



VINTAGE

THE MIDNIGHT CHOIR

GENE KERRIGAN

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About the Book

Sometimes, getting away with it is all that matters.

Dixie Peyton, widow of a petty criminal, is struggling to regain custody of her son. In desperation she seeks the help of controversial detective Harry Synnott, a man obsessed by his own interpretation of justice. But Synnott has other priorities. As he finds himself getting deeper into trouble, Dixie risks becoming a sacrifice on the altar of Synnott's career.

Meanwhile the police have arrested a blood-stained man. They seem to have chanced upon a murderer - now they need to find out who he killed. Ruthless gangland leader Lar Mackendrick is hunting an informer. And armed thief Joshua Boyce is about to rob a jeweller's shop. For all of them, as the pressure mounts and the choices become stark, getting away with it is all that matters.

About the Author

After seven non-fiction books, veteran journalist Gene Kerrigan received critical acclaim in Ireland, the UK and the USA for his first two novels, *Little Criminals* and *The Midnight Choir*. His most recent novel is *Dark Times in the City*. He lives in Dublin.

ALSO BY GENE KERRIGAN

Novels

Little Criminals

Dark Times in the City

Non-fiction

Round Up the Usual Suspects (with Derek Dunne)

Nothing but the Truth

Goodbye to All That (with Derek Speirs)

Hard Cases

Another Country

This Great Little Nation (with Pat Brennan)

Never Make A Promise You Can't Break

This book is dedicated to Elizabeth Lordan

THE MIDNIGHT CHOIR

Gene Kerrigan

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

Like a drunk in a midnight choir
I have tried in my way to be free
- Leonard Cohen

WEDNESDAY

GALWAY

It was just gone noon when Garda Joe Mills got out of the patrol car on Porter Street, looked up and saw the jumper sitting on the edge of the pub roof, his legs dangling over the side. Garda Declan Dockery was still behind the wheel, confirming to radio control that this was a live one. Looking up past the soles of the jumper's shoes, to the pale, bored face, Joe Mills was hoping the fool would get on with it.

If you're gonna jump, do it now.

Thing about people like that, they don't much care who they take with them. Mills had once worked with a garda named Walsh, from Carlow, who used to be stationed in Dublin. Went into the Liffey after a would-be suicide and the guy took him under, arms around his neck. Would have killed him if Walsh hadn't grabbed his balls until he'd let go.

The jumper was just sitting there, two storeys above the street, staring straight ahead. He looked maybe forty, give or take. The sleeveless top showing off his shoulders. Bulky but not fat. He paid no heed to the arrival of the police or the attention of anyone below. To the left of the pub there was a bookie's, and a motor accessories shop to the right and beyond that a branch of a building society, all with a trickle of customers. Passers-by slowed and some stopped. An audience was building. As Mills watched, several pre-lunch drinkers came out of the pub to see what was going on. Two of them were still clutching their pints.

Mills waited for Dockery to finish talking into the radio. He wasn't going up on that roof alone.

Thing like this, edge of the roof, all it takes is he grabs hold of you at the last moment, your arm, maybe, or the front of your jacket – and your balance is gone. You reach for a handhold and you're too far out and all you get to do is scream on the way down.

You want to jump, go ahead. Leave me out of it.

A man in his fifties, pudgy, balding and pouting, buttonholed Garda Mills. 'I want him off there, right? And I want him arrested, OK?'

'And you are?'

'The manager. I want him dealt with. That kind of thing – this is a respectable pub, right?'

Mills saw that the jumper was shifting around. Maybe his arse was itchy, maybe he was working on a decision.

'Oh, I dunno,' Mills said. 'Thing like this, you could have a lot of people dropping around to see where it happened. Tourists, like. Can't be bad for business.'

The manager looked at Mills, like he was considering if there might be something in that.

'I want him shifted, right?'

Dockery was standing at Mills's shoulder. 'Ambulance on the way. They're looking for a shrink who can make it here pronto. Meantime—'

Mills was thinking, traffic in this town, by the time a shrink gets here it'll all be over.

One way or the other.

Dockery was looking at the assembled gawkers. 'I reckon the most important thing is we cordon off down here. We don't want him coming down on top of someone.'

Mills nodded. That sounded like the sensible thing to do. Best of all, it was ground-level work. Dockery was already moving towards the onlookers when one of the drinkers said, 'Oh, no.'

Mills looked up. The jumper was standing.

Shit.

Mills said, 'We can't wait for the shrink.'

Dockery said, 'Wait a minute - there's—'

Mills was moving towards the door of the pub. He took the manager by the elbow. 'How do I get up there?'

'Joe—' Dockery was making an awkward gesture, caught between following Mills and moving the gawkers out of harm's way.

The manager, grumbling all the way, took Mills up to the top floor, where a storeroom led to an exit onto the roof.

Mills was trying to remember a lecture he'd attended a couple of years back. How to approach a possible suicide.

Reluctantly.

The roof was flat tarmac, with razor-wire barriers jutting out at a forty-five-degree angle on each side. The storeroom took up a quarter of the roof space at the back and there was a two-foot-high parapet at the front. Near the centre of the roof a green plastic garden chair lay on its side, next to a stack of broken window boxes and a couple of empty old Guinness crates. At the front of the building the jumper was standing on the parapet, arms down by his sides. Mills moved towards him at an angle, stepping sideways, keeping his distance. He wasn't going close enough to be pulled over, and he didn't want to startle the man.

From up here, the jumper looked like he was in his early thirties. Denim jeans, trainers and the dark blue sleeveless top. Well built, serious shoulders and biceps that didn't come from casual exercise.

Weights, probably steroids too.

What to say?

Mills couldn't remember much from the lecture, but he knew that there was no point arguing with a jumper. Logic didn't work. Whatever it was had got him out here it'd be so big in his mind that there wouldn't be room in there for reasoning.

Get him talking. Draw him out. Make a connection. That's a start.

Maybe ask him if he's got kids?

No.

Could be domestic.

Mention kids and I might step on something that stokes him up.

It was mid-April and Mills could feel the winter overhang in the breeze.

Down there, touch of spring. Notice the wind up here.

'Cold out here. In that top.'

Fuck's sake.

The weather.

The jumper stared straight ahead.

'You a regular in this pub?'

Nothing.

Should have asked the manager.

'You want to tell me your name?'

Nothing.

'Don't know about you, but I'm nervous up here.'

Mills was trying to remember something that the lecturer had said. About how, more often than not, the subject is using the threat of suicide as a cry for help. Offer a way out, show them that you care.

Okay, fella, I hear you.

Well done.

Point made. Help on the way. Quit while you're ahead.

Say hello to the men in white coats and they'll give you all the little pills in the world and by tomorrow you won't remember what was bothering you.

Or what planet you're on.

The jumper turned his head just enough so that he was looking Garda Joe Mills in the eye.

Jesus.

The man's blank icy stare was unmistakable evidence that this was no cry for help.

There's something mad in there.

The jumper held Joe Mills's gaze as he turned completely around until his back was to the street and he was facing

the garda.

Ah, fuck.

His arms still down by his sides, his heels an inch from the edge of the parapet, his expression vacant, the jumper stared at Joe Mills.

Now, he falls backwards, staring at me until he goes out of sight and the next thing I hear is the gawkers screaming and then the wet crunching sound that I'll be hearing in nightmares for years to come.

'Look, fella. Whatever it is - I mean, what you need to think about, give it time—'

Stupid.

Arguing - he can't—

The jumper stepped lightly off the parapet onto the roof. He stood there, chin up, his bulky tensed arms several inches out from his sides. After a few seconds he flexed his jaw in a way that made the tendons in his neck stand out. Then he took an audible breath and began to walk past Garda Mills. He was moving towards the storeroom and the door down from the roof.

'Hey, hold on—'

Mills reached out to grab an arm and the man threw a punch. Mills felt like his nose had taken a thump from a hammer. The jumper was turning sideways, instinctively positioning himself to block a return blow, but through the pain Mills was very deliberately suppressing his own urge to lash back. He was already ducking to the left, one hand snapping onto the jumper's right wrist, then he was twisting the man's hand and moving around him, keeping the arm taut, twisting it and pushing and the jumper made a *Hwwaawwh!* sound and Mills was standing behind him. The man was bent forward ninety degrees, immobilised by Mills's grip on his hand and his rigid arm.

Mills hooked a foot around the man's leg so that when he pushed the jumper forward he tripped and went down, his arm held rigid all the way. The anguished sound the

prisoner made seemed to come in equal measure from the pain and from the realisation that he had no control over what was happening.

Mills could hear footsteps behind him and then Dockery was reaching down and seconds later the man was cuffed, belly down on the roof.

Mills felt the elation rush from somewhere in his chest, spreading out right to the tips of his fingers, blanking out even the pain in his nose.

Did it!

Situation defused.

Every move totally ace.

If Dockery hadn't been there, Mills might have given a whoop.

He wants to go off a roof, there's always tomorrow, and to hell with him, but for now—

Gotcha!

Mills took a deep breath and Dockery said, 'Jesus, look at that.' He was pointing down at the man's cuffed hands.

Mills could see dark reddish-black stains on both hands, across the palms, in between the fingers. The dried blood was caked thick around the man's fingernails.

Dockery turned the prisoner over. There were darker stains on the dark blue top. There were also dark streaks down near the bottom of his jeans. The man lay there, quiet, like the fight had drained out of him in that short frantic struggle.

Dockery was looking at Mills. 'He's not hurt?'

Mills shook his head. 'Can't be his blood. And it's not recent.'

That much blood - someone was carrying a hell of a wound.

Mills looked at his own hands, where he'd gripped the nutcase. He saw a smear that might have come from the stains on the man's hand. He rubbed his hand on his trouser leg.

He bent and looked at the man's trainers. There were dark reddish marks ingrained in the pattern of the sole of one of them.

Might be, or maybe not.

Mills knelt, levered off both the man's shoes and held them by the laces.

Dockery said, 'What's your name?'

The man ignored the question. Lying on his back, cold eyes watching Joe Mills straighten up, there was a twist to one side of his mouth as though his face couldn't decide whether to scowl or smirk.

They got him to his feet and hustled him towards the roof doorway, from which the pub manager was emerging. As they went past, the manager poked a finger at the prisoner. 'You're barred, you are. You hear me? Barred.'

DUBLIN

On the way out to the Hapgood place Detective Garda Rose Cheney pointed out the house that had sold for eight million. 'Around here, the houses go for - what - pushing a million, and that's for your basic nothing special. One and three-quarters if they have a view of the sea, three if they back onto the beach. Any size on them at all and you're into four or five mil.'

Detective Inspector Harry Synnott wanted to tell her that he didn't much care about Dublin property prices, but this was the second time he'd worked with Garda Cheney and she was a bit of a yapper. If it wasn't property prices it'd be something else.

Cheney steered around a gradual bend and slowed down. 'That's it on the left, third one in from the end.'

It was a tall handsome house, glimpsed through a curtain of trees. Victorian? Georgian, maybe - Harry Synnott didn't know one period from another. Anything old that looked like a bit of thought had gone into it he reckoned was probably Victorian. Or Georgian. If not Edwardian.

'Eight million?'

'Eight-point-three.'

'Jesus.'

Rose Cheney snickered. 'Couple of rich men got a hard-on for the same sea view. Nice aspect, mind you. Worth maybe three million, tops. Not that I'd pay that for it. Even if I had three million. But the way the market is, I mean, place like that'd run to three million, there or thereabouts. But you know how it is, bulls in heat, and the bidding went up to eight-three before one of them threw his hat at it.'

Nice aspect.

Synnott wasn't sure what a nice aspect was, but it was apparently worth a rake of money. One minute the country hasn't an arse in its trousers, next minute the millionaires are scrapping over who gets to pay over the odds for a nice aspect. There were some who claimed the prosperity was down to EU handouts, others said it had more to do with Yank investment. There was a widely proclaimed belief among the business classes that they'd discovered within themselves some long-hidden spark of entrepreneurial genius. Whatever it was, the country had been a decade in love with its own prosperity and everyone agreed that even though the boom years were over there was no going back.

We might, Synnott thought, be card-carrying members of the new global order, but we're still committing the same old crimes. The working day had started for Synnott when he met Detective Garda Rose Cheney at the Sexual Assault Unit of the Rotunda Hospital.

Cheney had already interviewed the alleged victim and was waiting outside her room while a nurse did whatever it is nurses do when they usher visitors from a hospital room.

'Name is Teresa Hunt. Just turned twenty, doing Arts at Trinity. Family's from Dalkey, she has a flat in town. The doctor confirms she had recent intercourse, swabbed for sperm, so we might get something. She's not physically damaged, apart from minor bruising around her arms and thighs.'

'Who's the man?'

Cheney opened her notebook. 'Alleged assailant, Max Hapgood. They were an item some time last year, met again at a party a couple of weeks back. He called her a few days ago. Had a date last evening, ended up back at her flat, and you know how that one goes.'

Synnott shrugged. 'It'll be a she-says-he-says. How'd she strike you?'

'See what you think yourself.'

Teresa Hunt turned out to be a thin, wispy young woman who looked Synnott in the eye and said, 'I want that bastard arrested.'

Synnott's nod might have meant anything.

'You had a date,' Cheney said.

'I told you.'

'Tell the Inspector.'

The woman looked slightly resentful that telling her story once hadn't set the seal on the matter. She turned to Synnott. 'We had a date.'

'And?'

'We had a meal, a drink. It was good to see him again. I assumed maybe he was having second thoughts, you know.' She made a small dismissive gesture with one hand, like she was brushing away threads of illusion.

'You and he have a history.'

'It didn't last long - it was no big deal.'

Synnott heard something in her tone - perhaps it was a bigger deal for Teresa Hunt than she wanted to remember.

Cheney said, 'The relationship was sexual?'

Teresa nodded. 'We saw each other on and off, with other people - it's a small scene - but it tapered off. Then, when he rang, I assumed—'

Synnott sat back, let Cheney ask the questions. She did so gently but without skirting anything. There was no sign of the yapper now, just a capable police officer ticking off the boxes. Age of the alleged assailant? About the same as that of the alleged victim. He too was a TCD student. Business studies. Where it happened - in the woman's flat, on the floor of the living room. What time - between eleven and midnight. Yes, she asked him in for a coffee. Yes, there was affection, just a kiss or two. Yes, she consented to that. No, she didn't agree to have sex. Not in words, gestures or actions. Cheney took her through all the signals that meant one thing but might have seemed to mean another.

‘It wasn’t that kind of evening. It was hello-again, and that was that. I was happy to leave it that way. Then it was like he’d gone through all the right motions and it was time for the pay-off. He pushed me down—’

Again, Cheney methodically took Teresa through the moves that might have been taken for a signal of some kind. No, she’d just had a couple of drinks. Same for him, two pints. Yes, she had made it clear that she was saying no. Yes, she’d said the word. Again and again. Yes, she’d struggled. No, he hadn’t threatened to assault her.

‘I scratched him, his face, but he just laughed. He’s tall, strong.’ Quietly, with a twist of the lips. ‘Rugby type.’

‘Afterwards, what happened?’

‘It was like, he was just normal, smiling, trying to make conversation.’

‘You?’

‘I went into my bedroom. Then he left, called in through the door, said goodbye.’

‘This was about, what—’

‘We got home, I don’t know, maybe midnight, I wasn’t keeping track. He didn’t stay long.’

‘His car, yours?’

‘Taxi.’

A couple of questions later, Teresa went silent, her eyes and lips compressed. When it came, her voice was a hiss. ‘He – just – I was *nothing*. Like it was something he wanted to prove he could get away with.’ She wiped her eyes with the back of one hand.

Cheney said to Harry Synnott, ‘I’ll make the call’. They’d need Hapgood’s address, and they’d have to request a preliminary check to see if he had a record.

Synnott shook his head. ‘I’ll do it. You stay with Teresa.’

When Garda Rose Cheney came out of the hospital room, Inspector Synnott was at the nurses’ station, his mobile to his ear while he scribbled in the notebook that was open on

the desk in front of him. Two nurses were chatting loudly about something that had happened the night before in A&E, while a doctor stood by a computer workstation, bent over the screen, clicking a mouse.

When Synnott finished he and Cheney found a corner where they couldn't be overheard.

Synnott said, 'No previous. Hapgood has an address in Castlepoint.' He nodded towards Teresa Hunt's room. 'What do you think?'

'We may have a problem.'

'I thought she was impressive enough.'

'After you'd gone I went back over how they came to arrange the date. Seems Teresa wrote to him, got his address from the phone book. Suggested they get together.'

'What she said was that *he* rang *her* for a date.'

'He did, but before that – she bumped into him at a party, a week later she sent him a note. He rang her the next day.'

Synnott said, 'Well.'

Both Synnott and Cheney knew that rape cases can fall one way or the other when they come down to a conflict of evidence. This one could be made to look like a young woman refusing to let go of a passing romance, pursuing the man to a sexual reprise. Depending on the sequence of events, the elements were there to create a defence that when Hapgood walked away, having no interest in Teresa Hunt beyond a quick roll, she made a revenge accusation. With a case that weak it wasn't in anyone's interest to let it go as far as a charge.

Cheney said, 'It doesn't mean she's lying about the rape.'

'No, but if Hapgood's kept the note and if what she wrote is in any way juicy, that's it as far as the DPP's office is concerned.'

'It's still her word against his.'

'The state doesn't like being a loser. If the odds don't stack up the DPP will pass.'

The Hapgood place in Castlepoint was way over on the Southside, on the coast. They drove there in Garda Cheney's Astra. It was a big house, set well back, but it was on the wrong side of the road. No beach access. Rose Cheney parked the car and said, 'What do you reckon? Two million, tops?'

Synnott said, 'Depends on the aspect.'

The American tourist put his MasterCard back in his wallet and took the money out of the ATM. As he slipped the notes into the wallet he heard his girlfriend make a frightened noise. He turned around Kathy was pale and rigid, staring off to one side. The mugger was four or five feet away, a woman in – what? – her mid-thirties. Thin legs in faded blue jeans, a shabby red jacket too big for her frame. Her long hair was blonde, tied back untidily, she was blinking a lot and holding one arm stiffly down by her side. What the American tourist mostly saw was the syringe she was holding in that hand, the blood inside it a darker shade than the red of her jacket.

‘Give it,’ she said.

‘Take it easy, now—’

Neary’s pub, where the tourist and his girlfriend had had drinks the previous night, was across the street. Down to the right were a couple of restaurants, customers sitting at the windows, people coming out of a fish shop across the road, others crossing towards the specialist kitchen shop, no one paying attention. It was pushing lunchtime and fifty feet behind the mugger, at the end of the side street, the usual throng of Grafton Street shoppers flowed by unheeding.

The woman stuck her chin out. ‘You want the HIV?’

‘Just—’

‘Just fuck off – give me the money—’

‘Thomas—’ The American tourist’s girlfriend was holding out a hand to him. ‘Do what—’

The mugger said, ‘*She* can have it—’ She waved the syringe towards the girlfriend.

The man made calming gestures, both hands patting an invisible horizontal surface in front of him. Thomas Lott, the manager of an upmarket sandwich shop in Philadelphia, had been almost a week in Dublin, Kathy's home town, her first trip home in four years. Thomas had long ago decided that the sensible thing to do if ever he was mugged would be to hand over whatever money he had, and that was what he intended doing. He just wanted things to calm down.

No room in Kathy's parents' house, so they'd stayed in the Westbury. After six days in the city Thomas found Dublin bigger and less folksy than he'd expected. Lots of sandwich bars and coffee shops, just like Philly. Lots of tall shiny glass buildings to provide the sandwich bars with their customers, just like Philly. Just as many shopping malls as Philly, just as many overpriced restaurants and just as many dead-eyed shoppers. And now, it seemed, just as many muggers.

The mugger's voice had a hysterical edge when she hissed, 'Give me the fucking *money!*'

Across the street an elderly woman and her middle-aged daughter, both raven-haired and wearing fur collars and dark glasses, were staring at the mugger.

'Sure, OK—'

Thomas Lott felt the strap of his black leather shoulder bag slip down his right arm and his left hand automatically reached up to catch it. He saw the mugger's mouth widen, her eyes move this way and that and he knew that she thought he was trying something and he thought for a fraction of a second that he should say *No, it just slipped!* But there wasn't time, so he caught the sliding strap in his right hand and he swung the bag hard. As soon as he did he felt a dart of horror at his own foolishness – then he saw the bag connect, and the syringe was knocked sideways, flying out of the mugger's hand, and he felt a giddy rush of triumph.

Backing away, the mugger screamed a string of obscenities. Thomas Lott started towards her, but she was already turning, bent and running.

'Thomas!'

Lott gave up the notion of following the mugger. He roared, 'Stop her!' but she was already about to turn the corner into Grafton Street, slipping into the tide of unheeding pedestrians.

'Thomas.'

When he turned back, Kathy was standing very still, breathing heavily, like she was trying not to scream. Thomas Lott moved towards his girlfriend and he was within three feet of her before he saw the syringe, ugly against her dazzling white skirt, sticking up out of the front of her thigh at a forty-five-degree angle.

Stupid bastard.

All he had to do.

Stupid fucker!

Dixie Peyton's breath came in noisy gulps as she ran down Grafton Street. It was dangerous to run. Cop sees someone like her running – say goodnight.

To her left, a glimpse of a shaven-headed security man at the door of a shop, watching her, muttering into his radio.

Running, someone like me—

But the Yank – *fuck him* – might still be coming after her and she had to put some distance—

Half a minute later she ducked left, into a shoe shop. Two elderly women coming out of the shop stood to one side as she passed. They looked Dixie up and down and used their elbows to press their handbags closer to their sides.

Dixie stopped, aware that she looked out of place among the calm, well-dressed shoppers. She fought to control her breathing. She looked out through the shop window and saw a garda running awkwardly down the street. Youngguy,

moving too carefully to get up much speed, one hand holding his radio in place, the other touching his cap, glancing this way and that in search of the runaway mugger.

‘Hey, you!’

Dixie turned and saw a big fat bastard coming up from the back of the shop, his stare fixed on her, his walkie-talkie held at chin height.

She turned and hurried towards the door. Behind her she heard the big fat bastard shouting something, as if it was any of his fucking business.

The two old women were still standing just outside the shop, watching Dixie as she ran out. Then she could hear the barking of the big fat bastard as he used his radio to let the whole street know.

Dixie turned right and ran back up Grafton Street. If it was just a thing of running, she’d have no problem leaving the cop or any of the fat bastards standing. But with the radios it was like the cops and the fat bastards had threads linking them all together, sticky threads. No matter which way she ran she left a trace.

To vanish in the anonymity of the crowd she’d need to stop running. To stop running, she’d have to get far enough away from the Yank and the garda and the big fat bastard, and all the other security men and their net of sticky threads.

All she wanted was for this to stop.

Didn’t get any money. Keep it. Stick it where the sun don’t shine.

All a mistake.

Stupid. All the Yank had to do—

Leave me alone!

She’d made eye contact with the Yank’s girlfriend when the syringe hit her – *Jesus!* – talk about bad luck. Try that a hundred times, the fucking needle sticking up out of the prissy brunette’s leg, it’s never going to happen.

Ah, shit.

Twenty feet in front of Dixie.

Less than that.

One of the security men – tall guy in a black leather jacket, short haircut, chewing gum, was coming diagonally down the street, muttering into his radio, his gaze fixed on Dixie. She knew him. Potsy, something like that.

Dixie changed direction, headed straight towards Potsy, weaving through the shoppers. She saw Potsy stop and crouch, arms wide like he was a gladiator waiting for the lions to come out. Then – when she was three feet away from him – Dixie changed direction again and left him standing there like the gobshite he was, crouched, wrong-footed, one arm reaching hopelessly for her flying form, and she was past him and running towards the Westbury Mall and something hit her right shin hard, pain shooting up through her leg so that she screamed. Then her knees hit the ground, jolting her whole body, and she was rolling over onto her back, winded. She tried to sit up and she screamed as someone kicked her in the ribs.

'Bitch!'

It was the Yank, all excited, dancing around her, then Potsy was pushing him away and kneeling beside her. 'You OK?'

Dixie lay there, looking up. Everyone she could see – and there were dozens of people milling about – was staring at her. The Yank and Potsy, people standing around, people walking past, not looking where they were going, all of them staring at the woman sprawled on the ground. Curiosity in those eyes, excitement, contempt.

Leave me alone.

The garda was pushing his way through, younger even than she'd thought when she saw him first. He stood over her, making breathless noises into his radio.

Dixie's hands crossed in front of her chest, taking hold of the lapels of her red jacket, her fingers pulling the fabric

taut. She tucked her legs under herself and curled up, turning her head to one side. She could feel the cold rough surface of the brick footpath against her cheek.

Dixie closed her eyes.