

CHAPTER 1: THE DISAPPEARANCE

TUESDAY, 4 JANUARY 2005

THE DISAPPEARANCE, 2.00PM

Robert Holohan sped out the driveway of his home. His new silver BMX bike kicked up little stones as the wheels spun in response to his urgent desire for speed. Despite the cold of the winter afternoon, his face was flushed with excitement and energy.

It had already been a good day. In fact, it had been a great two weeks. Christmas had brought the marvellous bike that he was now putting through its paces with growing relish. Everyone had liked it – and his friends gave it the ultimate compliment: it was ‘cool’. He had also got enough cash in Christmas presents to buy the new Nokia camera phone that he had been admiring in Xtra-vision for weeks. He had agreed to share the phone with his mother, but Robert knew the phone was really his.

The best surprise of all – almost as good as Christmas morning – had been the medal he’d received only two days before from Midleton Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) club. He’d trained and played with the Midleton underage team over the previous summer and autumn and, like the other lads, he’d been rewarded with a medal.

It was his pride and joy – and, with a jolt, Robert realised that his cherished medal was back in his Ballyedmond house. He’d almost

refused to take it off – and he liked the medal so much that he had decided he was now going to concentrate on horses and hurling, his two great loves. Never mind, he thought, he'd pick up his medal later when he came back home for tea. Now it was time for some fun and to find his friends.

The morning had already been good. He'd built a special ramp on the driveway of his Ballyedmond home and practised jumping over it with his new bike. This BMX was much better than a racer, he thought, with tyres that were perfect for the local roads and lanes where he loved to play.

3.30PM

Majella Holohan was just about to start preparing the family tea when she thought that she'd call Robert to see what he wanted to eat. She tried him on his new mobile, but couldn't get any answer. The phone just rang out.

She thought no more about it – and decided to try him again in a few minutes. Her other children, Emma (eight) and Harry (four), were happily playing around the house. Perhaps Robert didn't hear the phone. But it was unusual for him to be so long away from the house without letting her know where he was. 'We always kept in contact – just to see what he was up to,' Majella said.

A few minutes later, after again failing to get any answer from Robert, she decided to leave a message on the mobile. 'Rob, it's Mam, give me a buzz'. By 5.00pm Majella had still failed to make contact with her son despite ringing his phone at least six times. With darkness falling she was becoming increasingly worried. 'Rob didn't like the dark. In fact, he hated the dark. He always made sure he was home before it got dark. That's why I was getting worried,' she said.

5.30PM

By 5.30pm her husband, Mark, had returned home from work and was greeted by a worried Majella. The family immediately began to try and locate their missing son. While they were concerned, they didn't think for a moment that anything untoward had happened. After all, this was Ballyedmond: it was quiet, rural and all the neighbours looked out for each other.

Majella decided to send her daughter, Emma, around to some of the neighbours' houses to try and find out where Robert was. One of the first houses that Emma called to was their immediate neighbours, the O'Donoghues, where Robert was a frequent visitor. But the family's eldest son, Wayne (twenty), said he hadn't seen Robert since before lunch. Wayne was one of Robert's heroes – Robert's grandfather, William Murray, said that the eleven-year-old thought that the older boy was some kind of God. Wayne's house was one of Robert's favourite places – and if he wasn't there, where could he have gone to on his bike?

While Emma was calling to the immediate neighbours, Majella had started working the phone in a bid to discover Robert's whereabouts. The more people she rang, the more worried she became. No one had seen Robert. At least not since before lunch that day. Where could he be? Mark and Majella decided to get into the family jeep and start a trawl of Robert's favourite spots around the East Cork town. They went to McDonald's in Midleton, then the GAA club and even a local leisure centre, Fat Als, where Robert often went with his friends. But there was no trace of their son. No one had seen him around town that afternoon. It was as if he had disappeared into thin air.

Majella then began a desperate ring-around of Robert's school friends – even those living some distance from Ballyedmond. Could the eleven-year-old possibly have decided to travel into town on his bike and simply lost track of the time?

7.00PM

By now both Mark and Majella were beginning to panic and decided they had to alert the Gardaí. Garda Liam Ryan and Sergeant Jim O’Leary responded to the call to Midleton station and decided to travel to Ballyedmond to assess the situation for themselves. ‘There was already a number of people out searching,’ Garda Ryan recalled. These included Mark and Majella Holohan as well as a number of the immediate neighbours in Ballyedmond.

The Gardaí consulted with the Holohan family and began to coordinate the search effort. They decided that a methodical approach had to be adopted and began door-to-door inquiries in Ballyedmond to try and discover Robert’s last movements. Their immediate superiors, Supt Liam Hayes and Inspector Martin Dorney, were briefed on developments.

As the Garda inquiries began to progress, it emerged that while a number of people in the area had seen Robert before lunchtime, no one had seen him after 3.00pm.

9.00PM

Shortly after 9.00pm, the Gardaí got their first break when it emerged that a local man and his son, Tom Keohane Snr and Thomas Keohane Jnr, had spotted a silver bike lying in the ditch earlier that evening in Ballyedmond as they were returning home.

‘My son said it was a new bike. We said we’d bring it home and have a look at it and see who it belonged to. Later, I saw a sticker on the bike saying “An Rothar”, a local bike shop,’ Tom Keohane said. Thinking that the bike had been misplaced or forgotten, the father and son decided to bring it back to their home and try to discover who owned it.

‘It was placed against the ditch,’ Thomas Keohane Jnr said. ‘It was parked neatly. It was a one-size-for-all bike, but the saddle was low.’

After hearing about the discovery of the bike, the Gardaí decided to try and confirm that it did, in fact, belong to Robert. They consulted with the Holohans and Majella asked Robert's friend, Wayne, to go and identify the bike. A short time later he returned to say that the bike was definitely the silver BMX that the eleven-year-old had received for Christmas. A straightforward missing person's case had just got far more serious.

Gardaí fears mounted when they realised just how much the bike meant to Robert. On one occasion, the boy had gone to McDonald's and bluntly refused to leave his beloved BMX outside on the street even though he could see it through the glass window. If this was how much the silver bike meant to Robert, would he have willingly abandoned it in a ditch beside a road? Privately, Gardaí began to fear the worst.

11.00PM

By now the word had spread around Ballyedmond and parts of Middleton that a local boy was missing. Nothing travels as fast in rural Ireland as the word that a local is in trouble. And the local community quickly pulled together. Neighbours as well as members of the GAA and hunting clubs began arriving to see what they could do. Most arrived with weather-proof gear and flashlights. Friends of the Holohans moved into their home to try and support the family by answering phones and trying desperately to think of places where Robert might have gone.

Others came because they knew Robert. Pat Healy (who runs a livery yard at Ballyspillane) called to the Holohan home to see what he could do. 'There were about twenty people outside the house and they were beginning to search,' he explained. Pat recalled seeing people in reflective jackets armed with torches beginning to search the fields and ditches.

Outside, the beams of flashlights split the darkness around the rural area. Locals initially targeted the woods, laneways, ditches and glens

in the belief that Robert might have suffered an accident. All of Robert's favourite spots, his so-called 'cabbys', were searched, but to no avail. The Keohanes brought the Gardaí to the exact spot where the bike had been found and search teams began spreading out across the fields to try and discover some trace of Robert.

Another search volunteer, John Ansbro, recalled how people were desperately trying to figure out where the boy could have gone. Mr Ansbro also recalled seeing Wayne O'Donoghue out searching that night. 'Wayne said he must have fallen off his bike,' he added. 'I saw him [Wayne] on the following night in the Garda station. He told me he had been up all night searching.'

Wayne wasn't the only neighbour involved in the search. The entire O'Donoghue family, led by Wayne's father, Ray, had arrived to try and help. Other neighbours began making flasks of tea and coffee for the search volunteers. As the hours passed and there was still no trace of Robert, Midleton Gardaí increasingly began to fear that hopes of an early and happy resolution to the crisis might be in vain.

MIDNIGHT

The search operation continued beyond midnight and through to the early hours of Wednesday morning, 5 January. As weary volunteers began to head home for some rest, there was still no trace of Robert nor any idea of what had happened to him. By lunchtime that day, word of the disappearance had spread through Midleton and East Cork.

News of the search operation was broadcast, for the first time, on Cork local radio stations and, slowly but surely, the search for Robert became a national campaign.

By late afternoon, news of the young boy's disappearance was carried on RTÉ, TV3, local and Dublin radio stations and the *Irish Independent*, *The Irish Times* and the *Irish Examiner* were working on the story for their editions of the next day. By that Wednesday afternoon,

the first television crews began to converge on Ballyedmond and the decision was made to use the nearby East Cork Golf Club as the coordination centre for the search effort. The hunt for Robert was about to become a national campaign and ignite the solidarity of an entire community.