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**Opening Extract from...**

# Himself

Written by Jess Kidd

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# HIMSELF

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For my father

# Prologue

*May 1950*

His first blow: the girl made no noise, her dark eyes widened. She reeled a little as she bent and put the baby down. The man stood waiting.

She straightened up into his second blow, which knocked her to the ground. She fell awkwardly, with one leg crumpled beneath her. He dropped down with his knees either side of her, so that she would hardly see the light greening the trees if she looked up, but she didn't look up. She turned her head to see her baby on the ground, with his face pale between the folds of the blanket. He'd kicked his tiny foot out, his toes all in a line like new peas in a pod. Because she couldn't hold her son in her arms she tried to hold him with her eyes as she willed him to be quiet, to be saved.

She did not see the man's hands as they moved but she felt each clear shock of pain in her dark little soul. She had once traced fortunes along the furrows of his palms with her dancing fingers. His hands could build walls, fell trees and turn a bull in its tracks. His hands could circle her waist, her arm, her ankle, to lightly plot her beauty. His fingers

could play songs on her spine, or tuck a strand of hair behind her ear with a mother's tenderness. His fingers had spelt out complicated love messages on her belly as it had grown, salving the marks there with quiet reverence.

His next blow took her hearing, so that she knew her child was crying only by the shape of his mouth. She heard nothing but an endless rushing. Just like when she swam underwater in the wild Atlantic, a sea cold enough to stop your heart.

His last blow left her without sight. She lay at the edge of the world, finally willing it all to be over. She turned the mess of her face to her beautiful boy, thinking she could see him still, even through the darkness, a dim gleaming rose of the forest.

She couldn't have known it but it was then that her baby stopped crying. The void her son had fallen into without the cradle of her gaze was immeasurable. He lay as mute as a little mushroom.

The man held her. He watched with quiet devotion as each breath she took became a difficult triumph, flecking his chest with scarlet spume. He touched her hair, sometimes stroking it back from her forehead, sometimes turning the wet skeins about his fingers. And he rocked her, small in his arms, for the longest while. As she left the world she raised her hand like a dreaming child and with blind splayed fingers touched his chest. He kissed every one of her white fingers, noticing the curves of black earth under her nails.

When she was still, the man sheared her hair and took her clothes; he would bury them later, another day, another time. He couldn't give everything away, not now, not yet.

He looked down at her; naked and faceless she could be anyone and no one.

He wrapped her in sackcloth, rolling her body gently, tucking her limbs in carefully, swaddling her tightly.

A thick silence grew as the forest surveyed his dark work. The trees stopped whispering and the crows flew away, speechless with horror. But the child watched everything, as quiet as a stone, with his eyes big and unblinking.

Across the clearing, through the trees, the man saw the place that he would bury her: a low-tide island you could wait years for and still never see. This wasn't a coincidence; it was a benediction. He gathered her in his arms and carried her into the river.

He laid her in a well-made grave in the middle of the island. She was little bigger than a stillborn calf, but still he was sure to weight her down, for the tide was coming in.

He bathed, washing himself clean of her for the last time as the light began to die. Then he remembered that he must also claim their child or his work would not be done. He must make one final deep hole, wrap his son in a blanket and put him into the ground. The earth would fill his mouth and eat his cries. He took up his spade again.

But whilst the man had bathed, the forest had hidden the infant.

Great ferns had unfurled all around the child, tree roots had surrounded him and ivy had sprung up to cloak him. Branches had bent low over his tiny head and had shaken a blessing of leaves down onto him. Moles had banked earth all around him with their strong claws, swimming blind and furious through the soil.

So that when the man looked about himself he could not find the child, however hard he searched.

# Chapter 1

*April 1976*

Mahony shoulders his rucksack, steps off the bus and stands in the dead centre of the village of Mulderrig.

Today Mulderrig is just a benign little speck of a place, uncoiled and sprawling, stretched out in the sun. Pretending to be harmless.

If Mahony could remember the place, which he can't of course, he'd not notice many changes since he's been gone. Mulderrig doesn't change, fast or slowly. Twenty-six years makes no odds.

For Mulderrig is a place like no other. Here the colours are a little bit brighter and the sky is a little bit wider. Here the trees are as old as the mountains and a clear river runs into the sea. People are born to live and stay and die here. They don't want to go. Why would they when all the roads that lead to Mulderrig are downhill so that leaving is uphill all the way?

At this time of the day the few shops are shuttered and closed, and the signs swing with an after-hours lilt and pitch, and the sun-warmed shopfront letters bloom and fade. Up and down the high street, from Adair's Pharmacy to Farr's

Outfitters, from the offices of Gibbons & McGrath Solicitors to the Post Office and General Store, all is quiet.

A couple of old ones are sitting by the painted pump in the middle of the square. You'll get no talk from them today: they are struck dumb by the weather, for it hasn't rained for days and days and days. It's the hottest April in living and dead memory. So hot that the crows are flying with their tongues hanging out of their heads.

The driver nods to Mahony. 'It's as if a hundred summers have come at once to the town, when a mile along the coast the rain's hopping up off the ground and there's a wind that would freeze the tits off a hen. If you ask me,' says the driver, 'it all spells a dose of trouble.'

Mahony watches the bus turn out of the square in a broiling cloud of dirt. It rolls back, passenger-less, across the narrow stone bridge that spans a listless river. In this weather anything that moves will be netted in a fine caul of dust. Although not much is moving now, other than a straggle of kids pelting home late, leaving their clear cries ringing behind. The mammies are inside making the tea and the daddies are inside waiting to go out for a jar. And so Tadhg Kerrigan is the first living soul in the village to see Mahony back.

Tadhg is propping up the saloon door of Kerrigan's Bar having changed a difficult barrel and threatened a cellar rat with his deadly tongue. He is setting his red face up to catch a drop of sun whilst scratching his arse with serious intent. He has been thinking of the Widow Farelly, of her new-built bungalow, the prodigious whiteness of her net curtains and the pigeon plumpness of her chest.

Tadhg gives Mahony a good hard stare across the square as he walks over to the bar. With looks like that, thinks Tadhg, the fella is either a poet or a gobshite, with the long hair and the leather jacket and the walk on it, like his doesn't smell.

'All right so?'

'I'm grand,' says Mahony, putting his rucksack down and smiling up through his hair, an unwashed variety that's grown past his ears and then some.

Tadhg decides that this fella is most definitely a gobshite.

Whether the dead of Mulderrig agree or not it's difficult to tell, but they begin to look out cautiously from bedroom windows or drift faintly down the back lanes to stop short and stare.

For the dead are always close by in a life like Mahony's. The dead are drawn to the confused and the unwritten, the damaged and the fractured, to those with big cracks and gaps in their tales, which the dead just yearn to fill. For the dead have second-hand stories to share with you, if you'd only let them get a foot in the door.

But the dead can watch. And they can wait.

For Mahony doesn't see them now.

He stopped seeing them a long time ago.

Now the dead are confined to a brief scud across the room at lights-out, or a wobble now and then in his peripheral vision. Now Mahony can ignore them in much the same way as you'd ignore the ticks of an over-loud grandfather clock.

So Mahony pays no notice at all to the dead old woman pushing her face through the wall next to Tadhg's right elbow. And Tadhg pays no notice either, for, like the rest of us, he is blessed with a blissful lack of vision.

The dead old woman opens a pair of briny eyes as round as vinegar eggs and looks at Mahony, and Mahony looks away, smiling full into Tadhg's big face. 'So are there any digs about the town, pal?'

'There's no work here.' Tadhg crosses his arms high on his chest and sniffs woefully.

Mahony produces a half pack of cigarettes from his jacket pocket and Tadhg takes one. They stand smoking awhile, Tadhg with his eyes narrowed against the sun, Mahony with a shadow of a smile on his face. The dead old woman slips out a good few inches above the pavement and points enigmatically down towards the cellar, muttering darkly.

Mahony increases his smile to show his teeth in an expression of considerable natural charm altogether capable of beguiling the hardest bastard of humankind. 'Well, the last thing I need is work. I'm taking a break from the city.'

'It's the city, is it?'

The dead old woman draws close enough to whisper in Mahony's ear.

Mahony takes a drag and then exhales. 'It is. With the noise and the cars and the rats.'

'Rats, are there?' Tadhg narrows his eyes.

'As big as sheep.'

Tadhg is outwardly unmoved, although he sympathises deep in his soul. 'Rats are a very great problem in the world,' he says sagely.

'They are in Dublin.'

'So what brought you here?'

'I wanted a bit of peace and quiet. Do you know on the map there's nothing at all around you?'

'It's the arse end of beyond you're after then?'

Mahony looks thoughtful. 'Do you know? I think it is.'

'Well, you've found it. You're on the run in the Wild West?'

'Seems so.'

'A lady or the law?'

Mahony takes his fag out of his mouth and flicks it in

the direction of the dead old woman, who throws a profoundly disgusted look at him. She lifts her filmy skirts and flits back through the wall of the pub.

'She was no lady.'

Tadhg's face twitches as he curbs a smile. 'What are we calling you?'

'Mahony.'

Tadhg notes a good firm handshake. 'Mahony it is then.'

'So will I find a bed tonight or will I have to curl up with those antiques on the bench there?'

Tadhg withholds a fart, just while he's thinking. 'Shauna Burke rents out rooms to paying guests at Rathmore House up in the forest. That's about it.'

'That'd be grand.'

Tadhg takes a thorough glance at Mahony. He'll admit that he has a sort of bearing about him. He's not a bad height and he's strong looking, handy even. He's been into his twenties and he'll come out again the other side none the worse for it; he has the kind of face that will stay young. But he could do with a wash; he has the stubble of days on his chin. And his trousers are ridiculous: tight around the crotch and wide enough at the bottom to mop the main road.

Tadhg nods at them. 'They're all the rage now? Them trousers?'

'They are, yeah.'

'Do you not feel like a bit of an eejit wearing them?'

Mahony smiles. 'They all wear 'em in town. There's wider.'

Tadhg raises his eyebrows a fraction. 'Is there now? Well, you wouldn't want to be caught in a gust of wind.'

Tadhg can see that the girls would be falling over themselves if this fella ever had the notion to shave himself or

pick up a bar of soap. And Mahony knows it too. It's there in the curve of his smile and the light in his dark eyes. It's in the way he moves, like he owns every inch of himself.

Tadhg stakes a smile. 'You'll need to watch the other guest who lives up there, Mrs Cauley. The woman's titanic.'

'After what I've been afflicted with I'm sure I can handle her.' And Mahony turns his laughing eyes up to Tadhg.

Now Tadhg is not a man given to remarkable insights but he is suddenly certain of two things.

One: that he's seen those eyes before.

Two: that he is almost certainly having a stroke.

For the blood inside Tadhg has begun to belt around his body for the first time in a very long time and he knows that it can't be good to stir up a system that has been sumping and rusting to a comfortable dodder. Tadhg puts his hands over his face and leans heavily against the saloon door. He can almost feel a big fecker of a blood clot hurtling towards his brain to knock him clean out of the living world.

'Are you all right, pal?'

Tadhg opens his eyes. The fella who is having a break from Dublin is frowning up at him. Tadhg reels off a silent prayer against the darkest of Mulderrig's dark dreams. He takes a handkerchief from his pocket and wipes his forehead. And as the hairs settle on the back of his neck he tells himself that this fella is really no more than a stranger.

Whatever he thought he saw in his face has gone.

In front of him is a Dublin hippy passing through the arse end of beyond.

'Are you all right?'

Tadhg nods. 'I am, of course.'

The stranger smiles. 'You open? I could do time for a pint.'

'Come inside now,' Tadhg says, and resolutely decides to lay off the sunshine.

Luckily the sun has a desperate struggle to get in through the windows of Kerrigan's Bar, but if it can seep through the smoky curtains it can alight on the sticky dark-wood tables. Or it can work up a dull shine on the horse brasses by the side of the fire, unlit and full of crisp packets. Or it can bathe the pint of stout in Sergeant Jack Brophy's hand to an even richer, warmer hue.

'Jack, this is Mahony.'

Mahony puts his rucksack by the door.

Jack turns to look at him. He nods. 'Get the man a pint, Tadhg. Here, Mahony, sit by me.'

Mahony sits down next to Jack, a strong square wall of a man, and, like all mortals, he begins to feel soothed. Mahony isn't to know that Jack has this effect on the mad, the bad, the imaginative, and skittish horses, whether off duty or on. Ask anyone and they will tell you it's what makes Jack a good guard. For here he is working his stretch of the coast, sorting out the wicked, the misjudged and the maligned without having to once raise his voice.

Tadhg puts a pint in front of Mahony.

'Now, tell me about it,' says Jack, barely moving his lips.

Mahony could tell him about it. Mahony could start by telling Jack what happened last Thursday.

★★★

Last Thursday, Father Gerard McNamara walked into the Bridge Tavern with a black leather folio in his hand and an envelope inside the folio. He was seeking one of St Anthony's most notorious alumni and had started by visiting the bars

within a one-mile radius of the orphanage. For Father McNamara was heeding the advice of the local guards along with the principle that a rotten apple doesn't fall far from the tree; it usually lands and festers right next to it.

Mahony was emanating from the jacks with a cigarette in his mouth as Father McNamara came round the side of the bar.

'I'll have a word with you, Mahony.'

Mahony took out his fag and squinted at the priest. 'Sit yourself down, have a drink with me, Father.'

The priest threw Mahony a caustic look, put the folio on the bar and unzipped it.

Mahony pulled himself back up onto his stool and took hold of his pint with serious dedication. 'Ah, excuse me, I didn't shake your hand, did I, Father? You see I've just touched something far from godly but just as capable of inflicting great bliss.'

Jim behind the bar grinned.

Father McNamara extracted the envelope from his folio. 'Sister Veronica passed away. She asked for this to be given to you.'

Mahony looked at the letter on the bar.

'Have you got the right man, Father? Sister Veronica wasn't exactly head of me fan club now, was she? Why would she be leaving me anything? God rest her pure and caring soul.'

Father McNamara shrugged. He didn't give a shite; he just wanted to get out of the pub.

Mahony watched Father McNamara zip up his leather folio, put it under his arm and walk back out through the saloon door into the weak Dublin sunshine. Mahony finished his pint, ordered another and looked at the envelope. Then he found himself remembering.

★

He was no more than six.

Sister Veronica said that there wasn't a letter left with him. Wasn't he a little bastard that no one wanted and why would anyone be writing letters for him?

Sister Veronica said that his mammy was too busy working the docks to write.

Sister Veronica said that his mammy had only brought him to the nuns instead of drowning him because she couldn't find a bucket.

But Sister Mary Margaret had told Mahony a different story, while she had taught him to hold a pencil and form his letters, and recognise all the major saints and many of the minor ones.

Once upon a time Sister Mary Margaret had answered a loud knocking at the door of the orphanage. It was very early one morning, before the city was awake. All the pigeons had their heads tucked under their wings and all the rats were curled up tight behind the dustbins. All the cars and lorries were asleep in their garages and depots, and all the trains slumbered on their tracks at Connolly Station. All the boats bobbed gently in the harbour, dreaming of the high seas, and all the bicycles slept leaning along the fences. Even the angels were asleep at the foot of the O'Connell Monument, fluttering their wings as they dreamt, quite forgetting to hold still and pretend to be statues.

The whole wide city was asleep when Sister Mary Margaret opened the door of the orphanage.

And there, on the steps, was a baby.

Of all the things in the world!

A baby in a basket, with a quilt of leaves and a pillow of rose petals.

A baby in a basket, just like Moses!

The baby had looked up at Sister Mary Margaret with two bright eyes and smiled at her. And she had smiled right back.

Mahony clung on to the bar. He couldn't light a fag or pick up his pint, he couldn't move, the sweat was pouring off him. He closed his eyes and right there in his memory he found Sister Mary Margaret, as she was the last time he saw her.

He was not even seven. At first he had held back from climbing up, for fear that he would break her. But Sister Mary Margaret had smiled down at him, so he scaled the arctic landscape of the bed. Without that smile he wouldn't have known her.

Sister Mary Margaret had a cancer the size of a man's head in her stomach and was as good as dead under the ground. That's what they had told him but he'd come to see for himself.

He sat next to Sister Mary Margaret and let her wipe his nose with her handkerchief although he was too old for it. It took her hours because she kept falling asleep. He had wished to God that he wasn't trailing great lanes of snot. But Mahony always had a cold from the fact that the tops of his fingers were often blue and his socks were never quite dry.

She had looked at him with her shrunken face on one side and he'd looked back at the ridge of her eye bone.

'A letter was left with you,' she whispered. 'Sister Veronica took it.'

But then Sister Dymphna appeared and gave him a fierce slap and marched him out of the sanatorium.

Mahony wiped his eyes and glanced around the bar; the

drinkers were sculling through their own thoughts and the barman had gone to change a barrel. He was safe.

He looked at the envelope in his hand.

*For when the child is grown.*

A good solid schoolteacherly hand, slanted in all the right places.

On the back of the envelope was a seal of sorts. A tiny medal of wax stamped with the shape of some old coin or other. He liked that: Sister Veronica had kept it back from him but she hadn't opened it.

Mahony broke the seal.

Mahony will tell you to his dying day that the arse fell out of the barstool just after he opened that envelope. Then the barstool fell through the floor and the whole world turned itself about.

But then, when Mahony looked around himself, everything was exactly the same. The same smeared mirrors over the same dirty seats. The same sad bastards falling into their glasses and the same smell crawling out of the gents.

Inside the envelope was a photograph of a girl with a half-smile holding a blurred bundle, high and awkwardly, like found treasure. Mahony turned it over and the good solid schoolteacherly hand dealt him a left hook.

> *Your name is Francis Sweeney. Your mammy was Orla Sweeney. You are from Mulderrig, Co. Mayo. This is a picture of yourself and her. For your information she was the curse of the town, so they took her from you. They all lie, so watch yourself, and know that your mammy loved you.*

His mammy had loved him. Past tense. Mammy was past tense.

They took her from him. Where did they take her?

Mahony turned over the photograph and studied her face. God, she looked young. He would have put her as his sister rather. She couldn't have been more than fourteen.

And his name was Francis. He'd keep that to himself.

Mahony lit a fag and turned to the drinker next to him. 'Paddy, have you been to Mayo?'

'I haven't,' Paddy said, without lifting his chin from his chest.

Mahony frowned. 'Jim, what's in Mayo?'

Jim put down the tea towel. 'I'm fucked if I know. Why?'

'I'm going to take a trip there, see how the land lies.'

'Grand so.'

Mahony stood unsteadily and picked up his lighter. 'I'm going. I am, Jim. Fuck it. What have I got to keep me here?' He included the bar with a wave of his fag. 'Nothin' – name one thing.'

'Parole,' said Paddy to his navel.

★★★

Mahony takes a taste of his pint and watches as Jack Brophy rolls a cigarette, deftly, with one hand. A hand as strong as a tree root, brown and calloused with big square cracked nails and deep gouged old scars. Mahony watches Jack and feels his brain slow a little. He breathes in tobacco, good soil, driving rain, calm sun and fresh air off the broad back of the quiet man.

Still. He'll tell Jack nothing of what happened last Thursday.

Mahony smiles. 'The truth is I've come here to get away from it all.'

A collie noses out from behind the bar.

When it turns its head Mahony sees that it only has one good eye, the other rests messily on the dog's cheek. Its ribs are caved in, leaving a dark sticky ditch. A dog that broken would have to be dead, and of course it is, fuck it.

Mahony sucks air in through his teeth and looks away.

The dead dog turns to lick Jack's hand, which trails down holding his cigarette, but its muzzle goes straight through and the dog, finding no response, folds itself up at the foot of his master's bar stool and rests the good side of its face on its faint paws.

Mahony studies his pint. 'All I really want,' he says, 'is a bit of peace and quiet.'

Sometimes a man is in no way honest.

'Aye,' says Jack. The word is little more than an exhalation of air. 'So that's it?'

Mahony feels no malice. He could tell them, ask them; he could start right here.

The two men look at him.

Mahony picks up his pint. 'That's my story. I have no other.'