, and I didn't need to be told.

In my bed I waited for Geraldine to finish her prayers. That afternoon I had left school early, sent home to give my news, and the children had been in the yard playing rounders. Their voices were lusty in the ecstasy of their game, and I was on the other side of the railings, walking away from them. I began to run, turning my head sideways to watch their playing, and the pictures I saw through each slat of railing were like new movements in the choreography of a familiar dance. My stomach had fidgeted then with thrill at the news I was carrying, and with a kind of helpless sorrowing that I could not understand.

And I remember the day I started at the convent school. My father was to take me that first morning after the milk round in case I fell off my bicycle in my nervousness and spoilt my uniform - after the first day I was to go on my own, and be careful, and my Uncle Rory's scholarship present for me was a handlebar basket to put my school books in. Geraldine made a lining for it so that the books wouldn't be scratched.

It was raining that first morning. I jogged about on the back of the milk-cart looking at the house and the lane as they disappeared away from me, and the hedges and the walls and all the farm buildings we passed as though I was seeing them for the first time, though it was a route that we used to take every Sunday to my grandmother's cottage after Mass when I was a little girl.

My father pulled up at the gates just long enough for me to jump down, and shouted to me to be good, and I watched the lane he went down until the sound of the cart-wheels was only a remembered one, and then I walked slowly up the drive to the convent school. I was far too early. There was no one in sight, and the grey house with its high narrow windows was frightening. I hid among bushes of mauve hydrangeas with water bouncing off their leaves and onto the brim of my velour hat, waiting for the girls to come down the lane. They came at last in laughing bunches of twos and threes, and when I counted fifty of them past and was sure no one was watching me I scrambled out of my hiding-place and shook the damp leaves off my coat. I followed them up the drive, my heart lurching in my chest with pride and fright.

The school smelt of the spice of carnations, and it had corridors that rang with the smart striding of the girls, and its stairs and panels gleamed with polish. The girls all seemed to know each other, and their laughter shrieked like sudden peals

of bells till the nuns hushed them. 'Pssshh!' like pistol cracks ricocheting off the tiles. 'Psssssh!' and all the bells stopped pealing.

The day started with Mass in the convent chapel. It was quite tiny compared with our parish church, and had white walls and a carved wooden ceiling, and pictures of lambs and flowers and young child saints in its stained glass windows. It was Father Carolyn who came to celebrate the Mass. I wanted to smile at him as he came out from the vestry with the serving nuns. Instead, timid, I bowed my head. I had never been in any other church but my own before, and it was comforting to recognise the statues on the shelves, because they had the same faces as the ones in our parish church and the ones in every room of our house at home. There were flowers everywhere; we could smell them as soon as we went in, and beneath them the waxy smell of candles and polish. And I knew the perfumes of the incense. I stopped trembling for the first time, feeling at last that I was in a place as familiar as my home, and when the nuns and the choir started to sing the responses I closed my eyes and smiled to myself. Gently I pitched my voice into theirs, knowing how it shone.

In class nobody spoke after the Hail Mary. A nun who was more beautiful than any painting I'd seen of the Blessed Virgin wrote 'Algebra' on the board for us to copy, and said the word signified the reunion of broken parts, and promised us we would understand it some time, and would consider it an excellent ordering of mathematical notions, and I slid my eyes from her and saw how the other girls watched her with admiration and awe. She had a low, calm voice and grey eyes, and she said her name was Mother Philomena, which was the poetic name for a nightingale. I wondered whether she knew the story my Uncle Rory had told me, where Philomel had had her tongue cut out before she was changed into a nightingale,

but I daren't ask her. I kept my head down and listened to her low voice telling me about things I'd never heard of before, and the magical transformation of numbers into letters.

The room we were in was panelled to the ceiling with dark brown wood. High up at the top was a narrow slit of a window tickled with the scuttle of leaves. There was one bare light bulb, and the only colour came from the sky-blue robes of the Virgin's statue in the corner, where we addressed our prayers at the beginning and end of every lesson and at the twelve o'clock Angelus.

Next to our classroom was the kitchen, and the reek of boiling cabbage rose like the salt of the incoming tide halfway through the morning, and lingered throughout the day.

When my brother brought the cart for me at four o'clock I could hardly keep back my grief, and I sat behind him with my throat aching for tears all the way home, and sat silent at the table while my mother and Aunt Bridget coaxed me with scones to talk about my day. Little Terence squatted at my feet, anxious. It wasn't till Geraldine came home spattered with mud from running up the wet lane from the hospital and came straight to me to hold my face in her fat hands that I could let out my weeping.

'Dear God, what's up with you child?' Aunt Bridget said. 'Did they beat you?'

'Nobody talked to me,' I blurted out, though that wasn't it.

'Well, that's a fine thing to grieve about!' My mother, impatient and relieved, went back to her cooking.

'Everybody knew each other and nobody talked to me. At playtime they all walked around the gardens, and nobody walked with me. And at dinner we had hard potatoes and wet cabbage and a nun read to us about the life of Juliana.'

'Not a nice story to be eating your dinner with,' Aunt Bridget agreed. 'She was the one whose body was broken on a

wheel till the very marrow spurted out, if I remember my martyrs and virgins right. Yet she would not give up her chastity, no she would not. Actually I like her story, Cecilia.'

I sat back, exhausted. Geraldine dropped her hands from my face and sat down on a stool opposite me, still searching my eyes. But I couldn't look at her. How could I paint for her the picture of the dark corridors, the classrooms with wooden walls and high, tiny windows, the black line of nuns parading round the hall at assembly, the pistol-crack of their voices, the smell of carnations and cabbage, the long and dreadful walk down the drive in the rain, the climbing onto the milk-cart with Michael grinning at the staring girls?

For that is what I remember of my first day, and that is what came to me the day I left, when I stood alone in the holy of holies, the nun's burial ground, that forbidden place. The blank row of little flat stones was well-ordered, protected by the trees and shrubs that crowded in on all sides. Beneath my feet the soil was rich, moist, newly turned and tossed on the bed of Mother Mary Rose.

Take away the black robes, Mother, and the bowing at the altar. Take away the hushed prayer and the magic telling of the beads. And take away your mystery.

Chapter Two

We had our first choir practice on my second or third day at school. At last here I could look forward to something wonderful, because like my lion-haired Uncle Rory I loved to sing. One of my favourite places to sing was down the yard in the old lavatory with the door shut tight and the hens scratching at the broken planks to get underneath it, and dust tumbling with the sunlight through the cracks. I reasoned that because no one could see me there then no one would hear me, and I could sing popular songs without my Aunt Bridget scolding me for their coarseness, or Christmas carols at any time of the year. Sometimes I could sing the sweet sad songs you heard the fiddlers playing in between the hooligan jigs at the ceilidhs. And there was a hollow in the hills up behind our barns, with boulders clutching the sides of it like seats in a theatre, and every time I sang there it would be different…

'Oh, the days of the Kerry dancing… Oh, the ring of the piper's tune…'

If the sun was heavy and full the tune would skip through it, but a sea wind would snatch it up away from me and fling it back again. The best time to sing was just before rain, when the air felt thin as silk; that was when everything echoed for me. And in church, listening to my mother and father each side of me, and Uncle Rory rich as peat, and all the voices rising up, rising up like waves, and my own sound there, bright inside them all.

When we went in to choir practice that first time it was in the gym, and Mother Mary Rose, teacher of music, was playing a hymn on the piano. It made us march, and it made us laugh. I caught the eye of one of the girls, Veronica, and we smiled at each other. I was excited. We filed into the row of chairs that had been set out for us and the playing stopped.

'Which of you girls is Cecilia Deardon?'

'Me, Mother.' I said.

'Who? Who? Who spoke?'

I put up my hand. I was in the middle of a row, somewhere near the back of the class. The nun made no effort to see me, but shouted, her old woman's voice ringing in the lofty gym.

'Who? Stand up. Stand up. Don't be such a goose, child. Stand up.'

I stood up, blushing fiercely as heads turned to look at me.

'Come out here to the front. I want to look at you. So.'

I stumbled over sandaled feet and out to the front. I knew my skirt was too long and that I wasn't wearing the uniform cardigan. It was nearly the same colour, but cheaper. My Aunt Bridget had knitted it for me. I knew that.

'So you're Cecilia.'

'Yes, Mother.'

The old nun stared at me, and I stared at her half-gloved fingers as they fidgeted like moths on the yellow keys.

'And do you know, child, who it is you're called after?'

'I think it was my granny, Mother.'

There was a titter round the girls.

'Your granny, is it? Is that what you think?'

'Yes, Mother.'

'You don't know much, do you?'

'No, Mother.' I whispered.

'She was a far greater lady than your granny is, or was, or will ever be, girl. Remember that. You can tell your granny that Mother Mary Rose said that to you.'

'Yes, Mother.'

She slapped down the piano lid and sprang up from her chair. Her fingers grasped my arm as she turned me round to face the rest of the class.

'Well, who was she then? Who can tell me? November 22nd. Look in your missals, girls. Look in your missals. November 22nd is..?'

There was a fluttering of pages as girls rustled through their missals. I was holding mine but was too much of a fool to open it.

She had made me stupid. There was no redemption.

'Please, Mother!'

'Yes?' Mother Rose pointed at one of the raised hands.

'Please, Mother. Saint Cecilia's day, Mother.'

'Good girl. What's your name, dear?'

'Veronica Murphy, Mother.'

'I believe I taught your dear mother. And who was Saint Cecilia, if she wasn't this girl's granny?'

The class tittered again. The missals had been closed and were reopened, pages shuffled in the fever of the race.

'Please, Mother!'

'Yes, Veronica.'

'Please, Mother. Martyr and Virgin, Mother.'

'…and?'

'Please Mother! Patron saint of music, Mother.'

'Yes, Veronica.'

The sigh was like the wind hushing through trees, as the girls sank back into their chairs. Mother Rose let go my arm. 'Saint Cecilia, Martyr and Virgin, patron saint of music. Did you hear that, child?'

'Yes, Mother.'

'And are you worthy to be named after her?'

My head swam. 'I don't know, Mother.'

I could see the fine hairs on her pale cheeks, the fluff of spittle on her lips. 'It's yes or no, child. Yes or no. Do you love music? Yes or no?'

Do I love music? With my soul.

That night after Terence had gone up to bed I sat with my mother and Aunt Bridget round the kitchen table. I had homework to do for the first time ever, but first I had something to ask my mother. She was reading the paper, her face puckered with the effort, even though she was wearing the reading-glasses that she would never put on when my father was in the house.

Geraldine was in the yard at the back, chopping logs. We could hear the gasp of breath that came just before the chuck of the axe, then the splintering of the wood and the thud of it as it was tossed into pile. When we moved the pile after the summer into the porch with the drying wood and turves we would find toads there, squat and loose-limbed, blinking.

My question was a bluebottle, buzzing in my head.

'Mam,' I said, when at last she folded up the paper and shoved it across the table to Aunt Bridget along with the reading-glasses. 'Mam, what's a virgin?'

Hadn't I known that it was not a question to be asked? Aunt Bridget tapped the edge of the table sharply with her fingers flat out. I saw mischief glimmer in my mother's eyes and out again as quick, and the sides of her neck glow pink.

'Oh shush!' she said.

'It's not a bad word,' I insisted. 'There's the Virgin Mary.'

'Then you know what it means,' said Aunt Bridget.

'No,' I said. 'I don't.'

My mother fiddled with her hair, which was curling down loose from its pins. Aunt Bridget pushed back her chair abruptly, screeching it, making the sleeping cats sheer up. Geraldine's gasping had come to a rhythm. Oosh chuck oosh chuck oosh chuck.

'Mam?'

'Well now,' she said. 'It's a woman who doesn't have a husband.'

'And that's all she needs to know, Nancy, a child of her age, a child of eleven.'

'Twelve,' I reminded her. 'On Sunday.'

'That's all there is to know,' my mother agreed.

But the bluebottle was still buzzing. 'Mary had a husband,' I pointed out. 'Joseph. Mary and Joseph.'

'She was different.' My mother glanced across at my aunt who refused to look but kept up her tapping on the table. 'Different. She was the mother of God, but the holy child was placed inside her by a miracle. Usually a vir… Usually it means someone who does not have a baby. A woman without a husband.'

'Like Geraldine?' She had just come in, red-faced and damp-haired, clutching splintered sticks to burn when the men came home.

'Exactly,' my aunt said, dry, ending all prospects of pursuing the interesting subject. 'Exactly. You have it exactly, Cecilia. Like Geraldine.'

And Geraldine, standing in the kitchen in Michael's wellingtons, laughed with pleasure at hearing herself discussed and made a mock curtsey, as though she was in the centre of a stage.

I was in my bed by the time the men came home. I could hear them coming in, their voices loud and echoing along the lane, and the stamp of their feet in the porch as they worked mud off their boots. Uncle Rory was whistling. My Aunt Bridget's voice rose up to scold, and my father's laugh came back, light and easy. As soon as they came into the kitchen Geraldine came up to bed. She stood by the window for a long time, just gazing out into the night on the hills. It was September, the month of daddy-long-legs. I could hear them prancing on the plaster, and in the dark I could imagine their stalky legs running across my face. Thomas Smiley used to eat them whole, and that's the truth. He said they were delicious.

That night I wanted to be comforted from them, and gave a little squeak of dismay when I was sure one had danced down onto the pillow. Geraldine came over and knelt down next to the bed. She stroked my hair with the back of her hand and put her head down on the pillow next to mine. I stretched out my fingers to touch her cheek. It was wet.

'Geraldine,' I said. 'What's the matter?'

She took off her clothes and climbed into the creaking bed, and rocked me close against her warm, soft body.