We travelled to court in the glare of the man who killed Dad...

by Catherine Fegan
Chief Correspondent

Mr Moonlight's family tell of their torment after five years of agony and 71 days in a Dublin courtroom

FOR 15 weeks, the routine was the same. At 4.30am, Michelle Ryan would wake, quietly creep out of bed and shower. As her four children, ranging in age from 13 to 13 months slept, she carefully prepared their lunches and neatly laid their uniforms out on their beds. From there, she made the ten-minute journey by car to her mother Mary's house in Meelin village, Co. Cork.

As the clock moved towards 5am, 70km away in Kilcrea, Co. Cork, her brother Robert was himself setting off, getting ready to catch a train to Dublin at 7am.

It would fall to his partner Leanne to ferry him to the station, along with two sleepy children the couple had to drag from their beds for the 30-minute journey.

As Robert boarded the train alone in Cork, his sister and mother Mary began their journey on the 8.40am train from Mallow to Dublin.

So off they went, Bobby Ryan's two children, off to the Central Criminal Court for the day with their mother, to listen as every detail of their father's despicable death was played out in courtroom number 13.

This part of their story is a part few think about — children and partners left behind, routines out of kilter, lives on hold. Day in, day out, for 71 days.

'We never got to see our children,' says Michelle.

'Their lives were upended. We would leave so early in the morning that they would be asleep and then when we got back in the evening, usually at about 8pm or maybe 8.15pm, the day was gone. We spent most of the day on the train.'

It's been just over a week since the longest murder trial in the history of the State came to an end. On May 1, after seven days of deliberations, a jury of six men and six women found Patrick Quirke guilty of murdering Bobby Ryan, a part-time DJ known as Mr Moonlight.

This week, as the sun beamed down outside their mother's home in Meelin village, Co. Cork, despite the quiet anonymity of being in Ireland's highest village, there was no escaping a different type of glare for the Ryan family.

As Mary sat on the step of her picture-postcard home, watching on as her daughter Michelle fondly regaled tales of their father, a silver-haired woman approached.

'I'm very sorry for everything,' she began, offering Michelle an outstretched hand and quietly passing on her regards. Robert was there too, standing proudly next to his father's van, the same silver Citroen that was found abandoned in Bansha Woods all those years ago when his father disappeared.

They say that when the person you love is no longer with you, you cling to the possessions they treasured most. Robert has his father's Mr Moonlight van. Michelle has his 'disco kit' as his children call it.

As they step inside the sanctuary of their mother's home, closing the door on the world outside, a new sense of calm descends. Inside the immaculately-kept house, with its modern decor and elegant furniture, Mary Ryan's freshly baked apple tart and scones are passed around with cups of tea. Michelle's youngest child takes centre stage. Dressed in pink, she crawls along the tiled floor blissfully unaware of the chaos that has engulfed her family for eight years.

'Nothing has really sunk in yet,' says Michelle, cradling a yellow mug full of hot tea in her hand.

Her brother Robert, sometimes seen as the quieter of the two, is sitting next to her.

'The hurt and pain will never go away, even though he is locked away, it will never go,' he adds.

For now, at least, the arduous daily journey back and forth to Dublin is no more.

'I never want to see a train again,' says Mary.

Like her children, her routine began early every morning, usually with her frying sausages to bring with her to make sure they had something to eat.

'I would meet Michelle over at her house in the morning,' she says.

'I made sandwiches to take on the train, the journey was about two hours. We would buy the papers and read them just to put in the time. There was no switching off really.'

Making the same journey to Dublin's Heuston station, in his case to take his seat in the accused bench every day, was Patrick Quirke.

'He always got on with his wife in Limerick Junction,' says Mary.

'Michelle and I would have been on since Mallow so we were already in our seats. One morning they sat straight across from us. They looked at the two of us and sat down. We just did what we do every morning and we just sat there and said nothing. When they saw us they could have moved on but they didn't.'

Michelle remembers the incident too.

'He (Pat Quirke) looked down at us and he sat in the seat across from us,' she recalls.

'It was very intimidating. We knew he was brazen and we knew we had to be strong and not react.'

Robert, travelling alone on the Cork train, would also come across the man who killed his father on his way to court.

'If we had to be in court early they would be on my train,' he recalls.

'I would be on my own, with my headphones on and if I saw them coming I would just look out the window. Sometimes I would peep out to have a look and he would be staring back.'

As the Ryan siblings think back on their daily pilgrimage to court, their mother Mary, perhaps the one woman overlooked in a trial that focused on relationships, leans quietly over the kitchen island, her head slightly bowed.

Herself and Bobby separated in late 2005 and she remarried in 2012, but she too, like her two children, was there in court number 13 every day.

'I was there (in court) for my children but I would have been going there anyway for Bobby,' she says, firmly.

'I would be there for Bobby, there is no way I wouldn't. We might have been divorced but that doesn't mean we ever stopped caring about each other.'

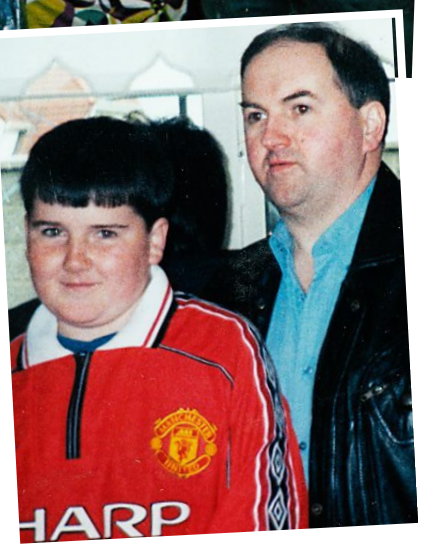
Mary, a petite, well-dressed lady with a warm manner and a wry sense of humour, was Mrs Moonlight for 19 years. She met the man who would later become the father of her two children on a night out in a venue known as The Rag, outside Thurles.

'It was a Sunday night and The Indians were playing,' she recalls, directing her words at her children.

'I loved The Indians. We were young enough at the time and my

'He looked down at us as he sat in the seat across from us'

Grieving family: Michelle and Robert Ryan with their mother Mary and (left) Michelle and her dad on a night out



Happier times: Together at Michelle's 21st and (right) Robert's Confirmation day

mother put a cousin of ours, Phil, in charge of us. Phil went to the toilet, he never let us dance with anyone and your father came over and asked me to dance.

'I went out on to the floor delighted with myself. Phil came out and tapped your father on the shoulder and said, "Who are you?" He said, "He could be anyone , you aren't dancing with him get back over there and sit down." Bobby said to me, "Do you know him?" I said, "I've never met him in my life.'"

The couple met again the following week and the rest, as they say, is history.

'When the kids were born, Bobby was delighted,' Mary recalls. 'He wouldn't have changed a nappy, but he was good with them.

'Shellie came first and when she was born I had to jump into the back seat. That was the way it was. Robert came along a year later and he was delighted to have a son.'

Mary, a healthcare assistant, recalls Bobby 'getting into DJing' but says she rarely went to see him perform.'The kids where young and I was at home minding them,' she says.

'The few times I did go I could see he was in his element. He loved music. He taught himself to play the guitar so he could perform with my brothers during the trad sessions.'

As couples often do, Mary and Bobby 'drifted' apart and decided

'It's the one thing that always torments me'

to split when Michelle was 19 and Robert was 18.

'It was a joint decision,' says Mary, emphatically. 'It was actually Bobby who said it to me and I will always remember it for the rest of my life.

'He said, "Do you know what? I don't know if the two of us have any business staying together" and that's the way he would put things. I said, "Jeez I think you might be right." And he was. We were more like friends than husband and wife at that point because he was doing what he was doing and I was doing what I was doing.

'We kind of drifted. There were no bad feelings.'

Later, as Robert and Michelle retreat to another room to have pictures taken, Mary walks into the nearby living room, where her granddaughter is playing on the floor.

'There are some old photos of Bobby in this folder,' she says, pulling them out from underneath a stack of newspapers detailing the trial.

'That's Michelle and him at wedding I couldn't go to,' she laughs, pointing at the photograph.

'That's Bobby with Robert on his confirmation day. That's myself and Bobby at my sister's wedding.'

They are all old photos, illustrated by the 1980s' hairstyles and the retro fashion, but it is clear that they stir up memories of a family that, once upon a time, knew nothing but happiness and laughter.

Mary, alone in her thoughts, quickly shakes herself and rejoins her children back in the kitchen, busying herself making tea and serving food. More newspapers, strewn across the kitchen table, show pictures of Mary Lowry, headlines with Mary Lowry, articles on Mary Lowry.

How does the other Mary, the Mary who really knew Bobby Ryan, feel about it all?

'The relationship didn't bother me,' she says.

'Bobby had told me about it and I remember saying to him, "Look Bobby, I am in a relationship and I have moved on."'

Evidence that came out in court, she admits, about Bobby and his new relationship with Mary Lowry, brought back memories of her own marriage.

'It took me back, yes, it dredged up all the memories we had together yes,' she says.

'It did, it did. But also...what I

'We are the ones carrying the guilt'

found that it did to me is that....if we had stayed together...he wouldn't be where he is today. That's the one thing that does play on my mind....in hindsight you can't go back, but it's the one thing that always torments me. If we hadn't broken up, he probably would still be here.'

Mary isn't the only one going over the past. Robert's partner Leanne, he says, regrets not taking Bobby up on his offer to sit in with her the night before he went missing. She was alone in the house with her daughter and Bobby later went to Mary Lowry's house, never to be seen again.

Michelle, in the same torturous vein, feels guilty for not seeing the danger her father was in. They know Patrick Quirke is the one who was found guilty, but they still carry the burden of regret.

'We are the ones carrying the guilt,' says Mary.

'We will have to carry that guilt and we will carry it. It is something that I think about all the time.'

Indeed, there is no escaping the legacy Patrick Quirke has left the Ryan family. They accept that their lives will never be the same, but they also acknowledge that many other lives have been destroyed.

'We know there has been a ripple effect,' says Michelle.

'I have a level of sympathy for Mary Lowry's children and Pat Quirke's children for what he has put them through too. I can't imagine what it will be like for his boys, having to say, 'I'm Quirke, I'm from Breanshamore." There is no escaping this for them.'

Looking back, the family admit that the final stages of the trial took its toll. They point to the daily return journey from Dublin as a barometer of how tense things got.

'We would spend the journey analysing,' says Michelle,

'Was there enough evidence there? Is there enough? It was a constant worry. We had so much tension building up. We used to have to remind ourselves that the DPP wouldn't have him there on a murder charge unless they had the evidence to prove it.'

Robert, who took the train home with his sister and mother, was struggling too.

'There were days in the train when maybe it wasn't a great day in court when we would be worried and there would be silence all the way home,' he says.

They would return to darkened homes, with sleepy children waiting up for hugs. For Michelle, it was in to a nightly routine of scrubbing floors and loading clothes into the washer. Her therapy, as she calls it. For Robert, it was restless nights, filled with worry and dread.

Verdict day, when it eventually came, would bring with it a tsunami of emotion they have yet to fully purge.

'It was hard to describe,' says Robert.

'If you could bottle that feeling... but there was no joy. It wasn't going to bring Daddy back, it wasn't going to make the pain or the hurt any easier, but there was relief.'

Next to Robert on the bench in the public gallery that day was Michelle, gripping her brother's hand tightly in one hand and her mother's in the other.

'I was shaking,' she says.

'We had waited nearly eight years and in 10 seconds that jury could rip us apart, leave nothing of us. Leave nothing. If they came back with a "not guilty" that was us finished.'

That night they came together in Michelle's house, with Mary's extended family and reminisced about the Moonlight days. Robert,

TURN TO NEXT PAGE

FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

however, retreated to the living room, alone with his thoughts.

They talked about the many difficult years that have passed since Bobby went missing. When he first disappeared in June 2011, the Ryan family spent every waking hour searching for him.

'Myself and Robert searched places the gardai wouldn't send horses, says Michelle.

'We searched and searched and searched. Fields, rivers, woods. We walked the roads, looked in ditches. It went on like that until October when the dark nights set in.'

In the intervening years, Michelle and Robert found it too difficult to remain in Tipperary,

'I believe he should die in prison'

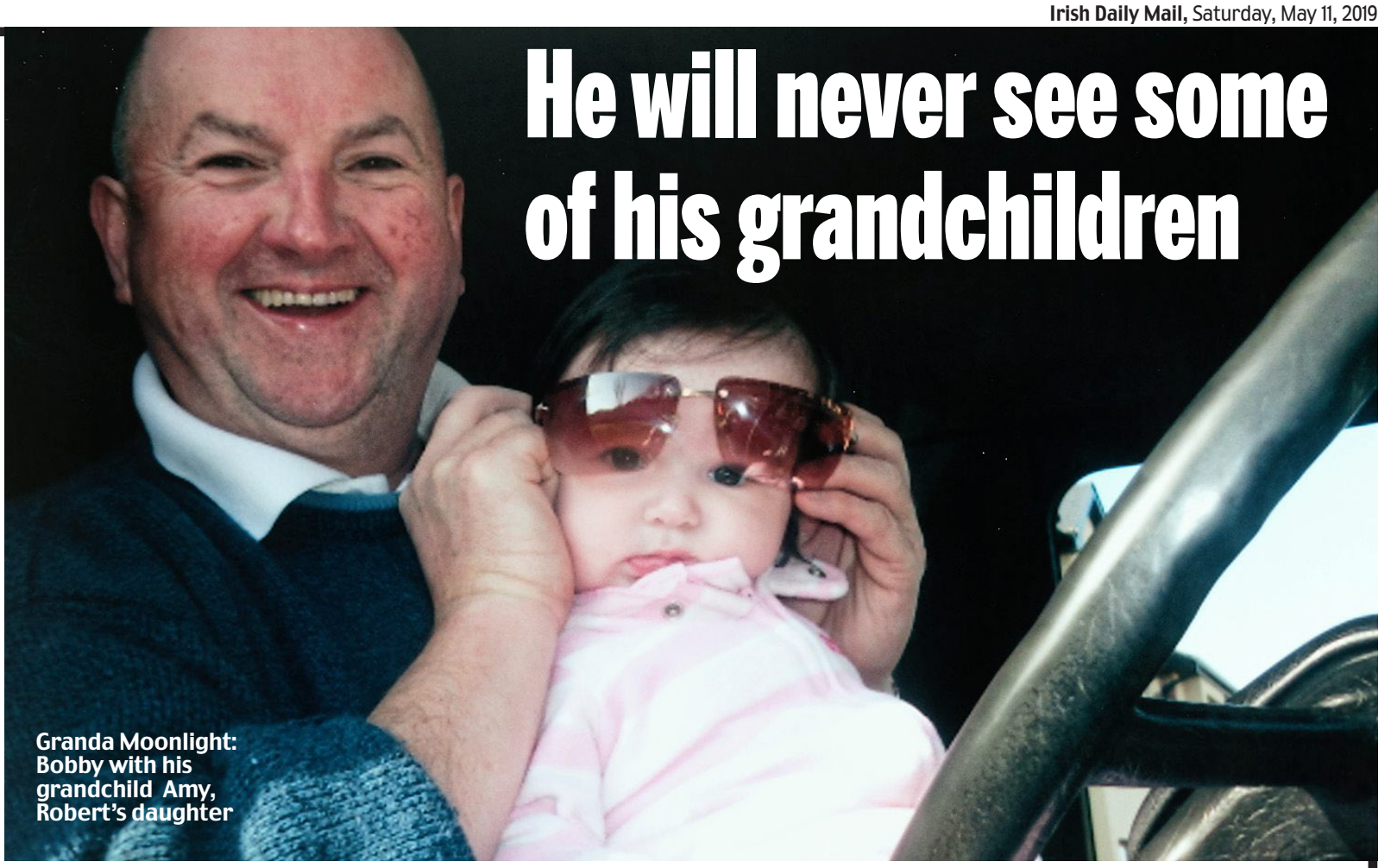
relocating to Cork to be closer to their mother. As time passed, with no sign or word of their father, life carried on. New grandchildren were born without him, something that is a source of huge pain for Robert.

'I found that hard,' he says.

'When Leanne found out she was pregnant it was very hard, very bittersweet. The thought of Daddy missing that was just so painful.'

As his eyes glaze over, a grief-filled silence fills the room, punctured by Mary. 'When you think about it,' she says 'Bobby would have loved being around his grandchildren. He would have gotten such a kick out of it.'

He will never see some of his grandchildren



Granda Moonlight: Bobby with his grandchild Amy, Robert's daughter

There is no bringing Bobby back. The Ryan family know it. They pore over hundreds of photos of 'Moonlight' — pictures of him with his guitar in Doolin, in his truck with one of his granddaughters at the steering wheel, behind his disco kit, smiling.

Their Mr Moonlight, always smiling.

They proudly talk of how much he did for them — Robert about how his daddy took him to Rosegreen Raceway every Sunday to watch car racing. About how he taught him how to drive and encouraged him to enjoy life.

Michelle, reminiscing about how he taught her to DJ and called her every day. Mary, chuckling about how bad he was at waltzing and jiving, but later improved.

'For us it is never going to change,' says Mary.

'We can't switch off. We get up every day and Bobby is on our minds. We go to work and he is on our minds. You might be thinking about him and you will just be overcome with emotion and burst out crying. That's how it is. You have a bit of a cry and you have to continue on.'

And so they talk about Moonlight, as the family call the man they have lost. They talk about him as much as they can. They talk about him in a desperate bid to fill the devastating void he has left in their lives. A void created at the hands of someone he barely knew.

Now that that man is behind bars, they are determined to make sure he stays there.

'The man did enough. He destroyed enough,' says Robert, calmly.

'He doesn't deserve any more. He is in the right place now and I believe he should die in prison.'

Michelle reiterates her brother's remarks, closing in on everything Patrick Quirke has taken from them as a family.

'We want life to mean life,' Michelle says.

'The rest of his days. You take a life, you get life. He didn't give Daddy a chance to see his grandchildren grow, to walk me down the aisle when the day comes, to be with his son, Robert.

'He didn't give him that chance. He played God on earth and he said, your time is up.

'Now his time is up.'

W SICK 'PROCLIVITY'

Facing judgment: Patrick Quirke and his wife Imelda arriving at court yesterday

him into a disused slurry tank on Ms Lowry's farm. The jury heard evidence that the tank was sealed shut and several bales were placed on top of it.

The State relied on evidence from the hard drive found in Quirke's home and on internet searches on the decomposition of human bodies. The evidence showed some of the searches were made prior to the death of Quirke's son, despite his assertion that his son's death was the reason for the searches.

The prosecution further relied on correspondence between solicitors regarding the termination of the lease and on background evidence of the financial relationship between Ms Lowry and Quirke

The court also heard of Quirke's alleged financial difficulties and demands for money. The State's case against Quirke was that as the clock was ticking down to his lease terminating at Ms Lowry's farm, he decided to draw water from a run-off tank on her property. The tank had never been used for that purpose and, according to the evidence of engineer Michael Reilly, it was porous and incapable of holding water.

Moreover, Quirke was one of only four people who knew of the existence of that tank and had exclusive access to it since 2008.

In interviews, he revealed that he knew the exact depth of the sludge in the bottom of the tank – one foot – and the approximate depth of the tank, at five feet.

This was something that could only have been known by someone who had accessed the tank.

catherine.fegan@dailymail.ie

No tear-filled eyes, no knowing glance... his lips never quivered

By **Catherine Fegan**
Chief Correspondent

IN the end, there was nothing.

No knowing glance toward his wife, no tear-filled eyes, no obvious acknowledgment that it was over. Nothing.

Patrick Quirke, as he had always been throughout his lengthy trial, was unflinching as the jury returned its guilty verdict.

His pursed lips, his slightly sullen expression never faltered for a moment, even when the Ryan family threw themselves into each other's arms, unleashing cries of relief and heartbreak that were audible throughout the courtroom.

Behind them, sitting at the end of the bench was his ever-loyal wife Imelda Quirke, staring towards the floor.

She too sat motionless, not lifting her head, even when the various members of the public sitting next to her began to gently pat her arm and offer words of comfort.

Imelda, the woman who had shown such remarkable stoicism

She too sat motionless

and steadfast loyalty through the weeks of her husband's murder trial, didn't even glance in his direction.

Her husband's sister was beside her too, visibly rattled by the news of her brother's fate as it sunk in. She reached for her phone, her hands shaking and frantically sent a text, as the room came alive with activity.

As Patrick Quirke was led out of the accused bench by two prison guards, his deflated legal team scurried behind.

Without warning and without uttering a word to each other, his wife and sister briskly rose to their feet, exiting the court room minutes later.

Once outside, in the circular corridor, Imelda bolted out in front, her head held high and her face scornful.

It would be the last time she would walk through the doors of courtroom number 13.

Her husband, however, would return 15 minutes later to listen to the victim impact statement of Michelle Ryan and receive his mandatory life sentence.

And for this part of the process he returned a noticeably different man.

Gone was his bright red tie, the one that had been tightly bound around his neck. Gone was his wife, the one who had never left his side during his ordeal. Gone was his pale-faced complexion.

Patrick Quirke, the convicted murderer, returned to court with a face mottled pink and red, an open-necked shirt and not a friend in the room.

Less than two hours earlier, as he set off for what would be his last lunch as a free man for some time, he skipped off down the stairs, chatting animatedly as his fate lay in the balance. By then, unable to reach a unanimous verdict, the jury had been offered a majority and still not returned. To all watching on, Patrick Quirke seemed remarkably confident.

Earlier, if the customary knock on the door from the jury ever came, few connected with the case actually heard it. While the jury was deliberating, another case, in camera, got under way and the room had been cleared.

Evicted from a courtroom they had spent over three months in, the Ryan family retreated to a private sanctuary. Meanwhile, the gardaí, the various legal teams, swarms of journalists and the assembled viewing public waited outside.

Just before 2.30pm, as the various parties connected with the in-camera case trickled outside, the room was handed back to the Mr Moonlight case. The verdict was in.

Outside, in the marble atrium that circles the fourth floor, detectives and members of the gardaí were milling around aimlessly and pacing the floor. As word trickled out that the jury were on their way back, there was an undignified surge towards the door. Within minutes the courtroom was jammed.

Just a couple of minutes later, Patrick Quirke strode back into the court. He sat down in his seat, his hands clasped and his head slightly bowed, staring intently at a spot in front of him. Breathing slowly and deeply, he waited.

After struggling to make their way through the hordes of people gathered in the courtroom, the Ryan family then took their seats, their faces showing the strain and tension they were feeling.

Around them the courtroom fell into a respectful silence, only broken by occasional whispers and the rustling of the pages of reporters' notebooks.

The tension in the room was conspicuous, people straining to see how Patrick Quirke was coping with the fact that in a very short time he would finally learn his fate. The Ryan family

An eerie silence fell over the room

gathered close, their faces grim, and their anxiousness plain for all to see.

Minutes later, the jury minder led the jury back into the courtroom. The chatter stopped and everybody stared. The foreman passed the issue paper, the page on which the verdict must be written, to the registrar.

For a room so packed there was an eerie silence – only punctured by the odd cough or whisper.

'Mr Foreman, ladies and gentlemen, you have reached a guilty verdict on which at least ten of you agree?' the registrar asked. 'We have,' was the reply.

And as Patrick Quirke was deemed guilty of murdering Bobby Ryan, an extraordinary calm fell over the room.

A collective exhale of breath was all that was heard from the row where the Ryan family were sitting. Wrapping their arms around each other, Bobby Ryan's two children, Michelle and Robert, cradled their mother, Mary.

Minutes later, as they rocked in gentle unison, their sobs enveloped the room.

In the accused bench, Patrick Quirke was motionless. Still just staring hard ahead.

HOW HE BECAME A KILLER: TRIAL PULLOUT, CENTRE PAGES

Irish Daily Mail

COMMENT

Law must be harsh on motorway ghouls

QUITE rightly, gardaí are doing all they can to trace anyone who took video or pictures of the fatal M50 crash on Thursday and then distributed those horrifying images to others.

For anybody to have decided that photographing such a distressing scene is nauseating enough; to then circulate such images plumbs the depths of human behaviour. We very much hope that those responsible are caught, and that the full force of the law is applied. And while their only offence might be stopping on the M50 or using a mobile phone while driving, the fact that they will be publicly shamed might also act as further penance.

Yet what we must remember in all of this is that these people did not actually publish this material. Had all of this happened 20 years ago, and had the ghouls been using normal cameras, the most they could have done was shown the images to a few friends. The world would not have seen them – and nor would the deceased woman's family or friends.

The reality is that these images were in fact published to the world by social media companies – notably Facebook and Instagram, which is owned by Facebook. It was these businesses which accepted the horrific pictures and video, and made them available to millions. That is what they do: they make money by publishing content which people will watch; they learn everything they can about the people who watch the content; and then they sell that information to advertisers.

If they wanted to, they could check the content before it is made public on their sites – but then they would have to pay people to do that, and so they would make slightly less money.

No other publishing business in this country works this way. Newspapers and broadcasters operate according to rigorous codes of conduct, which are set and enforced by external watchdogs such as the Press Council of Ireland or the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland.

In consequence, they employ teams of people to verify, examine and vet material before it is published. Occasionally, they make a wrong decision: if so, they are subject to the full force both of the watchdogs and the law.

Social media firms, however, have no such rules. Every day they publish material that is violent, sick or just plain untrue. They do nothing to check that material before they publish it.

If someone complains, they may take it down – or they may not. They are answerable to nobody.

This must end. We cannot stop individual idiots from committing appalling acts: but we can stop giant corporations which make billions of euro a month in profits from facilitating them.

We must regulate social media – and we must do it before any more lives are destroyed by businesses which publish this material to the world but then say: 'It's nothing to do with us.'

Stub out ticket touts

THERE was a time when enterprising individuals got up early, queued to get a few concert tickets and then sold them on for a profit – with the risk that nobody might want them and they would lose their money.

Now, ticket touting is operated on an industrial scale. And so while we are always reluctant to shackle the free market, in this instance Fine Gael TD Noel Rock is correct.

When we learn that tickets for the Ireland-England rugby match are being sold for €2,700, it is clear that action must be taken.

This practice should be stamped out, and we commend Deputy Rock for his efforts to do so on behalf of ordinary sports and music fans everywhere.

THEY WI

As Derry recovers from last week's car blast, the people of this once divided city are united in their determination to stand against those who want to drag their children into a new era of bullets, bombs and bloody mayhem

SATURDAY DISPATCH

by Catherine Fegan
CHIEF CORRESPONDENT

ALFIE McALEER apologises for his outburst as he takes a moment to settle his emotions. He is tucked into a corner of a two-sitter sofa in his living room, dressed in a striped dressing gown, gritting his teeth.

'Those two words,' he says, staring hard at the floor.

'Car bomb. They send shivers down your spine. There is no way we are going back to this. No bloody way.'

Alfie has good reason to be agitated. On Saturday night, his 14-year-old granddaughter was walking along Bishop Street in Derry's city centre when she passed a parked car loaded with explosives. Minutes later, the bomb inside the vehicle exploded.

'I couldn't believe my eyes when I watched the CCTV,' the 67-year-old told the Irish Daily Mail. 'There she was, my grandchild, inches away from a bomb and totally unaware. I mean, as a grandparent you worry about them going out and doing drugs or getting in a fight, but we are well past the point of worrying about this carry-on.'

There were no casualties following the explosion, despite the PSNI having a mere ten minutes to clear the area after a warning.

CCTV footage that was later released showed a group of young people, among them Alfie's granddaughter, walking past the car minutes before it exploded. Several other clips showed the car stopping outside the courthouse, the driver running away from the vehicle and then, a fireball engulfing the car and debris scattering all over the street.

THERE, in footage that was seen all over the world, it seemed like Derry had been catapulted back into the dark days of the Troubles. The bomb was later linked to dissident republican group the New IRA.

In some quarters, the timing of the incident, at a critical juncture of Brexit negotiations, was viewed as significant. Although the link was dismissed by the PSNI, fears over a growing threat from dissident republicans and a possible return to violence struck a sinister chord with many.

'Our granddaughter comes from a generation that has no experience of this,' says Alfie. 'This is not their world, not the way they live. We lived through it, we know the horror it brings and we do not want a return to it. The people in this city won't let it happen.'

It is Tuesday morning in Derry city. As Alfie and his wife Shelly speak with a tone of defiance, the surrounding community is slowly edging out of a state of shock.

Outside the courthouse on Bishop Street, the remnants of Saturday night – a charred and scorched kerbstone and a blackened imprint of an exploded car – garner little more than a passing glance from busy locals on their way to work. Nearby, on the same street, it was business as usual at the Holywell Trust, a charity that aims to foster better relationships and social transformation in the north west and across Northern Ireland.

'We can't go back,' says its director Gerard Deane. 'We have travelled too far along to allow something like this bring us back again. As an organisation, it's very frustrating. On Saturday, one of our partners held a workshop on dealing with trauma from the conflict. It finished up around teatime.

'That's what's happening in our building during the day. People here who want to deal with the past and move on.

'Then later that evening you have people who are trying to drag us back.'

Derry's troubled past – the violence, the terror, the killings – is a history that has been well-documented.

Tomorrow will mark the 47th anniversary of Bloody Sunday, when 14 local men and boys were killed by British paratroopers in the Bogside during a civil rights march.

In the decades of violence that followed, 3,532 lives were lost, homes and livelihoods were destroyed. Checkpoints were everywhere, body searches the norm, and a fine Georgian city centre lay partially in ruins.

Since then, politically, and visually, the city has changed almost beyond recognition. New shopping centres, hotels and blocks of flats rise high above the Foyle estuary.

Much of the centre, once devastated by a relentless bombing campaign in the 1970s and 1980s, has been sympathetically rebuilt.

The building of the Peace Bridge in 2011, a new footbridge across the River Foyle, linking the two communities and their respective loyalties, signalled a turning point.

Derry was the UK's first City of Culture in 2013 and, in 2017, launched a joint bid with Belfast to be named the European Capital of Culture for 2023. It is a wonderful city to visit, rich in culture and history and its people have a warmth and candour that endears them to visitors.

On the surface at least, much progress has been made in bringing together communities divided by conflict and by tradition.

AGAINST this backdrop, the sight of Derry's post-ceasefire youth, the generation who have only known peace, milimetres from injury or death on Saturday, has caused a tidal wave of emotion.

'There has been dismay and anger over what his happened, but also a determination,' says Gerard. 'We will not allow this to define what our city is and what our people are about. We are about working together and moving forward.'

The will to move forward, although a noble one, is an uphill battle.

Since the ceasefire and the peace deal in the 1990s, daily life in Derry has been protected by a wafer-thin film of healing, but old divisions and tensions remain. Minor security alerts are frequent and sporadic violence is a way of life. Dissident paramilitaries from both sides of the conflict remain active and are still recruiting.

Today, there's fresh graffiti in the Bogside urging the young to 'Join the IRA'. A short walk away, in the Waterside, a mural

LL NOT WIN

Ripped apart: The remains of the car that exploded in Derry last weekend

proclaims that 'the loyalists are still under siege'. Particularly in Derry, some of the elements that first set the stage for conflict remain in place.

Colm Daly has just picked up his morning paper in his local shop in the Creggan, a large nationalist neighbourhood that overlooks the city. Next to the shop is a bookies, where three young men who look to be in their 20s are standing outside smoking.

'It's been chaos since Saturday and that's the truth,' he says angrily, deliberately raising his voice so anyone in earshot can hear him.

'Every two minutes there was another security alert, another police cordon. You couldn't get in or out of the place. I don't think these people realise the disruption they cause to their own. 'It's a disgrace. This is a place that is branding itself as a tourist destination and we have roads blocked at every turn because of the recklessness of a small few.'

Today in Derry, Ireland's only remaining completely walled city, buses full of tourists from China and South America pour in to admire the 17th-century wall that surrounds the city. Protestant residents are still proud that it was never breached by Catholic forces during the Siege of Derry in 1689.

From the battlements, if you look below you can see the flatlands of the Catholic Bogside. Outside the city gates and far beneath the city walls and their cannons, the route of the Bloody Sunday march criss-crosses its way through the densely populated streets. A few metres down from the scene of the bomb, the Bishop's Gate is held up on one side by Derry's last remaining peace wall.

This long brick structure, topped with a high-wire fence, has separated nationalists living in Bishop Street from the Fountain estate, the last Protestant enclave on the west bank, for decades. Inside the Fountain, where its kerbstones and lampposts are emblazoned red, white and blue to match the fluttering Union Jack flags, a brightly coloured youth club, the Cathedral Club, has been a place of sanctuary for the community for decades.

The woman at its helm, 74-year-old Jeannette Warke, has spent the last 45 years helping youngsters dodge bullets, fight unemployment and seek out a better way of life.

'I will never ever forgive the man who drove that bomb to the court house on Saturday night,' she laments. 'When I saw all those kids walking up Bishop Street past that bomb my heart stopped. Then the footage of the man getting out of the car just before they appeared and run up to New Gate.

'I look at that man and I swear to God I will never forgive him until the day I die. He is imprinted on my brain. That man left that bomb in that car and he got out of there. He didn't give a s*** who was coming along after him.'

The problems facing the community in the Fountain are the same ones faced by their counterparts on the other side of the wall. A display of leaflets on the pool table in the main hall provides information on an array of issues: drug and alcohol abuse, mental health problems and debt.

The day before the bomb, Jeanette had met with community workers from the Catholic areas of the Creggan, the Brandywell and the Bogside at an event designed to strengthen cross-community relations.

'I looked around the room and I thought, "isn't this great?"' she says. 'Things are good. We have Protestant and Catholic kids mixing. We go on trips together.

'Then you have these idiots who are trying to ruin it all. What are these idiots thinking? I would love to know. What did they think was going to happen? What about all the people in that hotel that are visiting this city and putting money into it? What about the elderly people living in Alexander House who have suffered enough living at that interface? They have lived through enough.'

IN the Fountain, the metal gate in the wall between it and the nearby Bogside area – home to the late Martin McGuinness – is locked at 9pm each night. The interface between the two communities remains one of the city's flashpoints when sporadic violence breaks out. Last summer, in a disturbing week of violence sparked by unionist parades celebrating the Twelfth, angry crowds in the Catholic Bogside erected barricades to shut down streets.

Although the protests were dismissed by many as 'recreational rioting' by drunken mobs, more than 70 petrol bombs were hurled, alongside two pipe bombs thrown at police officers. Elderly residents of Alexander House, a care home situated just metres from Saturday night's bomb, were directly in the line of fire.

In the main, those participating in the disorder were teenagers and young adults. However, the PSNI say children as young as eight were also involved.

On the ground, many point to the age profile of those involved in last summer's outbreak of sectarian violence as being indicative of current trends.

What started as anti-social behaviour was quickly hijacked by the New IRA, all too eager to exploit the disaffected youth as a means to their own ends. And therein lies a problem some suggest is much greater than Brexit in peace-time Derry – there are young men and women growing up in a working-class part of a city which has seen relatively few returns from any peace dividend.

For the New IRA, the hopeless cycle these young people find themselves in, coupled with the threat of a hard border, has created the perfect storm.

'This is a complex situation,' says Gerard Deane. 'You need to understand the demographics and the statistics in Derry and in Strabane. There are high levels of deprivation, there is huge unemployment and very little opportunity.

'The young people who do go to university often leave and don't come back and you have a brain drain scenario.

'The people who are getting involved in this sort of thing are the people who, for 20 years or more, haven't seen a dividend from the peace. There were a lot of promises made about a better place for all and some people aren't feeling that.'

On the ground, there's a determination that the violence of last weekend will not have a future. For the dissidents to succeed they need support, something that is lacking from within their own community.

'Twenty or 30 years ago they might have had the support,' says Colm Daly. 'But we are living in different times. I got caught up in it myself back in the day, throwing bottles and bricks at the police. That's how it starts.

'People are very scared, to be honest. You know that innocent people end up paying the price. It's alright saying those kids got off the other night before it exploded, but we just don't know. So many times those bombs have gone wrong. No one wants a family sitting with a child blown up.'

On Wednesday morning, as the breakfast radio shows discussed Brexit and speculated about a possible return to violence, locals all over the city were emerging from their homes, bracing themselves against the cold and navigating through the icy footpaths to work.

In the Bogside, lollipop ladies wearing luminous yellow jackets escorted schoolchildren across busy roads. A group of young children, clad in a technicolour of fleece-lined coats, skipped through the remaining flutter of snow. Behind them, on a gable wall in Rossville Street, a famed mural of a little girl dressed in a school uniform stands tall. The girl in the picture, entitled 'the Death of Innocence' is Annette McGavigan, the first child to be killed in the Troubles. She died in 1971, when she was 14.

Back in the McAleer home, the resonance of that image cuts deep. Alfie's wife Shelly, 58, is sitting beside him, her hands neatly folded on her knees, shaking her head.

Alfie, a Catholic from Bishop Street and Shelly, a Protestant from the Waterside, are themselves a testament to a shared will to live in peace.

'Our granddaughter came as close to losing her life as you can get,' says Shelly. 'There is no appetite for this. Our generation remember this, our granddaughter and her friends don't.

'These people want to the blacken the future for our young people. Everyone in this city is on the same page with this. We have been there, done that and we won't let it happen again.'

catherine.fegan@dailymail.ie