

5. 'Fatal Fire Investigated'

Experts from the Garda Technical Bureau are still examining the Dublin house in which a mother and baby girl died when it caught fire early yesterday.

They are trying to establish the cause of the fire at 39 Butterfield Avenue in Rathfarnham. The deceased were named yesterday as Mrs Esther McCann (30) and her 18-month-old daughter, Jessica. Mrs McCann's husband, Frank, is thought to have discovered the blaze when he returned from work. He was taken to the Meath Hospital after attempting to rescue his family but was discharged later.

A Bord Gáis spokeswoman said a technician had gone to the house at the request of the fire brigade but that gas had been eliminated as a cause of the fire.

(Page 4, *The Irish Times*, Saturday September 5, 1992).

If Gary O'Toole returned from the Barcelona Olympics with a mission to expose George Gibney's secret criminal life, Frank McCann too came back to Dublin driven with purpose, though his was more sinister. Double-murder was what the president of the Leinster Branch of the Irish Amateur Swimming Association had in mind. His motive was not complicated. Esther, his wife of five years, and Jessica, the little girl they were trying to adopt, had become an

inconvenience. They would go to their deaths unaware that they had got in the way of his sexual proclivity for teenage girls.

Like his colleagues, George Gibney and Derry O’Rourke, McCann had cultivated a false persona. He was not at all what he seemed. Outwardly, as a non-drinker and a non-smoker with an exemplary work ethic, he lived the quintessential clean life, almost to the point of Puritanism. To those who knew him through swimming, however, he was a jovial character, with a ready answer for everything and a streak of arrogance. Tall, thin and bespectacled, his stern appearance was softened by a persuasive articulacy.

He was born in 1960, one of four sons with an adopted sister, Jeanette, the youngest. In his early years, the family home was one of the Guinness-owned cottages in Manor Estate, Fernhill Road. The house was a perk of his father Frank Senior’s job as a cooper in the James’ Gate brewery, where he had followed his own father before him into a livelihood of barrel-making for the famous stout. When the family traded up to Wainsfort Road in Terenure, Frank Junior attended secondary school at Templeogue College, a Holy Ghost Fathers’ sister school of Rockwell College boarding school in Tipperary and St Mary’s, Blackrock and St Michael’s fee-paying schools in Dublin. Templeogue College, which subscribed to the motto, ‘*In virtute scientia*’, ‘Education Rooted in Values’, had a reputation for excelling in sport.

After sitting his Leaving Cert in Templeogue, McCann followed his father and his grandfather into Guinness where he was the company’s last apprentice cooper. Ready access to the company swimming pool, where George Gibney had started his coaching career nearly fifteen years earlier, nurtured his talent as a swimmer. He had been a member of Terenure club’s 4 x 100m freestyle sprint relay team in the late 1970s. With his wiry physique, McCann was a strong

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swimmer and competed internationally before turning his attentions to coaching. He occasionally trained the Irish A squad as a stand-in coach. When he was let go by Guinness in the grim economic climate of 1982, he and a more experienced colleague set up their own company; Woodland Coopers Limited produced ornamental barrels designed for use as garden plant holders in a small factory in Greenhills industrial estate near the Naas Road. It was not long in business when McCann bought out his partner for £9,000, but soon after the factory was extensively damaged by a suspicious fire. Traces of an inflammable substance were found in the aftermath and a full investigation was launched. No one was ever charged with deliberately starting the fire. Nor was the insurance ever paid out. McCann eventually sold the company for IR£92,000; more than ten times what it had cost him to purchase his partner's half of it.

In November 1991, he entered into another business partnership, this time with his brother, Bert. They bought a pub called the Mary Rose in Blessington, west Wicklow; Frank drawing on the proceeds from the sale of Woodland Coopers. They renamed it The Cooperage in a genuflection to the trade of their forebears. But events were already in train to upend this new order too.

Esther O'Brien had come to live in Dublin in the mid-1970s. She was a vital, vivacious and intelligent woman. Her sister, Marian Leonard, who was older by two years, describes her as 'cherubic looking, with big brown eyes and an open, innocent face'. The sisters grew up in Talbot Place, in the centre of Tramore, County Waterford. Their father, Thomas, a native of the seaside town, was employed by CIE, the state-owned public transport company. Their mother, also named Esther but known by her second name, Brigid, hailed from a farm in Fenor, outside Tramore. She was working as the manager of a general provisions store in Tramore when she met

her husband and continued to work there after the birth of her first child, Phyllis, who would grow up to be a nun, ascending to the position of director of the Marist Order in Rome. When her second child, a son, Pat, was born seven years after Phyllis, Brigid gave up her job to rear her family full-time.

It was an idyllic childhood for Marian and the baby of the family, Esther, who was born on March 29, 1956. The girls went to school at the Sisters of Charity in Tramore and spent the long summer holidays swimming in the sea and, later, joining the local surf club. In the 1960s, Tramore was a popular destination for family holidays with its long strand and fairground amusements. It was a nice place to grow up.

‘Phyllis was eleven years older than me. She entered the Marist Convent in Carrick-on-Shannon when she was only seventeen years old. It meant that in those early years Esther and I could only see her on our monthly expeditions when Dad drove the family on what seemed like an endless journey across Ireland. The sad silence in the car on the journey home was unnatural for us two chatterboxes. Esther was angelic. She had big brown eyes and olive skin. She was open and innocent looking. By contrast, I was freckled with an unruly mop of hair. When there was mischief, I was the one who always got in trouble. It was always “What are you up to?” and “Mind your little sister”. We spent a lot of our time causing problems for our big brother, Pat. It must have been hard for him having to contend with the two of us! Esther was great fun, absolutely cracked, so full of life and laughter. People gravitated to her. If she went to a party, she’d know everyone by the time she left. She had a great eye for people who might feel left out and she would involve them – sometimes whether they wanted to be involved or not. It wasn’t something she did consciously. She just did it. She was the essence of a people

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person. Through school, she always had loads of friends. She was very bright and she did very well academically. There wasn't a bit of badness or malice in her. She always saw the good in people.'

In 1973, Marian moved to Dublin to join the civil service. Within two weeks, her father died. Her husband-to-be, Billy Leonard, accompanied her home and supported her through that period of loss. They married six months later, on September 8, and set up their first home in a flat in Cabra. Esther did her Leaving Cert exams and moved in with the couple while she studied psychology at UCD for two years. 'She'd bring fellow students back with her if they were in need of food, a bed or even a wash. Billy and I were saving to buy a house, but possessions came a poor second to people for Esther. That was a trait that never changed.'

After college, Esther landed a job as banqueting manager in the five-star Shelbourne Hotel on St Stephen's Green, 'Dublin's best address' according to its stationery, but she felt unfulfilled by it and signed up for a word-processing training course on Greenhills Road. She had a natural aptitude for the burgeoning computer skills sector and, at a time when serpentine dole queues were an intrinsic part of the Irish landscape, she was never without a job. She worked as a technology adviser to MJ Flood office supplies, the multinationals IBM and Nexus, and the accountant Bernard Somers, a future director of the Central Bank. She was independent, happy and popular.

Then along came Frank McCann.

Esther had been going out with a long-term boyfriend who decided in 1986, as many others of their generation did, to emigrate to Australia, lured by the promise of plentiful job prospects. He urged Esther to go with him and she considered it seriously but she felt too emotionally attached to Ireland and her family to go. She made the heart-breaking and fateful decision to stay behind. As soon

as her boyfriend left, Frank McCann stepped into the gap.

‘He was on the edge of a crowd Esther knew. Within a week of her boyfriend leaving, he arrived at our door with flowers for Esther and chocolates for me,’ Marian recalls. ‘They went to the pictures that night.’

McCann wooed Esther determinedly. ‘I remember they went to a banquet in the Shelbourne one night and Esther came home and said how much she liked him. She used to like a pint of Guinness, but she said that she hadn’t had a drink or a smoke that night and that he had told jokes and been charming and they had great fun. She admired his clean living and work ethic. He was solid and reliable.’

They were married in Kimmage Manor on 22 May 1987, with a reception afterwards at Stackstown Golf Club in the Dublin Mountains. The groom’s prolonged absence from the celebrations prompted a rumour to circulate afterwards that he had slipped away from the party for a sexual interlude with a young female, although this was never confirmed. Marian had already noted that McCann subtly excluded her from planning the wedding and from any central involvement in the day itself. Looking back, she believes that the entire marriage was a sham; that McCann calculatedly set out to marry Esther to provide him with a front of respectability. What the happy bride did not know as she made her wedding vows was that a teenager with special needs who used to swim in Frank McCann’s Terenure club was already in the third trimester of her pregnancy with his child. The newly-wed Mr and Mrs Frank McCann moved into their house at 39 Butterfield Avenue in Rathfarnham after their honeymoon. Three months later, a son was born to the teenage swimmer. Esther would go to her grave oblivious to the child’s existence.

Arrangements were made to have the baby adopted directly from

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the hospital. The facilitator was Ireland's best-loved priest, Fr Michael Cleary, known as the Singing Priest for his role in a clerical cabaret act that toured the country. Cleary, who appeared on the altar with the former Bishop of Galway for Pope John Paul II's youth mass during his 1979 visit to Ireland, was a vocal family-values advocate and a successful late-night radio presenter. It would emerge after his death that he had lived clandestinely with his housekeeper, Phyllis Hamilton, and their child, Ross, in the priest's house in Harold's Cross while denouncing divorce and contraception from the pulpit. Cleary had some practice in the arranging of adoptions. His and Phyllis's first-born son had been privately placed with a family in south Dublin in the early 1970s. The exposure of Cleary's double life would shock the country a decade after Frank McCann's son was placed with another family.

'Michael Cleary never considered our family or Esther,' says Marian. 'Cleary arranged for Frank to pay £500 "medical expenses" to the [pregnant] girl's family and he threatened Frank that, if he didn't pay up, he would tell his new wife about the baby. Following Esther and Jessica's death, I rang Michael Cleary, when I learnt of his involvement in McCann's secret life. I told him I would have expected more from him. I asked him did he not think of contacting Esther's family, that we could have done something about it. He told me what I needed was solace and not to be looking for vengeance. He recommended I read some book he'd written. He said it would help me find peace.'

Problems first surfaced in Frank and Esther McCann's marriage in October, 1987, five months after the wedding, and two months after the birth of his secret child. Outwardly, it was a successful marriage; Esther kept Frank's business books for him and taught him and some of his swimming colleagues how to use the computer. When he ran

coaching sessions at Terenure Swimming Club, she was on duty at the door, collecting the admission fees. She was socially at ease and an asset to him. Yet, almost from the start, he was cold to her.

‘He lost interest in her. He put distance between them. She was very lonely. He lost interest in her sexually. Esther had no inhibitions. She wouldn’t have thought twice about consulting sexologists, for instance, if that was what she thought it would take,’ says Marian. ‘She would have liked to have had children. She’d stopped using protection before they were married, but you need to have sex to get pregnant. Frank’s father died in the autumn after their wedding and Esther was worried he wasn’t grieving. She offered to get him counselling, but he wouldn’t hear of it. Frank never hit her. There was never violence in the marriage. Just coldness.’

In retrospect, Marian Leonard recognises a strangeness in Frank McCann. He used to hire the Terenure pool every Friday evening for use by his extended family. All the McCanns were strong swimmers, regularly participating in the IASA-organised open sea swim in Dun Laoghaire held every August for registered members of the association. The clan called their Friday evenings at Terenure pool ‘the McCann Hour’. Frank’s mother and father, his siblings, their families and friends would all pile in. One evening, Marian was in the pool with her young daughter, the third-generation to carry the name Esther. As mothers of small children are wont to do for convenience sake, Marian had left the child unclothed to splash about in the pool. McCann approached her in the water and said people were objecting to little Esther’s nudity. ‘Frank, she’s two,’ replied Marian indignantly.

‘Sometimes, I’d be in the changing rooms getting my daughter ready for the pool and Frank would walk through. There would be teenage girls changing in there and it didn’t feel right. When I

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suggested he should go round the other way, he said: "I'm the only man allowed in here."

In 1991, a new addition arrived in the McCanns' home on Butterfield Avenue. Frank's only sister, Jeanette, announced she was pregnant, to the consternation of her mother. She came to live with Esther and Frank. Esther liked the girl and was glad of her company. She wanted to bring Jeanette and the baby back to Butterfield Avenue after the birth, until the young mother settled into her new circumstances. She cautioned Jeanette to take time with any decisions about whether to have the baby adopted, warning her that, once she clapped eyes on her baby, she might find parting with the child an impossible wrench.

Jessica McCann was born at 5.05 am on Mothers' Day, Sunday 10 March 1991 in the Coombe Women's Hospital, weighing 5lbs 2ozs. Esther was present for her arrival into the world. The baby was kept in a special care unit for two days before getting a clean bill of health. Prior to Jeanette's discharge from hospital the following Thursday she asked Esther and Frank to become Jessica's parents as she did not feel she could give her little girl the life she needed. On the succeeding Friday night during the McCann Hour at Terenure pool, Frank's mother, Joan, announced that he and Esther had decided to adopt 'a baby'. That the baby was, in fact, Frank's niece was not mentioned during the back-slapping and squeals of congratulations that greeted the happy news.

From before the birth, Esther had been keeping a diary on her computer for Jessica. She gave it the title, 'Memories for Jessica'. Though the computer was destroyed in the fire, the Garda forensic team managed to salvage the hard disc and to retrieve her personal files, assisted by Marian Leonard's knowledge of her sister's passwords. On Wednesday 27 March 1991, Esther wrote:

Brought you to the clinic in Rathfarnham to be weighed. Honestly, child, you are a big pudding! Weighing in at over 7lbs – and only two and a half weeks.

Jessica was christened in St Aengus’s Church, Balrothery, Tallaght on 16 June, Fathers’ Day. Esther chose ‘Mary’ as Jessica’s second name out of devotion to the mother of God.

I always said my first-born girl would be called Mary. Well, you are my first-born, best girl and always will be, Esther wrote in her computer diary.

The christening was followed by a party in Butterfield Avenue attended by various officials and coaches from McCann’s swimming fraternity.

On May 20, 1991, the Adoption Board received the official application form from Esther and Frank McCann for permission to adopt Jessica Mary McCann.

‘Legally, they didn’t even have to do it officially,’ says Marian. ‘Jessica’s surname was the same anyway. Formalising it wasn’t necessary. But I was anxious to see it formalised, knowing the marriage wasn’t going so well. Frank didn’t have any real interest in Jessica. When there were other people around, he’d pick her up to display her. When the display was over, he’d hand her back. Still, if it did come to a separation, Jessica was a McCann baby.’

While they waited for the Adoption Board to reach a decision, Esther and Frank lived like strangers. He had commenced a sexual relationship with another teenage girl. In addition, he was working late hours in the bar in Blessington, and was immersed in the coaching and administrative affairs of Leinster swimming. The branch was incorporated as a limited liability company, separate from the IASA,

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on 20 August 1991. He flew to Brussels on 17 July for six days at the Youth Olympics. One of his proudest possessions was his gold chain of office bestowed on him as president of the Leinster Branch. His swimming buddies – Gibney, O’Rourke and the rest – seemed to be in the house perpetually.

‘They were his friends. That was his circle. Esther hated Gibney being in the house. When they were there, she was treated like an intruder. They used to have swimming meetings at the table in the breakfast room and you had to pass through that room to get to or from the kitchen. If Esther needed a bottle from the kitchen for Jessica, she had to go through the room. There would be silence while she walked through. McCann swore a lot. I remember being there a couple of times when Chalkie White rang and he’d say, “Tell that bastard I’m not here”.’

In the middle of her husband’s frenetic activities, the hand of doom shook Esther’s world. On 19 July, her adored nephew James, Marian’s eldest child, was found to have a malignant tumour in his left leg. He was taken from Cappagh Hospital to the Mater Hospital for treatment. He was only sixteen. In her diary, Esther wrote:

Not a day to be forgotten for any of us, possibly the blackest day in a long time. Things will get better and James will be well again after treatment.

The countdown to the 1992 Olympics was a busy time for McCann. Not long home from a swim training camp in California, he set off for Florida in March 1992 as team manager for the Alamo Cup in Ford Lauderdale. One of Derry O’Rourke’s swimmers in King’s Hospital, the future Olympic triple gold medalist Michelle Smith, was a member of the Alamo Cup team. ‘There were a couple of us who [were] teenagers at the time and we used to joke: “I wouldn’t go near him because he’d give you the creeps”,’ she recalled.

‘There was nothing behind it. We couldn’t have known what it was. It was a total shock when we heard what happened to his wife and child.’

As Leinster’s president, McCann prepared to travel to Barcelona that summer. Having none of his club’s swimmers on the national team, he had to pay his own way. The trip was costing him between £2,000 and £3,000. Before his departure for Spain, he had to organise the annual Liffey Swim, which was due to take place on 18 August. Despite his workload, he had time to meticulously lay a trail of false leads as a precursor to murdering his wife and child. ‘He was still continuing his job and the swimming and, on the side, planning his killing of Esther and Jessica,’ says Marian.

His plan clicked into action late one night while he was at the pub in Blessington and Esther and Jessica were asleep in Butterfield Avenue. A ringing phone woke Esther to the discovery that her electric blanket was ablaze. The incident was put down to one of those freak events that happen in life. Besides, Esther had other things on her mind, as she entered in her diary for Jessica:

Your own darling James has had the most terrible news imaginable today and he doesn’t even know it yet. Marian in pieces and I am not so good myself. Two tumours on the left lung to be operated on end of July – no end to the cruelty!

On July 28, McCann phoned Bord Gáis to report a leak. Esther and Jessica had again had a narrow escape. Esther had awoken to a bad smell which she described as being like the smell of onions, but which she recognised as gas. She lifted Jessica from her cot and put her in the car which she then let run down the driveway to avoid causing any spark that could trigger an explosion. Esther went to her mother’s house and phoned Frank at the pub in Blessington to alert

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him to the gas leak. The timing of what was, at minimum, the second attempt on their lives coincided with Esther's ongoing heartache. James was undergoing surgery on his lungs, as the cancer had spread. McCann knew that Marian would not be around and was unlikely to turn up unexpectedly as she would be at her son's bedside. Esther wrote in her diary two days after the incident:

My darling daughter Jessica, you have grown and become a beautiful child. You have been walking now for a little over a week and have given up holding onto the walls in search of your own bit of independence. 'Cup of tea' and 'up a daisy' with constant talk of 'Daddy', 'O Mammy' and 'Mammy's baby' ... Lots of talk and every day brings new joys ... Ten teeth to show for all the months of painful teething ... The hottest and driest summer in years ...

A gas inspector, responding to McCann's complaint, called to the house and found 'a colossal leak' and 'an explosive level of gas' in the house.

Only with hindsight would a pattern become discernible. It certainly was not a coincidence that, in the same month, the Adoption Board had notified Esther and Frank's solicitor that it had decided to reject their application to adopt Jessica after receiving a phone call from a woman on 16 April 1991 alleging that McCann had fathered a child with her teenage daughter. The McCanns' solicitor, however, informed only Frank of the decision. Esther was never told. Time and again, she phoned the Board's office to try to find out what was causing the delay. Finally, she was invited to a meeting where everything would be explained. She was given an appointment for a meeting on Monday 7 September, the office being shut for the summer holidays in the month of August.

As she waited, her husband was getting ready to leave for

Barcelona with his swimming club. One day, while he was packing for the trip, Esther picked up her camera and captured a riveting image of Jessica. In the photograph, the child she loved as her daughter is sitting in Frank McCann’s fastidiously packed suitcase atop the couple’s bed, her face dominated by enormous brown laughing eyes. At the age of eighteen months, Jessica had a personality of her own and was uttering complete sentences, such as ‘Thank you very much’ and ‘I want my bottle now’.

At lunchtime on the Thursday before her scheduled appointment with the Adoption Board, Esther called to Marian’s home in Firhouse. James was to escort a friend to a debs dance in Tramore the following night and Marian was going down with him. ‘Frank used the fact that we were all coping with James’s impending death to get away with the attempts on Esther,’ Marian believes. Esther, who was very close to James, called in to wish her nephew a good time at the dance. That night, she phoned Marian in Tramore, and talked about the problems in her marriage. ‘I’m fed up with this,’ she said. ‘I’m going to have it out with Frank tonight when he comes in.’ Marian understood she was talking about the lack of communication in their relationship and the Adoption Board’s protracted deliberations about Jessica. ‘She said she was going to tell him she’d move on with the adoption on her own if he wasn’t interested.’ Marian never found out if her sister got the opportunity to initiate that conversation. In the early hours of Friday morning, her husband, Billy, phoned her in Tramore to say that Esther and Jessica were dead. Though she remembers little of that morning, she has been told that she immediately began telling the people around her that Frank McCann was the killer.

He had arrived home from the pub in the early hours of 4 September to find a crowd on the road in front of his house and smoke

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billowing from the windows. He had run to a ladder being raised to a window by a fire fighter and attempted to climb it. Several neighbours ran after him and held him back. They were utterly taken in by his performance as distraught husband and father. When he fainted, the neighbours rolled him onto his side, loosened his collar, and called an ambulance. While he was being ferried away to the Meath Hospital, fire fighters entered the house and made a poignant discovery. They found Esther, with extensive burns, lying on the landing, her arm reaching towards the door of Jessica's bedroom. The child was dead in her cot, still with her soother in her mouth. Only later would it be noted that the Leinster Branch president's chain of office, which had been on the hall table hours earlier, was gone.

On being released from the Meath Hospital without need for treatment, McCann went to Tallaght Garda Station to assist with inquiries as the distraught widower. From there, he went to his mother's house in Terenure which was thronged with shocked relatives and friends calling to sympathise. One swimming acquaintance found him sitting at the table in the kitchen demonstrating tricks with a box of matches. 'Poor Frank, he's down in the kitchen showing how to do tricks with matches,' the official told a colleague on returning to the sitting room. 'God love him, he must be out of his mind on medication.'

The bodies of Esther and Jessica were brought to the Catholic church in Firhouse on Monday, 7 September; the day Esther had been due to attend the meeting about Jessica at the Adoption Board. Scattered among the congregation were officials of the IASA who had been scheduled to attend an aborted emergency meeting at the association's headquarters in House of Sport on the Longmile Road that day to discuss correspondence containing allegations of child sex abuse that had been mysteriously removed from the office. During

the church service, the bookish-looking grieving widower was helped onto the altar by his sister-in-law, Phyllis. In a short eulogy, he said, ‘I was not the only man Esther loved. There were other men’. After a startled silence, he went on to talk of Esther’s love for her nephew, James, who was terminally ill and their friends’ son, Conor, who suffered from cerebral palsy. Afterwards, he would comment that he had not left ‘a dry eye in the house’.

On Tuesday, the cortege left Dublin for Tramore. It stopped at a village in County Carlow en route to allow mourners a rest. McCann got out of his car and walked back to the car carrying Marian and Billy Leonard, who were nineteen years married that day. He handed his wife’s sister an envelope. Inside was a wedding anniversary card, on which he had written: ‘To the best sister-in-law in the world’. For Marian, it was one of several surreal moments in the day they buried Esther. At the funeral mass, the widower delivered another brief eulogy. He thanked the people of Tramore for their support, but he seemed strangely unmoved by the occasion or his proximity to the two coffins, a pair of Jessica’s tiny shoes on top of her white coffin. Then, looking out at the congregation, which included many of his friends from the swimming association, he said he would like to read a poem. It was by Thomas Burbidge and entitled ‘A Mother’s Love’.

Oh, what a loveliness her eyes
Gather in that one moment’s space,
While peeping round the post she spies
Her darling’s laughing face ...

Esther and Jessica were buried together in a single grave. Afterwards, in a pub where the mourners had gathered, everybody said how lovely the poem was that Frank had read out. None of Esther’s

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family wanted to admit that it was they, not he, who had chosen the verse. When they left the pub for the home of one of Esther's cousins who had invited everyone back for food, McCann behaved in the most bizarre fashion imaginable. As his car passed by a group of young girls in the town, he leaned out the window, wolf-whistled and yelled: 'I'm a free man.' He left Tramore early and drove back to Blessington, his Leinster Branch chain of office conspicuously laid out on the back seat of the car. He was heading back to The Cooperage for a party. As they had been walking out of the graveyard earlier in the day, he had leant in towards Marian Leonard and informed her that he was due back at the pub for a surprise sixtieth birthday party that night that he had organised for his mother. Afterwards, Marian heard reports of how he had paraded into the party, holding aloft a birthday cake lit with candles and singing 'Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you, happy birthday dear Mammy ...'

'He didn't have emotions. He didn't know what appropriate emotional behaviour was,' Marian concludes. A week after Esther and Jessica died, Garda James Murphy from Rathfarnham station was on duty preserving the scene of the fire on 10 September when McCann stopped by to chat. He told the Garda 'in a jovial way', that he had encountered some friends a few days before and that he had been telling them about plans he was making for a barbeque. The widower of one week said his friends found this very funny and they had laughed. Garda Murphy kept a note of the conversation. Two weeks after the funeral, McCann flew to California, where he had been on a swimming camp the previous year, for a fortnight's holiday. The insurance company paid him £10,000 for the fire damage to his house, but he left the undertaker's bill to be paid by his wife's family. In the following weeks and months, he filled his diary with appointments for meetings with his swimming colleagues.

There was never any other suspect. On the morning of 4 November, Garda ballistics experts conducted an experiment in the Phoenix Park to establish how the fire in Butterfield Avenue had reached such an intensity so rapidly. That afternoon, Gardaí arrived at The Cooperage and arrested McCann under the Explosive Substances Act, permitting his detention for forty-eight hours. While he spent that first night refusing to answer questions in Tallaght Garda Station, a meeting was underway in the Ashling Hotel during which he was formally re-elected president of the Leinster Branch of the IASA. To McCann, it must have felt as though it was his reward for double murder. The icing on the cake should have been his automatic elevation to presidency of the IASA in time for the next Olympic Games in Atlanta, but he had not reckoned on a dogged Garda investigation rendering that a dream too far. The next day in the station, when it was put to him that he had fathered a child with a teenager and that the Adoption Board had refused his and Esther’s application to adopt Jessica for that reason, he replied: ‘It was all such a horrible mess. It had to be sorted out.’ He said Fr Michel Cleary had phoned him at the time the teenage girl was pregnant to discuss the baby’s welfare and that he had gone to meet the priest and the girl’s father at Cleary’s house. He said the priest had asked him if he had a problem with young girls. McCann claimed he had stormed out of the house and had heard nothing more until the Adoption Board raised the matter. He told Gardaí he had intended killing himself in the fire too. When they asked him why he had brought petrol into his house, he said: ‘I was going to finish it off. I was going to clean up the mess – me, Esther and Jessica.’ He was released, pending a file being sent to the DPP.

On 22 April 1993, McCann was arrested and formally charged with the murders of Esther and Jessica. He pleaded not guilty. Just two weeks before, Marian’s son, James, had died at the age of

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eighteen and was buried in Tramore alongside Esther and Jessica. When Gardaí went looking for McCann, equipped with the arrest warrant, they found him fitting out a mobile home, complete with pipework beneath the floor, in Stradbally, County Waterford, a neighbouring seaside town of Tramore, where Esther had grown up. He was held overnight in Tramore Garda Station, which is situated a few hundred yards from his victims' grave. After making his statement in Tallaght Garda Station the previous November, he had been voluntarily admitted to St John of God's Hospital in Dublin with a nervous breakdown. While there he had met a female patient with whom he began a relationship. He moved into her home with her after they discharged themselves. She introduced him to her son and McCann was welcomed by her unsuspecting family.

He was defiant to the end. When he was refused bail by Mr Justice Declan Budd in the Central Criminal Court, his lawyers instigated an appeal to the Supreme Court on a legal point but it was never pursued. McCann had been sent to Mountjoy Prison to be held in custody pending his trial, but he managed to get himself transferred to the Central Mental Hospital in Dundrum. There, he gave swimming lessons in the hospital pool to some of his fellow inmates, who included Brendan O'Donnell, found guilty, but insane, for the murders of Imelda Riney, her three-year-old son Liam, and Fr Joe Walsh in County Clare, and John Gallagher, who murdered Annie Gillespie and her daughter, Anne, in Sligo. After several months in Dundrum, McCann was dispatched back to Mountjoy upon the discovery of duplicate keys to his cell in his possession. His escape plan was foiled.