

the
silent
ones

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*To the real Mary O'Shea—
My aunt. My inspiration. My mother.*

The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there.

L. P. Hartley

Until our very recent past, the beautiful, culturally rich and storied country of Ireland was a cold house for women. Teenage girls growing up in the 1980s were shaped by a pious patriarchal society terrified of female sexuality and determined to control it. During this time, real and terrible events highlighted how far the Irish had fallen, how difficult life for women and girls had become and the cruelty at the heart of the Irish Church and state.

The case of Baby Crónán is a fictional story inspired by a real event. In 1984 the body of a murdered baby boy, Baby John, washed up on a beach in Kerry. What happened afterwards was tantamount to a witch-hunt: a young single mother was erroneously charged with the child's murder, and although the charges were later dropped, the events that followed caused great harm to her and her family. It took the Irish state thirty-six years to formally apologise for the 'appalling hurt and distress caused'.

In March 2023, DNA tests confirmed the identities of Baby John's parents, but their names have been withheld to protect their privacy, as they have not been charged with any crime. The investigation remains ongoing. Mary Shea is a fictional character, born to explore what it is to be a woman attempting not just to survive, but to thrive in a man's world; she questions how differently the cases involving the death and murder of Irish women and children would have turned out if the women of that time had power to effect change.

Prologue

There's a strand shaped like a crescent and made of white sand, powder to touch and so fine that when disturbed, it flurries unseen into the air before gently settling once more. That's where he was found, in a dune not far from the lifeguard tower and straight as the crow flies. It was the smallest drift, sunken, surrounded and fanned on all sides by tall marram grass. Till then an anonymous patch of ground, but afterwards and forevermore that small dune would be known as *the cradle*.

In the midst of surreal horror and terrible beauty, I'll focus on the latter for now. He was tiny but sturdy too, his hands balled into fists, ready to fight for his life. He had dimples above both knees and was a chubby thing, pale as the dawn and with perfect little feet. Ten toes with translucent nails that were already turning black at the base and tips. His eyes were grey, a mirror of the heavy sky above him, and he stared far beyond it and the people gathered around. It was undeniable he had come to a violent end and so they were weeping and whispering, shocked utterances of how and why and who could do such an evil thing, while staring down at his beautiful, angelic face. He was gifted with rosebud lips that no doubt would have delivered a devastating smile had he been given the chance to muster one. He was clean; I could smell the bleach wafting my way as I approached, and his

black tuft of hair was rancid with it. He had been wrapped in a blue towel rough from overuse. It had slipped from around him so he lay on it, naked.

It was catching, this baby Medusa. One look at him and we were all turned to stone – at least outwardly. Our humanity shrank to accommodate the practicalities of the job at hand, but inside, every one of us, from the best to the worst, screamed. How could we not? For my part, I wanted him to know that someone cared for him; I wanted to shout to his soul high above the clouds, to where God's choir sings, but what could I say? So I remained silent as the grave while my emotions ran riot and my mind ticked over. Who was he? Where did he come from? Why did he die? By whose hand? That was for us to investigate, but first we called upon Father Cunningham to perform the rituals to pave this tiny creature's way to heaven while he lay there in the cradle – and to do that, he needed a name. He was christened Baby Crónán, an ancient Irish name, meaning little dark one.

CHAPTER ONE

Monday, 21 January 1980

Day One

I ran around my tiny rented one-bed cottage, which was in reality a converted cowshed on a farmer's land. The walls were plastered, the floor tiled, and indoor plumbing had been installed but despite many attempts to rid the place of the musky odour of cows, it remained in the air, stubbornly refusing to shift. Once I'd conceded defeat, I got used to it, even found comfort in it, but the galvanised steel roof was harder to tolerate, as I was a light sleeper and it made a terrible racket when it rained.

It had been raining for four days and nights, so I'd slept barely a wink. Bone-tired, I smoothed down my freshly ironed uniform, knotted and tied my wet hair in a bun at the nape of my neck, and covered my head with a hat; I checked my tights for ladders and my shoes for dirt, while eating a slightly burnt slice of toast I was holding in one hand and grabbing my coat from the rack just inside the door with the other. I was a skinny thing, often described as a tall glass of water: blonde hair, watery blue eyes. I suppose I had a pretty enough face, the kind with small features, but my height became an issue early on. Despite my mother's prayers to Saint Anthony, I stood

at five feet seven-and-a-half inches in stockinged feet by the age of fifteen. Boys didn't like looking up at girls, and men weren't too fond of it either. The end result? I was no prize at the fair.

I was running late. The rain had finally stopped at 4:15 a.m. and as soon as the noise relented, I'd finally slept in the silence. Too soundly, because the alarm clock rang just over an hour later and one or both of my arms decided to react independently of my brain by knocking it to the floor. I don't remember it happening, I simply woke to find the evidence of my action and saw from the wall clock that I'd overslept. I couldn't be late for work. Everyone else at the station seemed to breeze about the place as and when they liked, but I was held to a higher standard than those fellas. If I was a minute late it was noted, shouted aloud for all to hear. Grumbling and the shaking of heads would follow. 'Probably too busy doing her make-up,' one or another would say. I didn't wear make-up, a fact that went unnoticed by those detective geniuses. I would pretend to make no mind. I'd just offer to make a pot of tea, thinking what a bunch of ignoramuses they were as I poured it.

I left the house that morning and got into my second-hand Ford Escort, which smelled of peat briquettes, and had a tear in the driver seat's leather upholstery and an artfully mangled steel hanger that replaced the long-gone radio aerial. I was on the early shift, six a.m. to two p.m. It was already five fifty-five as I drove speedily to the station in the dark, half-concentrating on the road ahead, half-daydreaming of the outfit I'd be wearing to the disco that the farmer's son, Seamus, was taking me to the following weekend. Seamus was as handsome as the devil – at least that's what my mother said the first time she saw him.

He was tall and lean but fit too, from all the work he did on the farm. He kept his chestnut hair long enough to sweep back and had the most extraordinary aqua-blue eyes – they made him stand out in any room. Some girls would look at us with obvious envy when we were together, not realising that I was far from his type. That suited me just fine. I was more interested in having the opportunity to wear the brand new, beautiful, embroidered blouse Mammy sent me as a birthday gift than Seamus, but he was kind company and he fixed things around the cottage that needed attention. I daydreamed of the blouse, the music, the lights and spinning around to Blondie or The Police, arms in the air, dancing. I loved to dance. Seamus would hole up at the bar and mind my handbag, and I'd boogie the night away until the sweat rolled off me and my head felt lighter. I was looking forward to the weekend and losing myself in pop music as I pegged down those quiet roads, nestled where the mountains met the sea in the town of Nead Mara, a quiet haven in God's own county of Kerry. Speeding along the winding roads, past quaint stone cottages, unflinching against the ravages of time and high tides, and the beach that swept out into the North Atlantic Ocean, I ratcheted the window down and inhaled the soul of the place. Despite my hurry and the trepidation that came with every working day, I felt at ease with the world.

Donal 'Dicey' McCarthy made it through the gate of the carpark just before me when I arrived at two minutes to six a.m. I'd broken every speed limit and maybe even set a few records in getting there. He was a big wide bear of a man – his broad frame and heavysset shoulders were at odds with his lean, wiry face that seemed to belong to another body, and his thick head of fair hair definitely looked like it

belonged to another head: nothing about Dicey added up. He snarled more than he smiled but when he did, it was disarming. He had a hearty laugh too; I'd hear it echoing about the place when he talked with the lads. He'd always talk *at* me, not *to* me, but I pretended not to notice. Now, he checked his watch as though he was my superior. He wasn't, he was just on the regular like me, but he didn't act like it. I parked close to the building entrance to be sure I made it through the blue door before him. Aside from the cleaner, who was pushing sixty and came in twice a week, I was the only woman in the station. Women were as welcome in the Irish police force as a fart in a space suit but I had managed to slip through the net by sheer force of will, sneakiness and the fact that my father was a high-ranking assistant commissioner. I adored my job, even the mundane stuff – and so falling in love was not an option, because love leads to marriage and if I got married, I'd be fired. That would be the end of doing the thing I felt I was born to do, and at the age of twenty-eight I felt I had so much more to give.

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Liam Kenny was already inside, standing at the desk, coughing and spluttering. He was in his uniform but his grey pallor and shiny forehead suggested he was a sick man needing his bed and comfort. He was only thirty but his balding head and having lost a few teeth he'd failed to replace, when he played hurling in the minors, made him look twenty years older. He wasn't the brightest man in our unit but he was the sweetest, and although he wasn't my friend, he was friendly to me and it meant a lot. Dicey arrived in a step or two behind me, just enough time for poor old Kenny to cough and splutter right into his face.

‘For the love of God, what did you do that for?’ he shouted at Kenny. Dicey was close to fifty and although he was still on the regular, he acted with authority so that even the Station House Officer, Brian Keating – a small, quietly spoken but firm man – was almost submissive to him. He had that kind of presence, one which took up more space than everyone else; his size, his voice and his aura were vast and he wasn’t one bit apologetic about it.

‘Sorry... God... Sorry, Dicey. I’m dying over here,’ Kenny said, wiping his nose ferociously.

Dicey took one look at him. ‘Well, you’re not going home. Keating has a hospital appointment with that knee of his.’

‘Oh, I’m ready to work,’ Kenny said, lifting his arms into the air as if that made a difference. He was pumping sweat and wavering right in front of us. *Ah, Kenny, you’re as sick as a small hospital*, I thought to myself, hoping to God I wouldn’t catch whatever he had. Influenza was not a part of my plan for the weekend, so I stepped back, hoping he’d do the same. He didn’t. He pushed forward. ‘I’m here to work,’ he assured us, hawking all over Dicey, whose gaze raked over him, from his head to his toes, before he leaned over the counter to take a sniff. Kenny pulled back so quickly, he almost lost his footing but steadied himself just as quickly. He looked towards me anxiously. I was still shielding behind Dicey so in the absence of doing anything helpful, I gave him the thumbs up.

‘You’ve got the waft of a coffin ship about you,’ Dicey said.

‘I can work,’ Kenny said.

‘So stay here and answer the phones. I’m not having you in the car with me,’ Dicey said, before looking my way. ‘I suppose it will have to be you.’ He sighed as though

sharing a vehicle with me was the worst thing in the world. I'd been working in that station for five years and it was only the third time I'd be in the car.

Ten minutes later, we were driving by a house inhabited by a man known to beat his wife. Apparently, Dicey liked to drive by and flash the blue lights to remind the brute that he was watching. The wife had never made a complaint, but that wasn't unusual. In a small town like Nead Mara, she didn't have to. Town gossip reached our door daily, and the reports of Ann Buckley's beatings were regular. I'd heard from Kenny that Dicey's solution was to threaten the fella with his size and deliver a few punches when he stepped out of line. He was a factory worker, locally referred to as Dave 'The Wave' Buckley. He was a surfer at one time but gave it up when he lost a few toes in a lawnmower accident. We passed by and Dicey hit the blue lights just as he was getting into his car to go to work. A neighbour was leaving at the same time and he stared at us, then looked over at Dave The Wave, waiting for some sort of verbal or even non-verbal explanation.

'Everything all right, Dave?' the neighbour said, feigning ignorance, as Dicey slowed almost to a standstill outside the house.

'Shag off... You nosy feckin' article,' snarled Dave The Wave to his neighbour, who was now fumbling for the keys of his car, desperate to make his getaway. Dicey laughed but I didn't find his action funny or constructive.

'You're just rising him,' I said.

'Excuse me?' he said, anger immediately injected into his tone.

'Look in on her, be kind to her but leave him alone,' I said, but Dicey wasn't used to people telling him what to do. He stewed on what I'd said and as soon as we were

away from the street and out of sight, he pulled in at the side of the road with a dramatic swerve, then turned in his seat to address me.

'You haven't a clue.' He scoffed. 'He's scared of me. That's what he needs.'

Dicey was what my mammy would call a galoot. Thinking he was saving this woman from the hell and torment she lived in, congratulating himself for being the big man. But he was a fool if he thought that. And I, being a different kind of galoot, felt an obligation to let him know as much.

'I see Ann Buckley in the supermarket with bruises on her arms, moving slowly and guarding her ribs. They've got four kids, and she's never going to call for help. All you succeeded in doing just now is making good and sure she gets a hiding tonight.'

Dicey's mouth fell open, and he was momentarily lost for words. 'You're one cheeky bitch,' he snapped, and although I had a lot more to say on the subject, I stayed quiet long enough for him to voice his grievance.

'I'm sorry I didn't put up with Kenny's diphtheria, it would have been less painful than listening to a foolish woman.' Then he leaned in to me, grabbing my leg with his hand and holding my thigh tight in his grip. 'She's alive because of me. He might give her a few slaps but he knows the line.'

I didn't move, not an inch. I just held his eye as I let him sink his fingers in the flesh of my thigh, hoping to God my tights didn't rip, because I didn't have a spare set with me. *Don't say a word, Mary. Not one word, just breathe.*

I waited, steeling myself for what may come. Then, slowly and deliberately, he let go, put the car in gear, and we were off – him in a temper, me in fear. That's when the

radio crackled to life. I grabbed it like a drowning woman clutching a buoy and answered. It was Kenny. His voice, as alarmed as it was, offered some reassurance.

‘Is Dicey there?’ he said.

‘No, I’m in a French woman’s knickers,’ Dicey retorted, his temper dampening and ego soothed as Kenny pretended to laugh.

‘Eh, listen, just got in an interesting call... Some woman, she was bawling, hysterical really...’

‘And the sky is blue, Kenny, so what about it?’ Dicey said.

‘She said she’s on the beach... There’s a baby there... Thing is, Dicey, she said it’s dead.’

Dicey grabbed the radio from my hands. ‘Did you say dead?’

‘Yeah. Gave her name as Nora Fitzgerald. She rang from the phone box on the top road. I told her to go back to the site, where she said the baby lies, near the lifeguard tower. The one closest to the main entrance, you know, with the carpark.’

Dicey didn’t speak after that but threw the radio back into the holder and bolted along the narrow winding road, despite the wet and at a speed that made it feel like we were on rails.

We arrived at the beachside carpark just after six thirty a.m. and the woman who was waiting for us looked to be in her late twenties, small in stature with a chubby frame and a round face. She was wearing a coat too light for the weather, and her body trembled and her teeth rattled from either the cold or the shock of her discovery. Black mascara tracks lined her cheeks and her dog was at her feet, silently awaiting instruction as she wiped her tears.

As we approached, she pointed to the dune behind her and Dicey ran towards it as I slowed to speak to her.

‘Are you Nora Fitzgerald?’ I asked and she told me she was. ‘Is that where the baby is?’ I said, pointing to the dune that Dicey was scrambling to.

‘He’s in there, it was Prince who found him,’ she confirmed, presumably referring to her dog. I looked up in time to see Dicey turn to me with his mouth gaping and his eyes wide. Suddenly, I was walking to him as though he were a magnet. He tried to stop me.

‘No. Don’t,’ he said, his hands raised as if to ward me off. ‘You won’t stomach it.’ His tone wasn’t mean, and there was a quiver in his voice from barely contained tears, as though he was already regretting what he’d seen and wished to spare me. But I wouldn’t be spared. This was my job. I was determined to do it.

‘I’m a member of the force, just like you.’ He let me pass and that’s when I first saw him. A tiny baby boy, hurt beyond words, stabbed repeatedly until the life flowed out of him, leaving nothing but dark wounds. It was in that moment my heart ripped asunder, and he found his way past the tear, searing himself into me. The anger rose within me, fury burning in my throat as I tasted the tears that I swallowed. I would not be seen crumbling. Dicey had paled and I noticed his hands were trembling, but I was determined to keep mine steady. I retreated down the dune, past Nora and her dog, and back to the car, where I used the radio to call in. ‘We need a coroner and the lads from McGuire’s funeral home.’

‘So it’s real,’ Kenny said, his voice laden with disbelief. I watched as Nora bent double, clearly in a bad way.

‘It’s a baby boy, Liam,’ I said quietly. Kenny didn’t reply, presumably taking in the information. I continued,

more firmly now, 'We have a witness in shock here, is the ambulance on its way?'

'Oh God... I'll call it now. Was he...?' He tapered off, as though he couldn't bring himself to say the word – that, or his sickness was getting the better of him.

'Murdered?' I said, before confirming that he was.

'Oh Lord God... A little boy.' Although I couldn't see him, I was aware he was blessing himself.

'We'll need to call the Super so he can put a call in to the lads from Dublin, and don't forget the State Pathologist.'

'Leave it with me and... well... God rest the poor creature,' Kenny said, and I hung up the radio and grabbed the tape from the boot of the car, passing poor Nora again, now crouched, hugging her dog. I paused briefly to assure her that help was on the way.

'For the baby?' she queried in surprise.

'For you,' I replied.

'The baby's gone,' she muttered, hopelessly.

'He is.' I confirmed what she already knew, my heart as heavy as a rock. As I turned to leave, she grasped my skirt. 'They'll need a statement,' she said.

I nodded as I politely corrected her. 'We will.'

'I'll give it to you, then?' she asked. I hesitated, knowing it wouldn't be popular. 'Just you,' she insisted.

I was grateful to be there for her and ever more so that she wanted me to.

As I reached Dicey, he was just staring at the baby. 'Oh, dear God,' he muttered. I handed him the tape. *Don't look at the child, Mary. Focus on the job. He deserves your help. Don't let him down.* I kept my eyes averted.

'Come on,' I said, 'we've got a crime scene to preserve and a witness I need to take a statement from.'

He looked at me as if I were an alien. 'Have you no heart, woman?' he asked, and I almost laughed at the response in my head: *No heart? What am I supposed to do, Dicey McCarthy, cry my heart out so you can call me names? What are any of us to do?* Aloud I asked, 'What would you have me do? What is the right reaction to a murdered baby?' I was genuinely interested in his response.

'Are you a woman at all?' he retorted.

This time a bitter yelp of laughter fell from my mouth.

'I am, and that's why if my hands shook as yours do now, it would be derided as weakness.' He was shocked; I could see it. I was shocked myself. Truth be told, seeing his hands tremble transformed the beast in the car into a vulnerable human standing before me. But that question, in that place at that time – it was as though he'd wielded a knife of his own. My insides were blackened with grief, but I pushed through *because* I was a woman. The sight of the dead infant had done something to me and the anger I felt growing within me was set to explode. I tempered myself before I burst into flames and went on before he could interrupt me. 'Nora wants to talk to me alone,' I said. Then I walked away and left him with the roll of tape. For once Dicey McCarthy seemed to take up a little less space in the world.