

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Dancing with
Minnie the Twig

Mogue Doyle

About the Book

Rural Ireland in the 1960s: if you were a boy, you listened to Radio Luxembourg on the wireless, went hurling up the fields with your best friend and thought about what the big boys got up to with the girls. In particular your brother and his girlfriend Minnie.

You knew everything about the village where you lived, and everyone there. And Tony did; he was one smart boy, ready for anything - until the day he and his friend stumbled across a family secret that brought with it devastating consequences.

As in Pat McCabe's *The Butcher Boy*, this story is told in the funny, haunting and intensely convincing voice of a young boy who isn't quite ready to understand the things he sees. In a novel that opens with a funeral, Mogue Doyle brings a small community to life and gives us a picture of an Ireland that, for better or worse, is quickly disappearing. This is a book that lingers long in the mind after the final page has been turned.

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DANCING WITH
MINNIE THE TWIG

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BLACK SWAN

1

THE BELL STRIKES; The Church Shakes.

Vibrations fill the mountain village and spread beyond: out over the hall and on across Murphy's fields. At some point along the way, the sound loses its clanging and clanking and grows easier on the ear till, farther out, it changes into a pleasing sort of chime - almost musical. It goes out over Patsy Doran's vegetable plot, down along the valley, across the river and up the other side, past Mrs Rourke's house and our place; then over to where little Mikey Doyle lives - the house in the fields. And away, till it fades in the evening air over the flat townlands, where the big farmers live and the fat hangs off the cattle in the long grass.

When the bell strikes, few other things around here are more important: it must be obeyed. In school at twelve o'clock, right on the dot before the second gong goes off, the master and our class rise to our feet in the same big wave-burst, everything dropped ... Clang! I am the bell. Stop what you're doing right now. I am what matters most; listen to me. Come with me from this place and float with my chimes in the air, over the valley, across the flatlands and away, along to another valley the same as this one.

But, as anyone round here will tell you, the best place to listen to the bell is up the Blackstairs mountain, and the farther up the better, where the sound closes in, not by dribs and drabs on the wind but piercingly, like a baby's yells in the middle of the night. Come Fraughan Sunday in July, six o'clock in the evening, we all straighten our backs and stand rigid till the ringing dies away. We wrap calico

tablecloths, or whatever was quickest to hand at home that morning, round bundles of fraughans, bits of heather and stalks of grass, and plonk the lot into brown baskets. It's usually a race then, down the sheep paths and round the heather that scratches our bare legs, with our mad-dog shouting to pick up where the ringing left off. Fecking mountain! It would tear the legs of a young fellow without long trousers.

It's not a bad old mountain all the same. It has a great colour: deep purple, the exact same as the tart Mam makes from the fraughans I bring home - blueberry pie, she says, they call it over in America. The way the mountain range curves up and down, in big rolling sweeps, makes it easy on the eye; not like those great pointed needles you'd find in a magazine, scary-looking things. From up there, on a clear day in September, it's possible to pick out the Tower of Hook to the far south, the Wicklow Mountains to the north and, eastwards, the coast - only on a very fine day, mind. The flatlands of Carlow, good scallion-eating country, stretch away westward to the marble city of Kilkenny, where the game of hurling is only mighty.

Right under where the gap in the range is biggest and the sweep is at its lowest, my village sits on a shoulder, like a loose slate about to slide down a sloped roof and drop on someone's head. There's the hall, where the pictures are shown on Wednesday and Sunday nights. Murphy's own most of the village: the pub, the shop, three or four houses and the farm beside the church. The church, the tallest building in the place - despite competition from Murphy's hayshed nearby - sits tucked in against the butt of the hill. A path runs around its three sides, and all the graves are outside of that: a garden-ful of headstones and tombstones. Another path goes from the church door, through the graves, to the street. One long village street. Round the bend, at the far end of the street, is the school, Master Mooney's territory. And instead of headstones for a garden,

it has rows of grass and dandelions shooting up through the concrete, dividing the playground into patches. I could walk that place with my eyes closed, especially those steps leading down to the backyard where the shelter is. Codd's house beside the school is at a much lower level.

When the bell rings, Murphy's dog sticks his head in the air and starts to howl. His moaning, like the mountain range, rises and falls with each clang, and ends only when the ringing ends. That fellow is as old as the hills, and nobody round here can recognize what breed he is. I can't remember a time when he wasn't mangy, or didn't have a scabby backside with his magairle puffed out. Yet his tail is always in a loop over his back. A pure beggar, he's forever outside Murphy's shop, waiting for tidbits from people, and likes to have his food handed to him, mind you: won't touch any scrap just thrown on the ground. A wooden block, one time, had to be tied from his neck; he'd taken a fit of chasing cars passing on the street. That soon changed his tune, knocking the bad habit out of him. The block was removed though, because it was dinting the doorway every time he went into the pub. When missing from outside the shop, he's usually in the pub next door: wide eyes staring up into old lads' faces, looking for porter. All the same, there's something likeable about the mangy old brute. Maybe it's because he's as much part of this place as the schoolyard, the graveyard, the mountains and ... It's my place, and I like everything that goes to make it up. Well, almost everything.

In our village, the priest's housekeeper, old Mrs Brennan, is the bell woman. It's great watching her in action. Out she comes, always at the right minute, tearing along the pebblestone path from the priest's house to the side. Out through the gap in the high hedge and up to the church gable, at such a pace as might take her through the wall without stopping, though she always manages to pull up in the nick of time. Black dress, black stockings, black

shoes and a black hat over a grey bun. Sergeant Major Mrs Brennan unties the rope knot and starts to tug downwards, unleashing an almighty power. Her knees bend, her hump sticks out and she is off pulling like a Trojan. The clapper falls, the bell clangs again and the village shakes. One of these days, that woman will have the church gable down round her ankles. Without Mrs Brennan, time in this place would surely stand still.

This evening the bell is ringing for a funeral. Right now, that funeral - a hearse, the crowd walking and two black hackney cars behind - is no more than a couple of hundred yards from the village. Most of the people who are not walking behind the hearse have already arrived here in the street, and are waiting. Old women in black, who love occasions like this, stand outside the church door at the end of the path through the headstones. The men stand in twos and threes chatting along by the wall, on the street footpath. I'm going to go over to one group, where there's bound to be some bit of a laugh.

Heading into the bad weather again, men, are we? says one fellow.

Surely not looking the best this evening anyway, says another.

Are you blind or what? I say to them. The sun is shining: is that not good enough? But they just ignore me. Always the same story around here: nobody wants to listen to what young lads have to say.

The rain's not too far off anyway, says Long Bob; the mountain she looks horrid near. He turns the head sideways to check the Blackstairs over his shoulder. You'd think the Blackstairs was going to move in and give him a clatter, the way he cranes his neck, looking back. Horrid near! When did Bob ever before notice anything, whether it was *horrid near* or not; except for, maybe, a basin of boiled spuds sitting before him on the table. Talk about eating!

The man was born to eat; still not a pick on him to show for it. Eating, and then chasing young lads out of his yard: lads like us, who'd only ever go in there to get back their ball. Well, that's Long Bob for you.

Oh no, the bogey-man himself has just landed. Patsy Doran comes strutting like a hen - more like a fecking bantam cock - across the street on to the path, and joins the group. See how careful he was, the way he parked his nice grey Anglia. How long has he got that one for now? That fellow had a car when nobody else in the area had one. Has to be said, he thinks more of that old jalopy than he does of anything or, for that matter, anybody else. Just look at the grey leather seats and the dash: he has them spick and span, boy. Wouldn't I love, right now, to get my hands on that steering wheel and go vroom-vroom up and down the street. Hey lads, would yous like a spin in my new car? Sorry, I've changed my mind; I don't give lifts to mangy old fellows who refuse to listen when I've something to say. Then I'd drive like hell through the next county; with nobody for company but Murphy's scabby-arsed dog, sitting up in the front seat, checking every village we'd pass through for church bells to give out to. Off we'd roar as far as Kilkenny to watch a mighty game of hurling; then drive through those marble streets, and we'd not come home till the small hours, headlamps full on.

How long more do you think it'll be before the funeral gets in? Doran asks.

Oh, I don't know, due in any minute now; but then again, these things always run late, don't they? says Long Bob.

That fellow, Patsy Doran, gives me the creeps. And no wonder, with what has been happening around here in the last while.

Vronnie Byrne is after stepping up there on to the far end of the footpath on the street. Hey, clear the way, lads, here she is; and no sneering now either, not till she passes. The thing about her - aren't there so many things about old Vronnie - she's so bent over, she looks like a tradesman's square when she's walking. She'd want to be sitting down for the top half of her body to be straight upwards facing you. When you're talking to her, she has to tilt her head sideways to look up at you with those big round searching eyes of hers - like the eyes in an oil painting that follow you around the room - and they appear so totally out of place there with the rest of her body.

Yes, here she comes now streaming along: head first, arms stretched back along by her sides and the long bony fingers crooked up to the sky, like the claws on a bat. All the men stand in by the wall, or step off the path altogether, to give her a good wide berth as she passes.

Another thing about Vronnie: she knows absolutely everything that goes on in the place. Every fit fart that happens, each scrap of information that ever was about anybody, she has it in there all stored up, ready and waiting. Her lower lip slides down off the outside of her upper lip, her mouth opens wide and her eyes bulge and flicker when she gets something new on you. She's like some exotic red and green species of bird gawping out from the cover of *National Geographic* - Master Mooney brings bundles of them to school, and gets us to cut out the pictures for sticking on the wall when an inspector is due. And boy, will Vronnie slap it up in your kisser then, the next time she sees you - but not before she's told half the country.

Vronnie can't help it though. It's just her nature to fatten off gossip and dole it out to everyone she meets. And she's not beyond capable of doing a spot of exaggerating, or spreading a few lies, about anyone who crosses her or she doesn't happen to like. There's many a brave fellow as

starts to get queer fidgety when that one's shape appears over the horizon.

I see Red Bill has his hand up to his mouth as Vronnie passes. He leans over to Patsy Doran beside him and is about to say something, but waits till she's gone a few feet past hearing. It must be something worthwhile - coming from Bill.

That'll be some crooked tree they'll cut down when old Vronnie kicks the bucket, he says in a low voice.

Why's that? says Doran.

To make a crooked box for her, of course. Keeping a straight face, Bill asks: Tell me, and you being a smarter man nor me any day of the week, would you be able to fit her into an ordinary straight coffin? When you'd lay her head back, her legs would fly up in the air; push down her legs and her head would pop up, looking at you face on.

The men nearby try to hold back the guffaws. Can you imagine then the problem for the poor old priest? says Bill, cocking out the chest as he swaggers out on to the middle of the path, pouting his lips and with his thumbs stuck in under his gallowses, mimicking Father Breen. He'd have to write one of them great episcopal letters to the bishop, says he, as he spits on the road for effect.

My dear eminent bishop, we have a *dialimma* here: what are we to do with her? How will we bury her? Will it be feet up, or sitting up? Please reply by return of post, as she is starting to *dicay*.

Patsy Doran faces into the wall, hiding the snigger.

Oh, you better watch yourselves now, you smart bastards. Vronnie has better hearing nor you might think she has. But not showing any sign of hearing or heeding them, she walks along in her freshly washed wellingtons, right on up to the end of the path, then stops and gives a good look around. She takes a right turn in through the church gate, and on to where the black crones stand as

rigid as statues: for once not even talking, only waiting before they go into the church.

Long Bob, who can see over most people's heads, shouts: Here it is. Mrs Brennan kicks her way along the pebblestone path, appears through the gap in the high hedge and goes up to the church gable.

Clang! Silence comes down on the place again and settles around the churchyard, where the black spider women at last begin to disappear into the dark of the church. There's an extra stir outside on the street. The men along the path move out from the wall and fix their heads in the same direction.

Another clang: the second in the toll. And again, the silence settles. A long black motor appears around the bend in the road at the far end of the village, moving along at a crawl pace. A crowd is walking behind. All the men on the path, and the people standing across the street opposite the church gate, stop talking and go back into themselves; like hens going into the safety of their coop at nightfall to roost and shelter from foxes and things of the dark.

Clang! The engine under the bonnet chugs on, as the big black Dodge goes right up to the silvery gates of the churchyard and comes to a halt. The claps of the leather footsteps on the street behind the hearse linger on for just those few seconds longer. The air in the place is gone so still and heavy.

The poor little innocent waif; anyway, an awful thing to happen to a youngster, says Long Bob.

What do you mean *waif*? I shout.

A dreadful tragedy, says he.

An awful tragedy; the family's to be pitied really, another fellow says back to him.

A terrible thing altogether happening like that, a terrible thing, Long Bob says.

What are they going on for with this old raumaish? Ah, for feck sake, Bob, speak to me; or, as big as you are, I'll clock you if you don't give over with that talk. This is me here; I'm no fucking waif, whatever that is, and I'm not to be pitied either. Do you understand? I don't want your shagging pity, and I'm no more an innocent than you are, you miserable big hoor. Why didn't you stay at home, if all you're going to do is talk about me like this?

Ah, what's the use. He can neither hear nor see me. Kicking him in the shins is no good either. There's no point hanging around these lads, listening to such black talk. It's so blasted empty. Everything is so shagging empty and dark ... And the time between the single strokes is getting shorter.

Clang! The two hackney cars, carrying the family, have already stopped behind the hearse. A back door of the first car opens. Aidan gets out, walks around and opens the other back door. Ciss gets out. Aidan stands helping my mother shuffle her way off the back seat and climb out on to the street.

I want to see her eyes, but I can't, for her head is lowered. I want to catch her by the hand, like when I was little and we'd go off together visiting my aunt's - her sister - after dinner of a Sunday. I want to make her hear me, take away the trouble from her face and set everything right, like it must have been long ago, when there was only the two of them and Aidan. But I can do nothing.

Nearly like that evening way back; I was around seven or eight at the time. Me and little Ciss came home from school, and Mam wasn't there. When I didn't find her in the house - she'd generally be inside at that time of the evening when we'd get home - I went out around the yard looking for her. Up into the haggard - the small field beside the yard where the hayshed and ricks of straw are - and in around the shed, I'd go; then check up and down the road outside. No sign of her anywhere.

It was some sight, boy, when she arrived back in later on. Totally different she was: her mouth and gums were all bulged out, fat. She must have found the look on my face funny, for she started to laugh. But soon as she opened her mouth there was nothing but teeth, top and bottom. Big white new teeth where I'd never seen teeth before, except for the one or two old fag-stained fangs sticking out like leaning fence posts she'd had taken out months before. Lord, Mam, what's after happening to you? says I. She leaned forward, slapping her knees and bursting her sides, laughing at me with those new teeth of hers. She was talking funny as well. Sort of hissing her words out, like Humphrey Bogart lisping in the pictures below at the hall. It was a queer thing.

That new woman wasn't the mother I knew; it was real suspicious or something. Maybe we had one of those changelings in the house, a swapped mother, a queer old harpy there in her place trying to be my real mother. The shock and suspicion together was too much to handle; I ran like blazes out of the house. And all she could do was laugh. It took me ages to get used to her then.

Here now, it's hard to believe she's the same woman, she's bloody aged so much. Ah, and there goes all that black again: hat, coat, shoes and stockings. I wish she'd worn her woolly fawn coat; she always looked so snappy in that. Mam always loved the bright colours.

The people from the next car, little Jimmy and the two aunts, have already made their way out on to the street and are standing just behind the hearse. One of the aunts has her arm round Jimmy's shoulder, leaning him into her side. And they're dressed in black. Does nobody have anything to wear any more except black?

Back to the first car again. The front passenger door opens slowly, like as if it didn't want to open. Out gets - oh now wait for it, yes, now we're ready - the main man. Introducing the great lord and master, that big chief boss-

man, almighty leader himself, one and only ... rapatatap ... the old fellow. Where is the brass band? Ra ra diddle a ra ra. Bum bum. Ra ra diddle a ra ra.

And why must he be here, can anyone tell me? Why was he invited? After all, this is my show isn't it, my show for once? So I should have some say in this little matter of who attends and who arrives in bloody hackney cars, shouldn't I?

There are people I want at my funeral and people I don't want. Not many that I don't want, mind you, but he is one of them. Definitely not on the list. No special invitation for him. Why should anyone want their blasted enemy around at a time like this? No, no. He is out - kaput, finito - as far as I'm concerned. That bastard.

2

IN THE BEGINNING we weren't enemies, staring each other down across the battle line. It wasn't always a duel to the death between him and me. I can remember away back to the early days, to a time when I actually called him Dad. You could say we got on not too badly at all then. Was only in the last few years, I suppose, that things really went to the dogs.

One of my earliest memories - kind of half-dream, half-memory - was of him picking me up in his arms one night I was scared of the thunder. Used to be afraid of my life in the thunder. I'd run under the table, stick my fingers in my ears and close my eyes, for the smallest rumble even. When he spotted me huddled up there under the table, he reached down and picked me up in his big vice-grip hands. It felt safe in his arms. He stayed patiently with me for hours till the clattering and flashing passed over. After that, when there was thunder at night, we'd sit together and he'd count between the flashes and the claps, till I became fairly nifty at telling whether the lightning was near or not. Wasn't so afraid of the thunder ever after. He was a different man then. And it was a different world.

I remember another time. We were walking along the headland of a ploughed field one spring, and he was telling me the names of wild flowers, trees and about how God made all the things. There was a certain feel about it - one of those good-to-be-alive sort of moments - listening to him. He took his time and picked the right way to put things simply for me. Not that I knew then much of what he was on about, but what he said stayed with me and, when I