

# This Mortal Boy

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## Chapter 1

October 1955. If Albert Black sings to himself he can almost see himself back home in Belfast, the place where he came from. He begins it as a low hum in his head, but words start tumbling out louder and louder *I am a wee falorie man, a rattling roving Irishman*. He's not sure what falorie means, but his da has told him he thinks it's about sorrow, which at this very moment he is feeling. A falorie man is harmless, just likes a bit of mischief, his da had said. Shut up, Paddy, a voice shouts, and other voices start clamouring in unison, Shut the shite up, Paddy. *I can do all that ever you can*, he sings. Shut up, not really meaning it for him, it's just something to scream about when men are locked in stone cells behind steel doors, they shout and they scream day and night and their voices are the one thing they have, their voices that the warders can't control. *I can do all that ever you can for I am a wee falorie man*. The trains that run past the west wing of the prison have been rattling all night, first the express that runs down south, then the goods trains, their long banshee wails trailing behind them. The morning train passes and

he raises his voice louder and louder to drown it out. *I'm a rattling roving Irishman* like it's a yodel now.

'No you're not,' the man in the next cell calls, 'you're a no good ten-pound Pom, why don't you go back where you came from?'

That's me, Paddy thinks, as he straightens his clothes out as neat as he can, for there are no mirrors in this cell. Neither fish nor fowl as far as these men are concerned. He speaks like an Irishman, he calls himself an Irishman, but he's from that No Man's Land that calls itself the United Kingdom. But it's there, Sandy Row, Belfast, the street crowded with shops and life and people going about their business. He's no culchie. There are said to be one hundred and twenty-seven shops in the Row, although he's never counted them. The corner shop with all the items of groceries his mam buys to make their tea, the rag shop, the barber's shop, the pubs where his da spent money they didn't have. There's the picture theatre and the butcher and the sweet shop and the stall that sells double-decker candy apples with coconut on top. Funny how you can go from one place to another in the blink of an eye. There's the chance, in the situation he now finds himself, he could be sent to the gallows. He sees himself standing on a platform, the audience waiting for the last act of the play. The platform will actually be a trapdoor. He will be fit and well, standing up straight, the next minute he'll be down the way, dropped from one level to the next, in a different state, that of the dead. That's what he'll be doing, going from one world to another, his past and his future all rolled into one. All the people in this play will still be alive, but he might not. Who is to know what will happen next?

He allows himself a pace or two back and forth, puts his eye to the slit in the door. The cell, around ten feet by six, consists of a slatted steel bed screwed to the floor, covered by a mattress of canvas and straw that still stinks from the piss of the last man who

slept on it; a bench with three shelves where he keeps his notepaper and a book, the cigarettes his friend Peter in the south has sent to him; a bucket to shit in that is due to be taken away, but the man who collects it is always late, as if the task that lies before him must be delayed for as long as possible.

And sure enough, as he sets his eye to the aperture, there's an officer coming, the one called Des, a skinny little man with an out-thrust jaw, keys dangling in his hand. He lets Albert pass through the door, hands him his tie. They haven't given it to him in the cell in case he strings himself up. He's not ready for that, not yet. He fumbles a Windsor knot as he is hurried towards the outside world.

'Good luck, Paddy,' someone calls from the floor above, the rancour gone.

The Supreme Court in Auckland has a high arched dome made of timber, with splendid curved windows on either side of the room. It's said to have been built in the design of Warwick Castle but, handsome as it is, which part of that sprawling edifice it's meant to represent is hard to discern. There is no moat and no tower, although the courtroom is illuminated by a grand chandelier with royal decoration on its rim, like the edge of a crown. Behind the judge's bench hang the flags of the United Kingdom on the left-hand side, and on the right that of the 58th Regiment, presented in 1845 to the inhabitants of Auckland. It says so there on the flag. The dock stands in the centre of the room, almost close enough for the accused to reach out and touch the jurors seated in padded red leather chairs; the jurors sit face to face with the Press Gallery on the other side. There are chairs behind the dock where the public may sit, and above that a mezzanine floor where there is more space for the audience. It's called the Ladies' Balcony, although lately women have been admitted to the main gallery. The whole court is crammed with spectators craning their necks as the

moment approaches for the accused to appear. On this day, the lower gallery is brimming with brightly dressed girls, their faces vivid with dark lipstick and blue eye shadow.

The jury has been sworn in and taken their places. Some of them are returned servicemen, others have missed the war because they were too young or too old. The foreman is called James Taylor, a bank manager, dressed in an immaculately pressed charcoal suit, a snow-white shirt and a handkerchief in his breast pocket, his tie striped gold and navy with a crest on it; he sits alongside Neville Johns, a man described as a company director, whose tie appears to bear the same crest, his face shaved smooth as satin. The two men seem to lean towards each other, although it may be that the proximity of Jack Cuttance, a butcher, sitting next to them, is drawing them closer. Jack's thick hands grip the rail in front of him. Beside him sits Ken McKenzie, the youngest on the jury by perhaps twenty-five years, his face bleached with anxiety so that the scars of healed pimples stand out. Then there is an accountant, a tiny man with large black-rimmed spectacles, whose fedora has such a wide hard brim it almost engulfs his face when he puts it on. Next there is a gasfitter with a hard mouth that curls with contempt, as if he had already judged the evidence he is about to hear; a shop assistant who sells men's wear at an upmarket shop in High Street, better dressed in his way than the businessmen, but different, his pale-grey suit jacket slim around his hips, and perhaps the youngest above Ken McKenzie; then a night watchman who has warned them he might have trouble staying awake during the day as he tends to doze off. He and the ticket seller who works shifts at the Civic Theatre along the road have nodded their recognition, as has another man who describes his occupation as a product distributor, which sounds very fancy but turns out to mean he is a grocer. A university lecturer who teaches Classics and wears not a suit but a hairy brown jacket and