

PART I  
SHAME



1945

The Cuckoo in the Nest



## The Good People of Goleen

Long before we discovered that he had fathered two children by two different women, one in Drimoleague and one in Clonakilty, Father James Monroe stood on the altar of the Church of Our Lady, Star of the Sea, in the parish of Goleen, West Cork, and denounced my mother as a whore.

The family was seated together in the second pew, my grandfather on the aisle using his handkerchief to polish the bronze plaque engraved to the memory of his parents that was nailed to the back of the woodwork before him. He wore his Sunday suit, pressed the night before by my grandmother, who twisted her jasper rosary beads around her crooked fingers and moved her lips silently until he placed his hand atop hers and ordered her to be still. My six uncles, their dark hair glistening with rose-scented lacquer, sat next to her in ascending order of age and stupidity. Each was an inch shorter than the next and the disparity showed from behind. The boys did their best to stay awake that morning; there had been a dance the night before in Skull and they'd come home mouldy with the drink, sleeping only a few hours before being roused by their father for Mass.

At the end of the row, beneath a wooden carving of the tenth station of the cross, sat my mother, her stomach fluttering in terror at what was to come. She hardly dared to look up.

The Mass began in the typical fashion, she told me, with the priest's wearied discharge of the Introductory Rites and the congregation's discordant singing of the Kyrie. William Finney, a neighbour of my mother's from Ballydevlin, made his way in all his pomposity to the pulpit for the first and second liturgical readings, clearing his throat into the heart of the microphone before pronouncing every word with such dramatic intensity that he might have been performing on the stage of the Abbey Theatre. Father Monroe, perspiring noticeably

under the weight of his vestments and the intensity of his anger, followed with the Acclamation and the Gospel before inviting everyone to be seated, and three red-cheeked altar boys scurried to their side-bench, exchanging excited glances. Perhaps they had read the priest's notes in the sacristy beforehand or overheard him rehearse his words as he pulled the cassock down over his head. Or maybe they just knew how much cruelty the man was capable of and were happy that on this occasion it was not being directed towards them.

'My family are all Goleen as far back as records go,' he began, looking out at one hundred and fifty raised heads and a single bowed one. 'I heard a terrible rumour once that my great-grandfather had family in Bantry but I never saw any evidence to justify it.' An appreciative laugh from the congregation; a bit of local bigotry never hurt anyone. 'My mother,' he continued, 'a good woman, loved this parish. She went to her grave having never left a few square miles of West Cork and didn't regret it for a moment. *Good people live here*, she always told me. *Good, honest, Catholic people*. And do you know something, I never had cause to doubt her. Until today.'

There was a ripple around the church.

'Until today,' repeated Father Monroe slowly, shaking his head in sorrow. 'Is Catherine Goggin in attendance this morning?' He looked around as if he had no idea where he might find her, even though she had been seated in the same pew every Sunday morning for the past sixteen years. In a moment, the head of every man, woman and child present turned in her direction. Every head, that is, except for those of my grandfather and six uncles, who stared resolutely forward, and my grandmother, who lowered hers now just as my mother raised her own in a see-saw of shame.

'Catherine Goggin, there you are,' said the priest, smiling at her and beckoning her forward. 'Come on up here to me now like a good girl.'

My mother stood up slowly and made her way towards the altar, a place she had only ever been before to take Communion. Her face was not scarlet, she would tell me years later, but pale. The church was hot that day, hot with the sticky summer and the breath of excited parishioners, and she felt unsteady on her feet, worrying that she might faint and be left on the marble floor to wither and rot as an example to other

girls her age. She glanced at Father Monroe nervously, meeting his rancorous eyes for only a moment before turning away.

‘As if butter wouldn’t melt,’ said Father Monroe, looking out at his flock and offering a half-smile. ‘How old are you now, Catherine?’ he asked.

‘Sixteen, Father,’ said my mother.

‘Say it louder. So the good people at the back of the church can hear you.’

‘Sixteen, Father.’

‘Sixteen. Now lift your head and look out at your neighbours. At your own mother and father who have lived decent, Christian lives and been credits to the parents who went before them. At your brothers, whom we all know to be fine upstanding young men, hard workers who have led no girl astray. Do you see them, Catherine Goggin?’

‘I do, Father.’

‘If I have to tell you to speak up again, I’ll hit you a slap across this altar and there’s not a soul in the church that would blame me for it.’

‘I do, Father,’ she repeated, louder now.

“‘I do.’ That will be the only time you ever utter those words in a church, do you realize that, little girl? There’ll never be a wedding day for you. Your hands are going to your fat belly, I see. Is there a secret that you’re hiding?’

A gasp from the pews now. This was what the congregation had suspected, of course – what else could it have been? – but they had waited for confirmation. Eyes flitted back and forth between friends and enemies alike, conversations already being prepared in their heads. *The Goggins*, they would say. *I would expect nothing less from that family. He can barely write his name on a scrap of paper and she’s a peculiar article.*

‘I don’t know, Father,’ said my mother.

‘You don’t know. Of course you don’t know. Sure aren’t you just an ignorant wee slut who has no more sense than a rabbit in a hutch? And the morals to match, I might add. All you young girls out there,’ he said now, raising his voice as he turned to look out at the people of Goleen, who sat still in their seats as he pointed at them. ‘All you young girls are to take a look at Catherine Goggin here and learn what happens to girls who play fast and loose with their virtue. They find themselves with a child in their belly and no husband to take care of them.’

A roar went around the church. There had been a girl who got herself pregnant on Sherkin Island the previous year. It was a wonderful scandal. The same had happened in Skibbereen the Christmas before last. Was Goleen to earn the same mark of shame? If so, the news would be all around West Cork by teatime.

‘Now, Catherine Goggin,’ continued Father Monroe, placing a hand on her shoulder and squeezing the bone tightly between his fingers. ‘Before God and your family and all the good people of this parish, you’re to name the pup who lay down with you. You’re to name him now so he can be made to give his confession and be forgiven in the eyes of the Lord. And after that you’re to get out of this church and this parish and blacken the name of Goleen no more, do you hear me?’

She looked up and turned to my grandfather, whose face was set like granite as he stared at the statue of the crucified Jesus hanging behind the altar.

‘Your poor daddy can’t help you now,’ said the priest, following the direction of her gaze. ‘Sure he wants nothing more to do with you. He told me so himself last night when he came to the presbytery to report the shameful news. And let no one here blame Bosco Goggin for any of this, for he brought up his children right, he brought them up with Catholic values, and how can he be held to account for one rotten apple in a barrel of good ones? Give me the pup’s name right now, Catherine Goggin, give me his name so we can cast you out and not have to look at your filthy face any more. Or do you not know his name, is that it? Were there too many of them for you to be certain?’

A low murmur of discontent could be heard around the pews. Even in the midst of gossip, the congregation felt this might be going a step too far, for it implicated all of their sons in the immorality. Father Monroe, who had given hundreds of sermons in that church over the course of two decades and who knew well how to read a room, pulled back a little.

‘No,’ he said. ‘No, I can tell that there’s still a shred of decency inside you and there was only one lad. But you’ll give me his name right now, Catherine Goggin, or I’ll know the reason why.’

‘I won’t say,’ said my mother, shaking her head.

‘What’s that?’

‘I won’t say,’ she repeated.



‘You won’t say? The time for timidity is long since past; do you not realize that, no? The name, little girl, or I swear before the cross that I will whip you from this house of God in shame.’

She looked up now and glanced around the church. It was like a film, she would later tell me, with everyone holding their breath as they wondered to whom she might point the finger of blame, each mother praying that it would not be her son. Or worse, her husband.

She opened her mouth and seemed to be on the verge of an answer but changed her mind and shook her head.

‘I won’t say,’ she repeated quietly.

‘Get on with you so,’ said Father Monroe, stepping behind her and giving her an almighty kick in the back with his boot that sent her stumbling down the altar steps, her hands outstretched before her, for even at that early stage of my development she was ready to protect me at all costs. ‘Get on out of here, you floozy, and out of Goleen, and take your infamy to another place. There’s houses in London that have been built for the likes of you and beds there where you can throw yourself on your back and spread your legs for all and sundry to satisfy your wanton ways.’

The congregation gasped in horrified delight at his words, the teenage boys thrilled by such notions, and as she picked herself up off the ground the priest stepped forward again and dragged her by the arm through the nave of the church, spittle dribbling down his mouth and chin, his face red with indignation, and perhaps his excitement was even visible to those who knew where to look for it. My grandmother looked around but my grandfather gave her a pucker on the arm and she turned back. My Uncle Eddie, the youngest of the six and the closest in age to my mother, stood up and shouted, ‘Ah come on, that’s enough now,’ and at those words my grandfather stood too and laid his son out with one punch to the jaw. My mother saw no more after that, as Father Monroe discarded her into the graveyard beyond and told her that she was to leave the village within the hour and from that day forward the name of Catherine Goggin would no more be heard or spoken of in the parish of Goleen.

She lay on the ground, she told me, for a few minutes, knowing that the Mass had a good half hour to run yet, before slowly picking herself

up and turning in the direction of home, where, she guessed, a packed bag would be waiting for her by the front door.

‘Kitty.’

A voice from behind made her turn around and she was surprised to see my father walking towards her nervously. She’d noticed him in the back row, of course, as the priest dragged her towards the doors, and to his credit he’d had a look of shame upon his face.

‘Haven’t you done enough?’ she asked, putting a hand to her mouth and drawing it away to examine the blood that had seeped into her untrimmed nails.

‘This wasn’t what I wanted at all,’ he told her. ‘I’m sorry for your trouble, truly I am.’

‘For my trouble?’ she asked. ‘In a different world, this would be our trouble.’

‘Ah come on now, Kitty,’ he said, using the name he’d called her by from the time she was a child. ‘Don’t be like that. Here’s a couple of pounds,’ he added, handing her two green Irish punts. ‘This should help you get started somewhere else.’

She looked at them for a few moments before holding them up in the air and slowly tearing them down the centre.

‘Ah, Kitty, there’s no need for—’

‘No matter what that man in there says, I’m no whore,’ she told him, crumpling the pieces up into a ball and throwing them at him. ‘Take your money. A bit of sticking tape will put them back together and you can buy my Auntie Jean a nice dress for her birthday instead.’

‘Jesus, Kitty, will you keep your voice down, for God’s sake?’

‘You’ll not hear it again,’ she told him, turning away and heading for home and then the late-afternoon bus to Dublin. ‘Good luck to you now.’

And with that she took her leave of Goleen, the place of her birth, which she would not see again for more than sixty years, when she would stand in that same graveyard with me and search among the gravestones for the remains of the family that had cast her out.