

chapter 2 a conspiracy of silence

a real story — not a hollywood film

second edition

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2002 LONDON 2002



Figure 1: A Special Messenger, the Banshee. (Impression by Jake Bines age 10)

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chapter 2

a conspiracy of silence

There are some faces you never forget,
Some words that you'll always recall ...

-A song by Denise Stanley

Uncle John

What does strike me as sad and confusing is that no-one, apart from my mother, even when I was a young man, ever talked seriously to me about my father. Uncle John, my mother's brother, was the only one who declared that he knew him — the only one ever to mention my father. That made uncle John special.

“Uncle John's here!” my sisters greet me, as I come charging in, after playing with my mates in the street — our playground. It is the one time that I can remember uncle John staying in our house. We are going to a family wedding, and he is staying downstairs in auntie Mary's flat overnight. A buzz of excitement grips the house.

Uncle John looks the business when he's dressed up — another reason, and there are many, why he is special. Good looking and sharp in his suit, he sports a tie with the magical windsor knot. John holds the secret of the crafting of the knot, so that it sits squarely and symmetrically in the middle of the collar. God made us symmetrical, so why spoil the design with a sloppy apology for a knot, a lop-sided half-a-granny, that many guys wear at their throat? On the morning of the wedding, my mother, unable to satisfy my whingeing demands for the windsor knot, reluctantly sends me down to ask John to tie the knot for me. In our predominantly female household, it is an excuse only a boy can conjure up in order to see uncle John.

John is a big, muscular, beautiful man and his musky smell, as he sits up sleepily in bed in his vest after I wake him, is intoxicating. I stand entranced, taking in the regular, clear, handsome features of his face and his huge frame, as he shows me how to tie the magical knot. As I face him, he is practising tying the knot in reverse on me; I peer down my nose in an effort to remember the moves. He makes a mistake and, as he starts again, ventures to talk to me about his relationship with my father. His deep, soft, Irish, Waterford brogue holds me in thrall to him, man-to-man — his manner entirely male, somehow conspiratorial, very welcome to me probably because I am so unused to contact like it.

In a few brief sentences John describes how he liked my father, what a good bloke he was, how they were good friends, what a good time they had together and how they went out drinking and singing before he married my mother. Music to my ears. He looks up at me as he finishes the knot, tells me that I remind him of my dad and adds that I'll make

a fine man like he was. He hints strongly, by tapping the side of his nose with his first finger, that I shouldn't breathe a word to my mother. It's between us. Mum's (not?) the word. Buzzing and elated, I have heard the good news: that my dad and I are good blokes in uncle John's eyes. It is confirmation that my father existed — at least for another special man. As I mount the stairs, I am convinced that tapping my nose with my first finger as I go, is the secret sign of my initiation into the world of men. It is enough to set me alight for ages.

When we are assembling for the group photograph at the wedding, John, tapping his nose, whispers in my ear, in a mocking, confiding tone, "I'm the best looking man here and I'll fight anybody who says differently!" And, of course, he is. Hands down.

Auntie Mary

Even auntie Mary said nothing. I knew that she must have been well acquainted with my father. She was a mine of information and an accomplished raconteur. And so?

In 1933 My mother had run away from Ireland when she was fifteen. She bought a return ticket for the coach trip to the All-Ireland final at Wembley and didn't go back. Instead, she found a job and stayed with Mary who had come down from Liverpool to join her. From that time on they were together. Later, I was to realize just how separate they were too. Mary married and lived with my uncle Jim and, eventually, our five cousins. My mother and father, after they were married in 1940, lived in the middle flat at 46 Lydford Road,

and moved to number 50, when two of the flats became available in 1942, so that both families could live together.

After the post-war celebrations we went to Ireland to stay with my grandparents in Waterford City for a few months. At the time it felt like an extended holiday with trips on the steam trains from Waterford to the seaside at Tramore and Dunmore East. I now suspect it was a time for my mother to grieve and to decide on her future actions and life without my father.

When we returned from Ireland, and settled back into life in London and started school, my mother went to work. She had three jobs: early in the morning cleaning, waitressing over lunch, and sometimes bar work in the evenings. This enabled her to be at home to get us ready for school and to greet us on our return.

Auntie Mary was my mother's elder sister. Auntie Mary of the glorious, flaming red hair — a characteristic that was to re-appear in the family after skipping a generation. She lived below us in the middle flat at 50 Lydford Road in Paddington.

When my mother was at work, we were in and out of 'Auntie Mary's' — as we called her flat. She would welcome us into her kitchen, her family's living space, to a slice of bread and jam, the rare treat of a biscuit, and, occasionally, a story.

As children, my sisters, Mary and Jean, and I would sit on the floor by the fire with my cousins, Brian, Ann and John, hoping we would get a story before Uncle Jim arrived home from work. These might be stories of Ireland — the banshee, the 'little people', leprechauns, headless horsemen, or of the war — the blitz, the blackout, the bombers and the doodlebugs.

Tales of Ireland

Auntie Mary can tell a tale, especially about ghosts, and gripping stories of the war. She seems to know we are hooked on the scariness of her stories, and is able, with a roll of her eyes to heaven and a drop in her voice to a secretive anxious whisper, to hold us in fascinated horror with tales of Ireland.



Figure 2: The Headless Horseman

She has only to mention the headless horseman (*Gaelic: dullahan*) or the banshee (*bean sídhe*) literally, woman of the fairy mound, to transport me, in a trice, on wings of fantasy, desire and fear, back to the bogs in Ireland.

The Banshee

We are living in a London of the years just after the war; when memories of the insecurities of war were still fresh: how death, riding a bomb or a doodlebug, suddenly but routinely paid Londoners a visit.

The nights are drawing in. It is cold. Just around the corner is Hallowe'en, All Saints day and All Souls day. And then Guy Fawkes' night and Remembrance day. It's a time for sitting round the fire for a scary story.

Window of the Soul

But there's something else about Auntie Mary. Her eyes. Each is a different mix of colour, not so's you'd notice, people say, but you do. We do, because we can't help staring, even though we are told that it's rude to stare.

Whether one of those startlingly odd eyes affects the appearance of the other, I don't know, but they do seem to have a curious ability to change colour.

Out in the air with the sky, they are blue; in the fields, as green as the grass; by the trees, they shade into a tawny-brown; and in the reflection of the flames in the grate, framed by the glow of her red hair, before our very eyes, they seem to catch fire.

But it's not staring *at* them that I find scary. It's the looking *right into* somebody's eyes.

I have tried it only with Mum when she was removing a speck of grit from my eye. But I found myself fascinated by the beauty of her almond-shaped eyes with their light blue

irises. When I tried to look into her eyes she smiled at me and the moment was gone.

Am I ever likely to see the secrets of her soul — Auntie Mary says ‘the eyes are the window of your soul’ — or will it always be just my own reflection.

The World of the Fairies

In the course of her stories, we have learned that there are many characters from the Duineshee (*Daoine sídhe*), the inhabitants of the spirit or fairy world.

There are two that Auntie Mary favours: the banshee and the lenanshee, (*leanan sídhe*) or, as she calls them, in her soft, Irish accent, the ‘banashee’ and the ‘lanashee’.

Auntie Mary, in the pursuit and delivery of a good story, has been known to interchange or mix them up.

The Spirit of Life

Human beings who are able to sing, or recite, play music, dance, entertain, tell stories ... are said to receive these fairy gifts from the Duineshee.

The Spirit of Life from the Duineshee also freely bestows a well known talent on many people in Ireland: the ‘gift of the gab’. But that’s another of Auntie Mary’s stories.

Those who are singers or musicians, so the story goes, are watched over by the Spirit of Life and receive the added gift of second sight (*taisich*), and so are able to foretell the future.

Either there are far more singers and musicians in Ireland than you would expect, or the spirits are very generous and open-handed, even undiscerning, with this added gift — judging by the multitude of fortune-tellers, crystal ball gazers, psychics, seers, palmists and tarot readers that abound everywhere in Ireland.

In Nanny and Grandad's lane alone, almost every household had someone ready to read your fortune from the tea-leaves in your cup.

The Spirit of Doom

“But,” says Auntie Mary as she settles in by the fire with her cup of tea, while we hug our knees and stare with her into the flames,

“the Spirit of Doom, who reveals the secrets of misfortune and death, gives the gift of song and the ability to foretell death to a special messenger, the ‘banashee’.

“She it is, with her keening and wailing in the still of the night, who gives out the bad news:

“Somebody from a famous Irish family is about to die.”

Auntie Mary breaks into a low hum, which turns into a wail of plaintive tremolo notes as she starts singing in a hollow gasping voice — like the wind drumming up:

*“O Danny Boy, the pipes the pipes are calling
From glen to glen and down the mountainside...”*

I am not sure whether I feel nervous, or whether I have a giggle coming on.



Figure 3: A Special Messenger, The Banshee.

King Brian Boru

“The great families in Ireland, the Chieftains of the Gaels, were usually distinguished by having an ‘O’ or a ‘Mac’ at the start of their surname. Five hundred years ago,” she says grandly, “the ‘O’ meant ‘son of’ and the ‘Mac’ stood for ‘grandson’ or ‘descendant’.”

And more grandly still, “Even Brian Boru of nearly a thousand years ago, who was the last High King of all Ireland, and whom you are all descended from, had a ‘mac’ in his full name: ‘Brian Bóruma mac Cennétig’. And some of the direct descendants of King Brian Boru are the O’Briens, many of whom live in Waterford.”



Figure 4: King Brian Boru.

“WHOM YOU ARE ALL DESCENDED FROM”

Wow! Auntie Mary, effortlessly in passing, crowns us all princes and princesses at a stroke. Now, puffed up with the pride of royalty, we are ready to hear stories of our ancestor, King Brian Boru, and his kingdom of Ireland.

“The great families would have names like . . .” says Auntie Mary, rolling her eyes up in her head searching her memory as if picking names of the royal clans from the ceiling,

“the O’Neills, O’Donnells, O’Briens, O’Learys, O’Connells,

MacDonalds, MacCarthys, Mackrills, McSweeneys ... ”

Is it a coincidence that the names she lists are, without exception, familiar names of some of the families we know in our street or at our school, ‘Our Lady of Dolours’, here in Paddington?

Flaming Red Hair

“These families each have their own banashee. She could be an old woman with long silver hair wearing a grey hooded cloak or a white winding sheet; or a young maiden clad in traditional green with long, flowing, flaming red hair.

“The Gaelic legend arose from the tradition of keening (*caoineadh*) or wailing that took place at a Wake, or at the graveside. By drawing a comb through her hair as she was wailing the banashee would recall an old custom where mourners, on occasion, would tear out their hair in anguish when somebody close to them had died.”

Auntie Mary starts to comb slowly through her own long, wavy, flaming red hair. Hair so red and so rare. We watch her. She shakes her hair loose. It settles around her shoulders.

“The keening of the banashee carries over a great distance, and, though beautiful, mournful and melancholy, has something of the chill hollow whistle of the wind through the keyhole on a dark stormy night.”

Auntie Mary, with her hands cupped to her mouth, does a fair impression of the wind whistling through the keyhole, while looking at us carefully to see how we are faring.

“If it was someone very famous or very holy about to die,

two or even three banashees would gather together to sing and wail.”

Auntie Mary nods, gravely, and pauses. For dramatic effect? To see how we are reacting? Or is she daunted by the prospect of the next step? Even she would struggle to sound like several banshees wailing together.

The Lenanshee

Instead she gets up and pours herself another cup of tea, returns to her chair, and spends an age thoughtfully stirring in her two spoonfuls of sugar. Auntie Mary is mistress of the pregnant silence.

Finally, a deep breath, and she picks up her story again, “It is about this time of the year, so they say in Ireland, that the living may chance upon the Duineshee, the spirits or fairies, of the Otherworld.

“In a few days time, at the end of October, it is the feast of Samhain — the eve of the Celtic New Year. Samhain is the time for telling stories, and for remembering the dead, especially your relatives and loved ones. It is a time when you might just bump into the ‘lanashee’.

“There is only one lanashee, and she seeks the love of mortal men. She entrances them with her beauty and her hypnotic eyes.”

“She is also to be seen combing her hair not, mind you, as a sign of anguish in mourning, but to attract a mortal man to look directly at her.

Her eyes promise each one fulfilment: the chance of being with her forever in Tír na nÓg, ‘The Land of the Forever



Figure 5: The Lenanshee with Hypnotic Eyes

Young’.

“The more you want her, so the story goes, the more she slips away. Most men, once they lay eyes on her and look into her eyes, can’t resist her.

Tír na nÓg

Their desire to be with her in Tír na nÓg becomes so great that they languish and sometimes even die waiting for the love of the ‘lanashee’.

No wonder we are told not to stare at people — it sounds

as though staring could be dangerous.



Figure 6: Lenanshee Brushing her Hair

With a barely audible, but characteristic, “Now,” she goes on, “the lanashee is the one who deliberately drops her comb so that an unsuspecting young person might pick it up. If you do, she will come to reclaim it, trap you in her gaze, so it is said, and you are lost.”

Auntie Mary looks closely and intently at each one of us. She wags a warning finger

“That’s the reason why, in Ireland, we don’t go round picking up any lost combs.”

More knowing nods, this time from all of us in her audience.

“But if you do refuse the lanashee, she will become your slave and want to remain with you.”

Auntie Mary nods slowly to emphasize the sudden twist

in the story. And I have a strange feeling she is looking at me. But I keep staring safely straight into the fire.

Does that mean you can turn the tables on the lenanshee? Do you avoid her eyes? How do you do that? How do you know if someone is the lenanshee?

The banshee is obviously the spirit of death. That much I have realised. But is the lenanshee the spirit of love and romance? I am full of questions. This is all too exciting.

“But that is another Story.” says Auntie Mary cutting short my eager attempt at a question by buttoning her lips with her forefinger. I wonder why? I am so disappointed.

“So the lanashee is not like the banashee who, as we know, vanishes when people appear.”

Auntie Mary has changed track suddenly. The lenanshee has well and truly vanished from this story.

Telling her Future

In the telling of her stories, Auntie Mary plays any part with flair. But, she seems to take a special shine to the part of her banashee, or is it her lanashee? She looks so convincing as a tantalising, female ghost — as she combs her own long, flaming red hair.

I have come to realize that Auntie Mary doesn't let the small matter of fairy identities get in the way of a good story.

Or perhaps that is the way the Irish stories go — you are left to decide for yourself which storyline you are going to run with. Or, more likely, your own fears and fantasies decide for you.

After a final sip of her tea, Auntie Mary gazes into her

future displayed in the pattern of tea-leaves at the bottom of her cup, and heaves a resigned sigh of disappointment.

Her luck hasn't changed since yesterday; a win on the football pools is not in the tea-leaves this week. I could have told her that without the tea-leaves, (and told Mum for that matter).

I wonder why she doesn't consult the tea-leaves before she posts the coupon and save herself the money for the bet.

But, without fail, she will still check her Vernon's coupon come the Saturday football results at five o'clock.

And perhaps that's it: finding how close she comes to *not* getting the magic eight draws, twenty-four points and a seventy-five thousand pound jackpot, is what it's all about. I'll never really understand.

The Stone at the End of the Lane

Another refill from the teapot, the explanations of the Fairy world over, the lenanshee abandoned for another time another story, Auntie Mary keens on to her young Irish princes and princesses,

*“The summer's gone and all the roses are dying
'Tis you, 'tis you must go and I must bide.*

“Like a ghost, shimmering in the moonlight, the banashee sits on the stone at the end of the lane in Johnstown, Waterford, where your Nanny and Grandad live.”

Suddenly, the story has moved in closer to us — the ban-shee is almost in our backyard.

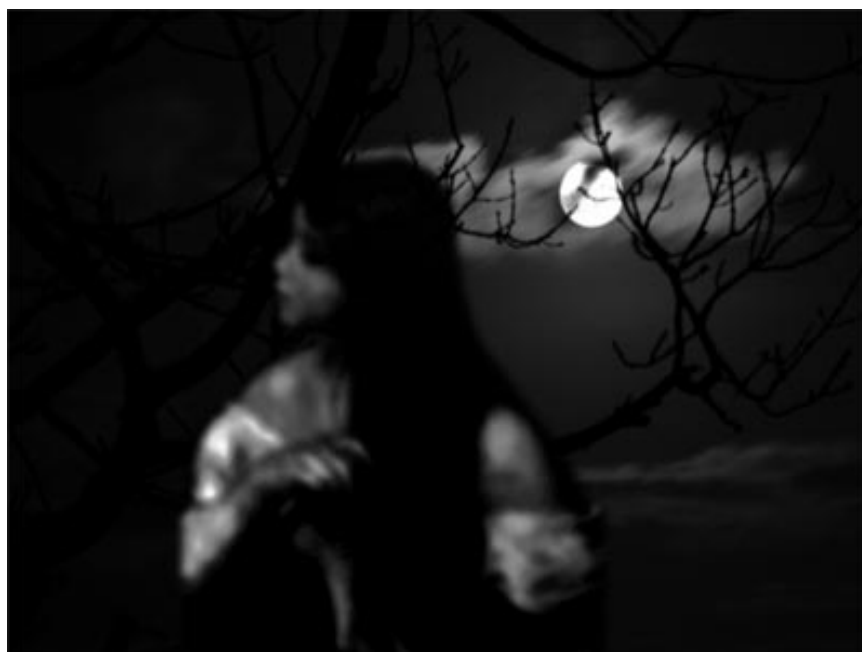


Figure 7: The Banshee Brushing her Hair by Moonlight

“She combs her long, flowing, shining locks, enticing any unsuspecting passerby to come and behold her.”

Of course, Auntie Mary knows full well we all know the stone she is talking about: it is a small pillar we like to sit on. We play games there of ‘run-outs’ and ‘it’, and the stone serves as our ‘home’ base.

We have never known it before as a ‘fairy-mound’ for the banshee, but it is not hard to imagine her taking up residence there after dark.

Auntie Mary’s comb slips artlessly from her hand and onto the floor in front of us. She smiles and gives us a look as if inviting one of us to pick it up. There’s an expectant pause, a few knowing looks, but we are far too street-wise to fall for that one. Besides, we are royalty. It’s beneath us.

She smiles again, not quite the Mona Lisa smile, just a hint of mystery and mischief playing on her face. She picks it up herself with a glint of satisfaction in her eye: that we

have learned the lesson of ‘combs that go astray’.

Mary Kate O’Brien

“If you hear her eerie, ghostly wailing at night ... ” Auntie Mary throws a thin, barely audible wail into the distance. Her mimicry, pitch perfect, sounds too much like it might be the real thing, and sends shivers down my spine.

“... she is warning you that somebody close by, whom you know, is about to die.”

Well at least, if I hear the banshee, it is somebody else who is going to die. Not me. But then how close is close by?

“One night, many years ago, so they say, Mary Kate O’Brien, who lived a few doors down the lane from your Nanny’s, heard strange but beautiful singing coming from the entrance to the lane — where the stone is.

“She went to look, but by the time she got there, the singer had vanished. She walked round the corner and up onto the bridge which spans the river, and took a look downstream. It was low tide.

“She could see a glowing light just above some rocks by the steps across the river from the little wall at the end of the turn in the lane. When she returned to the lane, she came up to the wall to get a closer look, but the glow was no longer there — only the sound of the water rippling around the rocks as the tide rose.

“The very next night her husband, a healthy young man, was drowned and his body found lying across those very same rocks by the steps where she had seen the glowing

light. There was no apparent reason for his death.”

The kitchen is silent apart from the odd flicker from the fire. We are finding it hard to take in this part of the story. The words ‘healthy young man was drowned’ and ‘no apparent reason for his death’ trigger uncomfortable mixed sad feelings in me.

‘Will-o’-the-Wisp’

“Afterwards the ‘knowing people’” (just about everyone who lived in the lane), “sat on the wall together and were soon persuading each other that it was the banashee Mary Kate had heard the night before.

“And her neighbour, Maggie, with sixteen children and not a tooth in her head, stage-whispered, ‘The glow that she saw from the bridge was surely the ‘Will-o’-the-Wisp!’ They all nodded in certainty — and that clinched the truth of the story.”

Auntie Mary pauses, and asks

“Do you know what the ‘Will-o’-the-Wisp’ is?”

We shake our heads. She takes a cigarette from her packet of ten Woodbines (her favourite) and grips it between her lips. She talks on with the cigarette now stuck to her bottom lip,

“It is a magical, flickering flame . . .

She strikes up a red-tipped Swan Vesta match. The match, held well away from her, flares noisily, and we wait, taking in every detail, as she lights up and draws deeply on the cigarette. She inhales the blue-grey tobacco plume that we glimpse in her mouth for a moment; she holds it down in

for a few seconds, and exhales slowly the paler digested smoke. She continues,

“a magical flickering flame, tinted blue, usually to be seen hovering over water; it goes out suddenly.”

Instantly, Auntie Mary snuffs out the dying flame of the match between her thumb and forefinger. She looks at us as if she has just pulled a rabbit out of a hat.

“The Will-o’-the-Wisp appears when somebody is about to die. It is another well-known warning of imminent death.”



Figure 8: ‘Will-o’-the-Wisp’

Auntie Mary decides, at this point, to leave us with our imaginations working overtime; to let it all sink in. She takes a long sip of her tea, a puff on her cigarette and passes round her precious tin of tea-biscuits.

A buzz goes around us by the fire as we munch the dry biscuits. We scare ourselves silly, when someone points to the elusive ‘Will-o’-the-Wisp’ dancing in the blue and yellow flashes hovering over the glowing coals in the fire; but

we agree that we have never seen anything like that in *our* stretch of the river. But then who would want to?

A Friend of the Family

It *is* our stretch of the river. Nanny and Grandad have sat with us on the wall to enjoy the beautiful view over the river, with swans coasting at high tide, and gliding across to us at the wall to snap up the stale crusts we have saved for them. ‘Walking the plank’ along the length of the wall is still a common dare for us — when adults are not around. We all know the bridge, and have paddled, or swum at high tide, across the river from the wall to the steps.

Has this place we love and know so well changed because we have heard that the tragic events of the story took place there? Is it haunted now? I don’t know. Perhaps.

It doesn’t escape our notice that Mary Kate belonged to one of the famous Irish families, the O’Briens — a name common enough in Waterford and in Paddington.

Mary Kate too descended from Brian Boru. Was she, therefore, we wonder, related to us? Was it *our* family banashee they were talking about?

As if reading our minds, Auntie Mary goes on,

“It isn’t that people think our banashee is evil; in fact, she is a friend of the family. It is just that she has this extraordinary ability to foretell death. And people there claim to have heard her singing from the end of the lane on different occasions, just before a death in their own family.

“Everyone, but everyone, is curious to know what our banashee sounds like, but you wouldn’t really want to hear

her wail or sing. Would you now?”

Auntie Mary teases us with more than just a twinkle in her eyes; eyes that change colour and pattern like a kaleidoscope.

There is no need to answer her question. We already know what a banshee sounds like — we have Auntie Mary.

Auntie Mary

Auntie Mary has a final flourish:

“Now, it was a very sad blow for Mary Kate losing her husband and all; but, she was lucky in one way. Because, when she went looking for the singer by the stone, she didn’t run into the banashee.

“And here’s why she was lucky: if you do see the banashee, and she sees you — if your eyes lock — it means that **you** are about to die.”

Auntie Mary’s last line is enough to make me choke on my biscuit. Obviously, there’s *no* chance of turning the tables on a banshee. And how do you tell who is a banshee and who is not?

Afterwards, I find myself deliberately not looking in Auntie Mary’s direction. Over the next day or two, I steer clear of “Auntie Mary’s”; and I get to thinking:

Auntie Mary with the beautiful, flowing, red hair;
Auntie Mary who is often dressed in green;
Auntie Mary who has the gift of Story-telling;
Auntie Mary who has dropped the dreaded comb:
Auntie Mary who foretells the future in her tea-leaves;
Auntie Mary wailing as though she is at a funeral;
Auntie Mary with the changing, colourful, hypnotic eyes;
Auntie Mary combing her hair (in the shimmering moonlight);
Auntie Mary sitting (on that stone).

there is the **banshee**;
there is the **lenanshee**;
and then
there is **Auntie Mary**.

Epilogue

... afterwards, along with my appreciation of the story and its affirmation of our childhood experiences of Ireland, come different emotions: my almost unaware feelings for my dad, his death in the war and his absence from our lives were touched and stirred by the story.

Also for me, it put the taboo subject of death on the agenda in a very Irish way; although there was no mention of my father.

And, probably unknown to Auntie Mary, it helped me to begin to recognise, and, much later on, to engage with and resolve some of my feelings arising from my father's untimely death.

