

Chapter 1

29 MARCH 1967 – DUBLIN

LIKE ALL GOVERNMENT BUILDINGS, the interior of the public waiting room in the Department of Social Welfare was drab and uninviting. The walls were painted in three colours: ‘Government green,’ as it was known to all in Dublin, on the bottom half, and either cream or very old white on the top half, with a one-inch strip of red dividing the two. The only seating consisted of two pew-like wooden benches – these were covered in gouged-out initials and dates. Lighting was provided by one large opaque bowl-like fixture hanging from a six-foot cable in the centre of the high ceiling. The outside of the bowl was dusty, the inside yellowed and speckled with fly shit. In the bottom of the bowl lay a collection of dead flies.

‘Serves them right,’ said the woman staring at the globe.

‘What? Serves who right, Agnes?’ her companion asked tenderly.

‘Them, Marion.’ She pointed to the globe. ‘Them flies ... serves them right.’

Marion looked up at the globe. For a couple of minutes they both stared at the light.

‘Jaysus, Agnes, I’m not with yeh ... serves them right for what?’ Marion was puzzled and not a little concerned

about Agnes's state of mind. Grief is a peculiar thing. Agnes pointed at the globe again.

'They flew into that bowl, right? Then they couldn't get out, so they shit themselves and died. Serves them right, doesn't it?'

Marion stared at the globe again, her mouth slightly open, her mind trying to work out what Agnes was on about. Agnes was now back scanning her surroundings; the wall-clock tick-tocked. Again, she looked at the only other person in the room. He was a one-legged man, half-standing, half-propped up at the hatch. She heard him making his claim for unemployment benefit. He was a 'gotchee', a night watchman on a building site. He had just been sacked because some kids had got on to the site and broken the windows. The girl was 'phoning his former employer to ensure he had been sacked and had not left of his own accord. Agnes was trying to imagine what it must be like to be sacked. Being self-employed, she had never been sacked.

'Fuck them.' Marion broke the silence.

'Who?' asked Agnes.

'Them flies,' Marion pointed. 'Fuck them, you're right, shittin' on everything else all their lives. Serves them right! Oh Agnes, is this fella goin' t'be much longer? I'm bustin' for a slash.' Marion had a pained expression on her face. Agnes looked over the man's shoulder. The girl was just putting the phone down.

'She's nearly finished. Look, there's a jacks outside in the hall, you go on, I'll be all right. Go on!'

Marion bolted from the waiting room. At the same time the girl returned to the hatch.

'Right then, Mr O'Reilly. Here's your signing-on card. You will sign on at hatch 44, upstairs in Gardiner Street at 9.30am on Friday, okay?'

The man looked at the card and then back at the girl. 'Friday? But this is Monday. Yer man wouldn't pay me and I've no money.'

The girl became very business-like. 'That's between you and him, Mr O'Reilly. You'll have to sort that out yourself. Friday, 9.30, hatch 44.'

The man still did not leave. 'What will I do between now and Friday?'

The girl had had enough. 'I don't care what you do. You can't stand there until Friday, that's for sure. Now go on, off with you.'

'He's a bollix,' the man told the girl.

She reddened. 'That's enough of that, Mr O'Reilly.'

But he hadn't finished. 'If I had me other leg I'd fuckin' give it to him, I would!'

The girl bowed her head in a resigned fashion. 'If you had your other leg, Mr O'Reilly,' she snapped, 'you would have caught the children and you wouldn't be here now, would you?' She closed the doors of the hatch in the hope that Mr O'Reilly would vanish. He gathered himself together, slid the card into his inside pocket, put his glasses into a clip-lid box and propped his crutch under his arm. As he made for the exit he said aloud, 'And you're a bollix too!' He opened the door of the waiting room just as Marion got to it.

'That one's only a bollix,' he said to her and, surprisingly quickly, headed off down the hallway.

Marion looked after him for a moment and then turned

to Agnes. 'What was that about?' she said as she took her seat beside her friend.

Agnes shrugged. 'Don't know. Did yeh go?'

'Yeh.'

'All right then?'

'I'm grand. Jaysus, the paper they use here cuts the arse off a yeh.'

'That auld greaseproof stuff?'

'Yeh, it's like wipin' your arse with a crisp bag.'

'Yeh.'

'Well, what are you waitin' for?'

'I was waitin' on you to come back. Come on.'

The two women went to the hatch. Agnes pressed the bell. They heard no sound.

'Press it again,' said Marion.

Agnes did. Still no sound. Marion knocked on the hatch doors. Behind, they could hear the sound of movement.

'Someone's comin',' whispered Agnes. Then, as if she was preparing to sing she cleared her throat with a cough. The hatch opened. It was the same girl. She didn't look up. Instead she opened a notebook and, still with the head down, asked, 'Name and social welfare number?'

'I don't have one,' Agnes replied.

'You don't have a name?' The girl now looked up.

'Of course she has a name,' Marion now joined in. 'It's Agnes, after the Blessed Agnes, Agnes Browne.'

'I haven't got a social welfare number.'

'Everybody has a social welfare number, Missus!'

'Well, I haven't!'

'Your husband – is he working?'

'No, not any more.'

'So, he's signed on, then?'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'He's dead.'

The girl was now silent. She stared at Agnes, then at Marion.

'Dead?' Both women nodded. The girl was still not giving up on the numbers game. 'Do you have your widow's pension book with you?'

'I haven't got one, that's why I'm here.'

'Ah, so this is a *new* claim?' The girl felt better now that she had a grasp of what was happening. She lifted a form from below the counter. Both women shot glances at each other, a look of fear crossing their faces. They regarded the answering of questions on forms as an exam of some kind. Agnes wasn't prepared for this. The girl began the interrogation.

'Now, your full name?'

'Agnes Loretta Browne.'

'Is that Browne with an "E"?''

'Yeh, and Agnes with an "E" and Loretta with an "E".'

The girl stared at Agnes, not sure that this woman wasn't taking the piss out of her.

'Your maiden name?'

'Eh, Reddin.'

'Lovely. Now, your husband's name?'

'Nicholas Browne, and before you ask, I don't know his maiden name.'

'Nicholas Browne will be fine. Occupation?'

Agnes looked at Marion and back at the girl, then said softly, 'Dead.'

‘No, when he was alive, what did he do when he was alive?’

‘He was a kitchen porter.’

‘And where did he work?’

Again, Agnes looked into Marion’s blank face. ‘In the kitchen?’ she offered, hoping it was the right answer.

‘Of course in the kitchen, but which kitchen? Was it a hotel?’

‘It’s still a hotel, isn’t it, Marion?’ Marion nodded.

‘Which hotel?!’ The girl was exasperated now and the question came out through her teeth.

‘The Gresham Hotel in O’Connell Street, love,’ Agnes answered confidently. That was an easy one. The girl scribbled in the answer and moved down the form.

‘Now, what was the cause of death?’

‘A hunter,’ Agnes said.

‘Was he *shot*?’ the girl asked incredulously. ‘Was your husband shot?’

‘By who?’ Agnes asked this question as if the girl had found out something about her husband’s death that she didn’t know herself.

‘The hunter, was your husband shot by a hunter?’

Agnes was puzzled now. She thought it out for a moment and then a look of realisation spread over her face.

‘No, love! A Hillman Hunter, he was knocked down by a Hillman Hunter – a car!’

The girl stared at the two women again, then dismissed the thought that this was Candid Camera. These are just two gobshites, she told herself. ‘A motor accident ... I see.’ She scribbled again. The two women could see that she was now writing on the bottom line. They were pleased.

But then she turned the form over to a new list of questions. The disappointment of the women was audible. The young girl felt it and in an effort to ease the tension of the two said, 'That must have been a shock.'

Agnes thought for a moment. 'Yeh, it must have been, sure he couldn't have been expecting it!'

The girl glanced around the room, wondering could it be possible that there *was* a hidden camera after all. Again she dismissed it.

'Right, then, let's move on. Now, how many children do you have?'

'Seven.'

'Seven? A good Catholic family!'

'Ah, they're all right. But yeh have to bate the older wans to Mass.'

'I'm sure. Eh, I'll need their names and ages.'

'Right! Let me see, Mark is the eldest, he's fourteen; then Francis, he's thirteen; then the twins, there's two of them, Simon and Dermot, twelve, both of them; then Rory and he's eleven; after him there's Cathy, she was a forceps, very difficult!'

'It was, I remember it well. You're a martyr, Agnes,' Marion commented.

'Ah sure, what can you do, Marion. She's ten; and last of all there's Trevor, the baby, he's three.'

The form had been designed to accommodate ten children so there was plenty of space left. The girl ran a line through the last three spaces and moved on to the next section. In the back of her mind she wondered what it was between 1957 and 1964 that gave Mrs Browne the 'break'!

'Now, when did your husband die?'

'At half-four.'

'Yes, but what day?'

'This mornin'.'

'This morning! But sure, he couldn't even have a death certificate yet!'

'Ah no, not at all – sure he didn't even go past primary!'

'No, a *death* certificate. I need a death certificate. A certificate from the doctor stating that your husband is in fact dead. He could be alive, for all I know.'

'No, love, he's definitely dead. Definitely. Isn't he, Marion?'

Marion agreed. 'Absolutely. I know him years, and I've never seen him look so bad. Dead, definitely dead!'

'Look Mrs ... eh, Browne, I cannot process this until you get a death certificate from the hospital or doctor that pronounced your husband dead.'

Mrs Browne's eyes half-closed as she thought about this. 'So, if I can't get this until tomorrow, I'll lose a day's money?'

'You won't lose anything, Mrs Browne. It will be back-dated. You will get every penny that's due to you. I promise.'

Marion was relieved for her friend. She poked her in the side. 'Back-dated, that's grand, Agnes, so you needn't have rushed down at all.'

Agnes wasn't convinced. 'Are you sure?'

The girl smiled. 'I'm absolutely sure. Now look, take this form with you – it's all filled in already – and when you get the death certificate, hand them both in together. Oh, and bring your marriage certificate as well, you'll get that from the church that you married in. In the meantime,

Mrs Browne, if you need some money to get by on just call down to the Dublin Health Authority Office in Jervis Street and see the relieving officer there.’

Agnes took all this in. ‘The relieving officer, Jervis Street?’

The girl nodded. ‘Jervis Street.’

Agnes folded the form. She was about to leave but she turned back to the girl. ‘Don’t mind that one-legged “gotchee”. You’re very good, love, and you’re *not* a bollix!’

With that, the two women stepped back out into the March sunshine to prepare for a funeral.

Chapter 2

DUBLIN OF THE SIXTIES WAS – and in the nineties still is – a city of many sections and divisions. There was the retail section, the market sections, the residential section and the (now almost disappeared) tenements.

The retail section had two divisions – the southside and the northside – with Grafton Street being the main shopping street of the southside, and Henry Street and Moore Street the flagships of the northside. A stroll through both sides of the city would leave one in no doubt as to which was the affluent side and which was not. The largest

Cathedral is on the south, the largest dole office is on the north; the Houses of Parliament are on the south, the Corporation Sanitary and Housing sections are on the north. In a café on the northside, you can purchase a cup of tea, a sandwich and a biscuit for the price of a coffee on the southside. The River Liffey is the dividing line and even she knows which side is which as she gathers the litter and effluent on her northern bank.

Just ten minutes' walk eastwards from O'Connell Bridge along the quays and another three minutes' walk north, was St Jarlath's Street. The entire surrounding area for one square mile got its name, The Jarro, from this street.

Although housing some sixteen thousand people in the fifties and sixties, virtually everyone knew everyone in The Jarro. By day, the area bustled with the movement of hawkers, prams and carts, as the men and women who lived in The Jarro made up ninety percent of the dealers from Moore Street and George's Hill. The Jarro also provided the labour force for both the fish and the vegetable markets, and the rest of the able-bodied men were either dockers, draymen, or on the dole.

Agnes Browne was one of the best-known and best-loved of the Moore Street dealers. She loved The Jarro. Happily, at 5am each morning, she set off with her pram, on top of which sat her folded trestle table, from her tenement in James Larkin Court. As she rounded the corner at the top of her cul de sac, her face would crack into a smile as she met the colour of Jarlath's Street, the washing hanging from a thousand windows on each side. She would pretend that this was bunting in all the colours of the

rainbow, hung in her honour, for a variety of different reasons. She would invent a new one each day – one day she would be a film star, the next a war heroine, once she was even an astronaut, Ireland's first, returning to the cheers and adulation of her friends and neighbours.

Five intersections down St Jarlath's Street, where it joined with Ryder's Row, Agnes would meet up with her best friend and fellow dealer, Marion Monks. Marion was tiny, with a round face, golden hair and round 'clincher' glasses, that made her eyes look like two little black peas. To make matters worse, Marion had not one, not two, but three dark brown moles in a straight line just under her chin. Each had a healthy tuft of hair growing from it, giving poor Marion the appearance of having a goatee beard. It was at bingo one night when Marion's glasses broke at the bridge and she managed to finish the night only by holding one lens up to her left eye and writing with her right, that Marion earned her nickname Kaiser.

Together the two 'girls' would push their carts down St Jarlath's Street, sharing the cigarette Agnes had sneaked from Redser's packet. Agnes was married to Redser Browne for thirteen years, and never once had he offered her a fag. So, each morning for thirteen years, she had helped herself to one. Before reaching the end of the street, the two would cross the road so as to walk past St Jarlath's church, the church in which Agnes had married Redser and in which Kaiser had married Tommo Monks, a man twice her height and a legend on the docks as a hard man. Nobody would dare go against him, and yet he could be seen some nights staggering home drunk and weeping, as every couple of yards he would receive a slap

of Marion's handbag, for inadvertently referring to Marion's mother as 'good old heifer-arse!'

When the women came to the front doors of the church, both prams would be stopped, and Marion would hand what was left of the fag to Agnes and climb the steps to the front door. She would gently push one door half-open and shout: 'Good morning, God ... it's me, Marion!' Inside the church, five o'clock Mass would be in full swing. Of the thirty or so congregation, only the strangers would turn their heads, the regulars were used to Marion's early-morning cry. The celebrating priest would not bat an eyelid, as he knew that, for her own reasons, Marion never attended Sunday Mass. This was Marion's way of praying, and that was that. The priest had seen it each morning for the eight years he had been in the parish and no doubt she would still be doing it when he was moved on. Marion would then descend the steps of the church and the two girls would round the corner and complete the ten-minute walk to the fruit markets where their twelve-hour working day would begin.

It is possible to buy almost anything in Moore Street with the collection of shops that are there, but on the stalls they concentrate mainly on fruit, flowers, vegetables and fish. Agnes and Marion sold vegetables and fruit. The two women would spend until half-past six at the wholesale fruit and vegetable market, getting their supplies. Of all the time they put in every morning in the wholesale market only a quarter of it would be spent picking fruit and vegetables, for by now the dealers knew well enough to give the two women the best of what they had – or pay the consequences. The rest of the time would be taken up

in chatting, catching up on the local gossip and solving each other's problems, for here in the early hours of a Dublin morning one could find the remedy for rickets, the secret of how to make a greyhound run faster by rubbing its legs with a bit of turpentine in a rag, or the cure for a cut that had gone septic. Then, after a hot cup of tea and a piece of toast in Rosie O'Grady's Market Café, the two ladies would push their prams, still empty, down to the market, empty because they wouldn't take the fruit with them – Jacko, the box collector, would bring it down later on his horse and cart.

On arrival at Moore Street, the girls would go to the 'Corporation sheds'. These were gerry-built sheds, put up specifically for the use of the Moore Street dealers, to store overnight any fruit or veg that would go on sale next morning. The cost of a shed was five shillings a month. Agnes and Marion shared a single shed and chipped in two-and-six each a month. Between seven o'clock and half-past, Moore Street would be a hive of activity, with stalls being set up all along the street. If the weather was inclement, canvas canopies would be erected to keep the dealers and the vegetables reasonably dry. Vegetables would be unbagged, fruit unboxed and apples polished, yesterday's flowers would be clipped again to give them fresh stems and the fishmongers would be scrubbing down their marble tops awaiting the arrival of the truck from Howth. By half-past seven Moore Street was like a country garden, beginning at the fashionable Henry Street end with a burst of posies from all over the world – roses, chrysanthemums, carnations and lilies, moving down towards the Parnell end with the various fruits and

vegetables – anything from an avocado pear to a strawberry, in season, and finally, tucked away right at the end of the street, the fishmongers, where everyone could see them but no-one could smell them. This was the ritual each and every day, as dependable as a Swiss watch, as colourful as an American election, as noisy as an Italian wedding and as sure as a ride in the National Ballroom!

Not today! Agnes Browne would not be there today. Her stall in Moore Street would be bare, except for the wreaths laid around the bottom, placed there by long-time friends, Winnie the Mackerel, Bridie Barnes, Doreen Dowdall, Catherine Keena, Sandra Coleman, Liam the Sweeper, Jacko the Box Collector, Mrs Robinson and her twin stuttering daughters – affectionately called Splish and Splash. Today, Agnes Browne would be burying her husband. The grave was ready in Ballybough cemetery, the three pounds and ten shillings it cost thankfully being paid by the Hotel and Caterers' branch of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union.

The children were all dressed up, the boys in grey corduroy pants provided by the Vincent de Paul, and white shirts and grey jumpers Agnes had bought in Guiney's, along with new underwear and seven pairs of plastic sandals. The money for this had been sent around by the hotel staff, along with a full breadboard of sandwiches and tiny little sausages. Cathy, the only girl, wore a black skirt and top, again sent down from Ozram House by the Vincent de Paul. Agnes was surprised to find she herself had a black dress at all ... but it was drab and old-fashioned, so it was with great relief that she found that the one sent up, on loan from a neighbour, fitted her perfectly. She cut up

her own dress into little black diamonds which she sewed on to the sleeves of each of the boys' jumpers. These black diamonds of death would be removed only after the first anniversary Mass for the children's father.

Since Redser's death, Agnes hadn't had a moment to herself. The previous night, the house seemed to be invaded by callers. Quietly and efficiently she entertained each caller, constantly making tea, offering a bottle of Guinness from the six cases sent down as a gift from Foley's Bar – Mr Foley had liked Redser, and Agnes. It seemed to go on and on. The younger children were taken down to Marion's house to be bathed, and although Agnes had intended that Mark, Francis and the twins should have a bath at home, it was two o'clock in the morning before she knew it. The children had gone to bed, and she was exhausted. She tidied around the house, collecting the beer bottles and putting them back in their cases. She wondered if Mr Foley would like the empties back; if not she would send the boys down to the Black Lion with them and collect the three shillings per case on them herself.

Before going to her own bed, she checked on the kids. The younger ones, Cathy, Rory and Trevor, were in the single bed – Rory and Trevor at one end and Cathy's little face peeping out the other, flanked by two feet on each side. Their faces glowed from the scrubbing Marion had given them, and they smelled of carbolic soap. One of the overcoats that served as blankets had slipped to the floor and Agnes gently picked it up and placed it across the three children. The other bed, a double, had a huge eider-down spread across it, one of Agnes's bargain finds at the

Saturday market on George's Hill – only seven and six-pence. It had been torn, and leaked feathers all the way home, but a few stitches and it was as good as second-hand! At the bottom end of the bed the twins slept side-by-side. She stared at them in wonderment as usual, for they always slept sucking each other's thumbs, spending their nights as Siamese twins. They had done this from birth and Agnes did not know if she could, or even if she should, try to stop them. They were not identical. Simon was taller than Dermot, and where Dermot had his father's mousey Browne hair, Simon was blond, with freckles in abundance. At the other end the large frame of Mark, the eldest, was sprawled across the bed. For fourteen he was big, big enough to be taken for sixteen. He looked rough and tough, a strong square chin, wiry muscular body and the beginnings of teenage pimples breaking out on his forehead – a forehead that Agnes could not see at this moment for Mark had his back to her, facing the wall. On the other hand, Francis's face was fully visible, the face of an angel. Pale-skinned and with fiery red hair, he lay on his back, his mouth half-open and a gentle hiss coming from his lips as he slept soundly. Agnes ran her fingers through the boy's hair and gently kissed him on the forehead. As she turned to leave, Mark's voice stopped her.

'Mammy.'

She turned, but he didn't.

'Yes, love?' she whispered.

'Don't worry, Ma, I'll be here.'

Her reply caught in her throat, and for a moment she closed her mouth and breathed deeply through her nose, then she whispered 'I know love, I know ... goodnight.'

He did not reply and she left the room. This short exchange upset her, so instead of going to bed, she went downstairs and made tea. She had then slept fitfully in the armchair beside the dying embers.

Agnes regretted that now, as she stood in front of the mirror in her bedroom. There were bags under her eyes. People would think she had been crying! She hadn't, she didn't have time for it. She stood back from the mirror.

'Agnes Browne, look at you, a ragged auld wan!' she said aloud to her reflection. She was being hard on herself, for although she had given birth seven times in fourteen years, at thirty-four she looked thirty-four! Medium height with full lips and a button nose, she was pretty, her outstanding features being her raven black hair and chestnut-brown complexion around almond-shaped brown eyes, a legacy of her grandfather's visit to Spain ... he returned minus a leg but plus a wife! A beautiful wife, for which most men in The Jarro would have given both legs for the chance to use the remaining one! She had died young, at only twenty four, of TB, but not before leaving behind three daughters, the loveliest of them being Maria, who became Agnes's mother. Agnes looked like her mother.

She heard a radio announcer say it was ten o'clock. She hurried down the stairs and gathered the children together. As she herded them out the door she noticed Mark was missing.

'Where's Mark?' she asked no one in particular.

It was Cathy who answered. 'He's in the toilet, he said he's not coming to Da's funeral.'

Agnes did not reply. She looked into Marion's face and

in an effort to make a puzzled face, Marion turned the edges of her mouth downwards, gathering all the mole hairs together.

'Marion love, you go ahead with these,' suggested Agnes, 'I'll go up and see what's wrong with the little cur.'

She quietly climbed the stairs calling him, 'Mark, Mark Browne ... get out here now!' By the time she had reached the toilet door there was still no reply. She banged on the door.

'Mark Browne, I haven't time for this messin'. You're going to Mass whether you like it or not. Get out of that fuckin' toilet *now!*'

The bolt clicked back and Mark emerged.

'What do you think you're up to?'

Mark did not look up. 'Nothin',' he mumbled.

'Then get down them fuckin' stairs and up to that church ... and listen, don't you carry on today or I'm tellin' yeh, I'll swing for yeh! Do yeh hear me?' she was screaming.

Mark was already halfway down the stairs when he said 'Yeh'. They caught up with the rest of the family before they reached the church. Agnes straightened hair, pulled up pants and tucked in shirts, then the new widow and seven orphans entered the church as a pale and frightened family.