

## CHAPTER 1

### SATURDAY

If only it hadn't been that particular school break... if P.J. Mooney hadn't been such a greyhound in his new summer plimsolls... if the man who died had possessed at least one close relative... We were just coming out of the Widow Caine's cottage, my father once more having failed to convince her of the benefits of the new gold injections for her crippling arthritis. The old lady – toothless and nearly bald under her usual black velvet bonnet – was stubborn in her counter claims for nettle broth as the only real cure this side of Lourdes. My father's gentle query as to the broth's progress was met yet again with a reluctant shake of the head and a snort. The small dark eyes flared briefly, like a candle's flame.

“Ah, wisha, even nettles aren't what they used to be!”

P.J. came panting up, all sweaty and scared-looking, skidding to a stop at sight of us, gulping air and hopping from one foot to the other in his agitation.

“What is it, P.J.?” Father asked quietly, not wishing to add to his distress.

“It's ould – it's Mr Barton, doctor. Sumptin' – sumptin'...” He began to gulp again, stopped, took a deep breath and allowed my father to take him by one arm and ease him down onto the car's step.

“Now, P.J., take it slowly. Just remember one thing. Whatever it is, it hasn't happened to you, you are merely the messenger.” He smiled down at him in that calming way he had. “I'm pleased to tell you that – manifold as the shortcomings of our new state are – it has not yet reverted to the ancient practice of punishing the bearer of bad tidings. Now, what about Mr Barton? Number seventeen Greenpark Road, isn't it?”

“Yes, doctor – I mean no!” His chest heaved again but he controlled it. “I mean yes, that's the one but – but he's at a wake –“

“A wake?” A puzzled look from Father, then his brow cleared. “Oh, Jerry Mulligan's lying-in you mean?” P.J. nodded vigorously, relieved to be finally on the same wavelength. “Go on, P.J., slowly now.”

It seemed that a few minutes ago – this was mid-afternoon and hot – when Jerry Mulligan's wake was well into its first full day of mourning after a long night's run-up, the elderly Jim Barton had toppled backwards, right in the middle of his well known rendition of 'Boo-lavogue', and was presently lying flat out, covered in spilt porter and not a sign of life in him.

The journey down the lane took but a few minutes, P.J. in the back of the Armstrong Siddeley, quickly forgetting the drama (I could see him

in the mirror) and instead revelling in the contact with real leather seats. I knew the feeling, part of my own joy when travelling with Father. P.J.'s pleasure was short, reluctantly getting out at the departed Mulligan's cottage, where Father gave him a thruppenny bit and told him to go and cool down with an ice cream from Ledwidge's over the road. The poor lad "... must be terribly thirsty after such an important message."

Inside the cottage I traipsed after Father through the front room that was used as a shop and into the one remaining, at the rear. There were loads of people but very little movement. The curtains were drawn and the mirror covered, the only glimmer of light coming from the three skinny candles and with the smoke from the turf fire I could barely make them out. As father's tall form instinctively stooped under the rafters Mrs Mulligan rushed forward out of the gloom, her white hands and pale face a disembodied distraction that for a moment caught even him off guard.

"Ah, be the Lord Jasus, doctor, it's me contention ye're too late. It's two o' them now I've got on me hands an' on'y wan o' them insured!"

"Come, come, Mrs Mulligan, I'm sorry for your trouble but there is a report of someone ill here. I was not aware that your many skills included a qualification as medical practitioner." My father knew when to be soft and when not. Mrs Mulligan was known more for her piety than her pity. Never away from the church, early Mass, evening Novenas, Benedictions, Sunday a feast if not a festival. She ran her shop with one thumb on the scales, extracting a grudging admiration from her 'strapped' customers for having once escaped prosecution, the charge being one of somehow producing brown paper bags with false bottoms.

Those customers unfortunate enough to be on her strap list often grumbled that they should all benefit from the millions of days indulgence accrued by her hours in the confessional, seeing how much they had contributed.

"Well, doctor, d'ye not think I have enough to contend wit', wit' Himself over there?" She waved one hand to the far corner of the smoky room, where the 'bold' Mulligan's mortal remains were going through what Father would call 'an accelerated process of decomposition' in the room's raised temperature. Propped up as he was in his coffin, the lid resting to one side, his yellowy eyelids shone in the candlelight as though watching the whole proceedings. His remembered doleful expression seemed somehow worsened by the draining of blood from the upper regions. He'd always had a watery look about him, according to a remark I'd once overheard Father say to his colleague and partner, Dr Maffin, whose patient Jerry Mulligan had been. They had been discussing his deteriorating health – varicose veins, piles, bad circulation – and Dr

Maffin had rumbled in that way he had, “Trouble with old Jerry is, Herself’s not always around to tell him when he needs a shite.”

Some of the mourners – lining the walls on either side of the coffin – could have been described as no more life-like. It was difficult for me to make out whether this was to do with respect for the deceased in the corner or the one on the floor, for even to me it was clear the life had gone out of Jim Barton’s eyes; wide open and staring though they were, as though somehow trying to see eternity through the thatched roof, a few wisps of white hair sticking up like Stan Laurel’s, a dribble of porter from his mouth already evaporating in the stifling atmosphere. There was a fair chance the same thing might soon happen to the contents of the glasses and bottles ranged around the room, for although no hand was empty, none were moving in the time-honoured manner.

In front of those standing against the walls were seated the ladies of more mature years, cakes and cups balanced on funereal black laps. The strange thing was the silence. Although I had, along with other boys my age, been permitted to pray at the bedsides of recently dead people, this had been done more out of bravado and curiosity than reverence. How different – younger – they had always appeared, with the worries of life removed from their faces. But I only knew about wakes from those chums who had actually experienced a death in the family and had been allowed to witness the ‘goings-on’, as my mother had once described them. Of course, this had merely sharpened my curiosity and I had to admit to a heightened interest in Jerry Mulligan’s situation, now that my inclusion was made possible through the Trojan Horse of Jim Barton’s cooling corpse.

But where was all the joking and laughter, where the tall tales about the departed, the unbroken rule that – no matter badly behaved or sinful the old reprobate in life – nothing but good must ever be spoken of the dead?

Ironically it was my father, he of few words usually, who broke the spell of silence by immediately taking control. “Pull those curtains, someone, and let’s have some more light on the subject.” He knelt down by the prostrate form, going through the motions of establishing the certainty of death and its probable cause before standing up to tower above everyone else. The bright sunshine from outside now threw his giant shadow across those standing mute and expectant between the kitchen press and the mantelpiece.

“He’s gone, poor fellow, his pump... What was it, singing again at the top of his voice and him with a heart condition and an overtight starched collar?” This to nobody in particular, a sign for all present to resume animation.

“Ah, sure he was right in the middle of –“

“Ye know how much he always enjoyed a good wake, doctor –“

“Indeed, an’ who would wish for a better way t’go than singin’ at a friend’s funeral –“

“Aw jay, I’m thinkin’ he’s got that turrrible liquor mortis look about him –“

“Mrs Mulligan!” My father. “Please get some of your... guests... to carry Mr Barton into the front room. C’mon, chop-chop!” This last was his only concession to the years spent in uniform and foreign parts.

“What! Ye can’t be serious, doctor!” Mrs Mulligan was almost shrieking. “There’s food an’ drink in there... comestibles! Ye’ll have the Health Board down on me like a ton o’ bricks –“

“Quiet!” My father barely raised his voice but once more the hubbub died. Upended bottles that had begun gurgling their contents into waiting glasses slowed to a trickle and eyes slanted our way, me standing slightly to the left and rear of Father. “Whether you like it or not the deceased has – temporarily at least – become part of your home’s grief. Would you have me drag him out into the street, hmm?”

The newly widowed Mrs Mulligan’s expression seemed to indicate a desire to debate that very point. But she couldn’t bring herself to bandy words with the tall, authoritative figure of my father. She quickly roped in some volunteers and the body was half-carried away.

He turned to me, his pale face stern but with that glint in his eyes I’d come to recognise, without having words for it. “Mr Barton has neither chick nor child in these parts. We’ll go and see Mr Halloran about arrangements for the body. Wait in the car while I make out the death certificate.” He handed me the bag.

As we drove away faint sounds of muted merriment were already surfacing again in Mrs Mulligan’s. My father shook his head and I imagined I heard an equally faint chuckle from him. I glanced over in some surprise; he rarely gave so little of himself to what he termed ‘the trivialities of life’. “I’m sure when some of the professional mourners back there have words with Mrs Mulligan she will begin to see the wisdom in a little Christian charity.”

I was puzzled. “What do you mean... about professional mourners, Father?”

He glanced quickly at me before negotiating the turn out of Greenpark Road, trying to avoid the many potholes as he did so. Then: “I’m sorry, Brendan, I tend to forget there are still a few gaps in your life’s education.” He had this theory that education came on several different levels: school and all that that entailed was obviously a very important level, as was the rudiments of hunting, shooting and fishing. But the University of Life, as he termed it, was the glue that held it all together. If the proportion in that area was somehow deficient (although

he never advised on how to determine this) then much of the rest would be wasted – or worse – ill-used. “Everybody has a talent for something, although sadly in a lot of cases it lies undiscovered. A job we love and are good at is a priceless asset, both to oneself and the community.” He raised his Homburg to an elderly lady standing at her front gate before resuming. “But most people are either forced into their jobs by parents or drift into them by chance. Professional mourning isn’t a calling, nor a vocation...it’s not even a job *per se*. You know what a parasite is, don’t you, son?” He glanced at me

“Yes, sir, something that lives by feeding or-or surviving off something else... I think.”

“Um... an example?”

“A – a tick?”

“That’ll do. Professional mourners prey on the grieving and the hypocritical. They simply live by moving on from wake to wake.”

“I – I don’t think I understand, sir.” And I didn’t. Father had strong views about a lot of things but hardly ever spoke of them outside our home. I would sit at his feet of an evening as he read sections of the paper out to my mother. She was partially crippled by polio and could do very little for herself. I often wondered if my birth had anything to do with it but hadn’t yet plucked up the courage to ask. Tell the truth I was half afraid of the answer. I only knew I’d be hard pushed to think of another family in our circle of friends with just the one child.

“The only thing they invest in legally is the daily newspaper but they’re not interested in the news or the sports section. No... it’s the deaths column they zero in on.” He must have somehow noticed me blink, perhaps I twitched, for he chuckled. “The deaths column is ironically their lifeline, the innocent means by which they prey on the less fortunate. There is a tradition long held which dictates that when there is a death in the house and the loved one is still there, laid out, then nobody can be refused hospitality under that roof. Are you with me so far?” I nodded and tried not to look too confused, which was proving a little difficult. “These vultures, having scanned the announcements, carefully choose their victim, establish the address – not too hard in a community like ours – and then land on the doorstep. Mind, they only try it out on widows, the poor soul usually distraught, trying to cope with funeral arrangements, the flowers, refreshments... the insurance policy! Anyway, in the middle of all this, here come your two – it’s normally no more than a couple – knock, knock, all cheerful and outgoing, asking is Himself at home. Poor widow says she’s sorry but Seamus or Pat passed on only yesterday. Shock, horror, disbelief – they’ve had plenty of practice at this! – and they mouth the usual platitudes... ‘Holy Mary, Mother o’ God...an’ we just talking to him only the other...’ They cross themselves,

caps in hand, looking suitably distressed. ‘We’re terrible sorry for your trouble, Missus... we’ll be getting’ on our way so...’ They edge back ever so slightly. Oh, these boys have got it off to a T, it’s performing at the Abbey they should be. At this she remembers her manners, urges them inside for something before they go – if indeed they have to go! At first protesting weakly they are prevailed upon to partake of their hospitality.”

“But – but...”

“Yes, Brendan, you have a contribution, hmm?” Father was always eager to satisfy my every query, on whatever subject, from why the sky is blue to the patterns of iron filings around a magnet. Sometimes, for the fun of it, *he* said, he would reach over and plonk down one of the many dictionaries or encyclopaedias in front of me, to seek for myself.

“But if these people are not known to others in the house, won’t it become obvious to – to...” I wasn’t sure if I knew what it was I wanted to say. But he gripped my shoulder for a moment before returning to steering round the potholes.

“Very good, Brendan, a very valid point and one that is the weak spot in their plan. But they are adept at quickly picking up the few facts they need to know. Is the departed a local man? His age, what he died of, the names of immediate family and so on. Masters of ambiguity, they have raised the practice of small talk to that of an art form. One could almost admire them, if only their motives were less odious and despicable.” He controlled his anger, so rare in him, before allowing the tension to ease out of his bony frame. “But the supreme irony in all of this, Brendan, is that most of the genuine mourners usually twig what they are about at some point in the proceedings... for they will stay as long as the wake goes on, eating and drinking, sheltered from the cold and rain, a place by the fire, a snooze. Then why aren’t they exposed for what they are, you say. It’s all to do with the human condition, something else you won’t be aware of (I wasn’t!). We are what we are, products – victims even – of our own environment. Even if our widow spotted these shysters for what they are she would very likely behave in exactly the same way. It’s tradition you see, Brendan, an abstract but laudable part of what we are, what makes us unique and yet so similar to other nations. Even if she were perfectly within her rights to show them the door, when word got around that she had refused someone – anyone! – the time-honoured hospitality, the facts of the matter would have somehow become distorted out of all semblance of the truth. It would bring shame down upon her house and the family name. And this is also true of the other mourners; they know that some day they too will be a ‘departed’, or the spouse of one. Nobody wants to be the first to rock the boat.” He

sighed. “Sometimes the surgery can be more restrictive than the confessional.”

He touched my shoulder again and smiled that shy smile, revealing the good, small, even teeth that he took so much care with. “What the devil am I going on about, eh? Senile at forty-five, that’s me, Brendan. Look, here we are at Mr Halloran’s.” The sign over the shop front, Halloran’s Funeral Emporium, came into view as we entered Castle Street. I always thought that last word a strange one for what they did in there; not only laid them out but made the coffins too. What was it one of the lads at school said his father called it? The ‘Bee-Four’ Factory: bathed, bound, boxed and buried. We drew up alongside a motor hearse, a new one, the paintwork glittering darkly in the summer sun. I shivered, uneasy at so much death, and talk of it, on an afternoon of such brightness, with less than a week left before boarding school beckoned once more.

Father switched off the engine, pulled at the handbrake, the ratchet ripping open the sudden silence for a few seconds before returning it to compete with the ticking of the hot metal.

“I’ll just be inside for a few minutes, Brendan, to arrange things. O.K.?”

I glanced at him quickly; the O.K. bit was unlike him, too... too vague for his usually precise and confident manner. As if he was seeking my approval. But he seemed all right, he looked the same. His direct gaze, though, altered for an instant – or was that too my imagination? Was he now challenging me for some reason? I nodded. He climbed down onto the pavement and pulled his suit jacket straight before striding across to knock once briefly and then turn the door handle. And then... then he did it again... something out of the ordinary. He turned to look back at me, as if to re-assure himself of my whereabouts. Then he was gone, into that awful building which held the strangest, most fearful smell for me, almost certainly magnified by the knowledge of what went on in there.

I sat there for... oh, I can’t remember exactly, perhaps two minutes or more. The whole street seemed asleep; no chimney smoke, several half-doors open, a dog lolling in the shade over by Foley’s saddlery shop. The stuffed pony in the window looked even more ready to explode, as the stitching slowly surrendered to the shrinking hide and the summer heat. The engine stopped its ticking and all was quiet... and then old Sam Bolger came roaring down the street on his Triumph 500, the sidecar bouncing the sods of turf in the sack as he wrestled to keep it all from landing on the road.

The dog came to its feet stiff-legged and barking, outraged at being robbed of its dream, and chased after him, head low and tail straight

out. Sam, goggles making him look like someone from the Flash Gordon matinees, waved across cheerily as he swept past, forgetting he only had one hand on the handlebars and going into a wobble that caught the dog unawares, an unexpected departure from the script. It veered off to the side, slowing itself down by bracing its front legs and raising its head to give vent in one last threatening howl before loping back to try and reclaim its dream world of juicy bones and soft soil.

I got down from the car, bored and hot, wrinkling my nose at the new intrusion of fumes and the ribbony petrol haze, slowly twisting and distorting as though seeking some means of escape in the dusty street. I peered through the grimy white lace that curtained off the window of the funeral emporium but the combination of unwashed glass and reflection of the street behind me proved too much and I gave up. The door was glass-panelled too but frosted, with fancy curls and feathery designs etched into it in such a way as to defeat all but the most determined squinting. But I was bored, so I moved my head this way and that, trying to line up at least one of the bevelled angles, marvelling at the way bits of the office inside multiplied and splintered like a colourless kaleidoscope. And then I stopped: a vertical cut – the stem of some flower – gave me an elongated image of my father bending over Barty Halloran, who was much shorter and rounder, with black straight hair Brylcreemed and parted down the centre like one of those English footballers. He was staring up at my father and shaking his head, his mouth forming an obvious No to something. Then Father's body moved out of my vision for an instant, to return with a flat bottle of whiskey in his hand, a hand which was thrust at Halloran in such a way as to brook no argument. My amazement made me lose concentration and the scene disappeared. I slid away from the glass, somehow ashamed of what I had seen. Whatever it was, was wrong, and that made me feel guilty of something, although I knew not what. But two things struck me. Halloran was noted for being one of the town's Pioneers. It was said his father made him take the pledge before handing over the business to him. And my father only drank the odd glass of wine at dinner.

So who was the whiskey for?

