

Prologue

When I bought my first car in May 2005, the first trip I took was to Abbeylara. Everything about my recent life to that point had been consumed by this place, the people in it and one young man in particular, John Carthy. For over two years, my time had been spent hearing of, reporting on and writing about a troubled life that ended suddenly and tragically. Now, it was time to put flesh on the bones of a story that existed to now as shorthand notes and one picture of a pale, drawn young man.

I parked the car in the large yard in front of St Bernard's Church in the heart of the village. Everything was quiet. The wind fluttered through the yellow and white bunting hanging across the yard and on my radio Neil Young found some words to fit,

*See the lonely boy,
out on the weekend
Trying to make it pay.
Can't relate to joy,
he tries to speak and
Can't begin to say.*

A laneway along the side of the church led to a small graveyard perched on a little hill. On this summer's day it looks like a peaceful resting place, full of birdsong and shaded by great

ABBEYLARA

trees. At the end of the graveyard, I find what I'm looking for. The large, black headstone stands boldly out from the rest. The grave is lined by tattered wreaths and some fresh flowers. John Carthy has been dead for more than five years now, but people haven't forgotten him.

A month later, I return to meet John's sister, Marie. I have been invited to the new bungalow in Toneymore, Abbeylara, where her mother lives, where Marie was spending most of her weekends and where John would have resided had he still been with them. Even after years of staring at maps of the area, finding the house is difficult. The only indication of the house's significance is a neat plaque on the front wall of the Carthy property, which reads:

'In loving memory of John Carthy whose life was taken tragically on April 20th, 2000 aged 27 years

Do not stand by my grave and weep
I am not there, I do not sleep
I am a thousand winds that blow
I am the diamond glint upon the snow
I am the sunlight on ripened grain
I am the gentle autumn rain
I am the soft star that shines so bright
In Abbeylara late at night'

The plaque is black, and alongside the words, there is a picture of John.

It is situated close to the spot where he fell on the road when the final bullet hit him.

At the front door, Rose welcomes me and invites me in, but then she goes out to the kitchen, leaving Marie to show me in

to the front room. Photographs are dotted along the cabinets and the mantelpiece. Normal family pictures track the lives of two children from infancy onwards. Marie points at a picture sitting on a sideboard in the corner of the room.

‘That one was when John won a local handball competition. He loved handball, and football and hurling.’

She moves to the mantelpiece.

‘There’s the two of us when we were young.’

‘You look really alike.’

‘Yeah, a lot of people say that. I suppose we did. But then, there was only a year and two months between us in age. We were very close.’

Settling down on the sofa in the comfortable living room, Marie is willing to bring me through her memories of John and her memories of the day he died, but she asks that I don’t make her cry. For support, her partner sits in on the interview. But where do we start? The beginning of this story came at the end. John Carthy’s life was only remarkable because of the way in which it ended.

A very ordinary young man, for twenty-seven years John Carthy was known only to those who were part of his small circle of family and friends. His life revolved around his mother and sister. His world was set on a parochial compass, keeping him close to home at all times. His hobbies were few, his working life was sporadic and consisted of short-term labouring jobs here and there. It was only on Holy Thursday 2000 that the name John Carthy reached a wider audience, through a tragic event that became known as ‘The Abbeylara Siege’.

On that day – 20 April 2000 – John Carthy was shot four times by members of An Garda Síochána after he emerged

ABBEYLARA

from his home following a twenty-five-hour stand-off, during which he fired thirty shots. The shooting provoked anger and raised awkward questions for the police force. Persistent calls for an independent investigation into the incident were made and eventually heeded, and over the course of a lengthy Tribunal of Inquiry, the short life of John Carthy was deconstructed and revealed for the whole country to see.

What emerged was a sad account of a young man who suffered from bipolar affective disorder, or manic depression. But that was just one dimension of his story. Other aspects of his character were also revealed, finally doing justice to his memory. For so long, John Carthy had existed in the public consciousness only in the context of his final hours, his name was synonymous with a tragedy, a shooting, a scandal. The in-depth examination of his life introduced the real John Carthy to those who wished to know him as more than the man at the centre of the incident at Abbeylara. It unveiled his caring nature, his intelligence, his ability to express himself and his determination to cope with his manic depression.

Sitting in the family living room, Marie asks that we don't dwell on the more upsetting elements of that day when John died. Years after that horrible day, it still makes her cry. The ordeal of the past few years has taken its toll on her. Now each Easter season, on Holy Thursday, Marie marks the deaths of her grandfather, her father and her brother. Three generations of Carthy men all dead on the same day, two of them through simple coincidence and the third through a tragedy that has changed their lives in so many ways.

The life Marie has led since John died has been a strange one. She has been grieving in the public eye. People on the street recognise her from her appearances in the media. Some feel

the need to speak to her, to express their sympathy and to tell her about someone they know who suffers from a mental illness. Both she and Rose have received hundreds of letters of sympathy, and that support has meant a lot.

Marie travels home as frequently as possible to visit her mother, but for the most part Rose passes the days and nights in the new house on her own. It is lonely for her. This was the house that she and John had planned together, and now it is empty without him. The void in her life is immense.

When mother and daughter are together however, they talk about John. Not about the way he was taken from them, but about the way he was. Marie remembers his sense of humour, his intelligence and his easy-going manner. In spite of the reams of newsprint and legal transcripts that have analysed his life in recent years, she remembers him as being just like any other young man.

She insists there was never a time in his battle with manic depression that he was suicidal, and feels that the emphasis on his mental illness has wrongly implied to people that he was always either elated or depressed. Some of the evidence she heard during the tribunal didn't tally with the brother she loved. To hear his personality distorted into an angry, unsettled young man hurt.

'They have tried to blacken his name by saying his only outlet was drinking and smoking,' she said. 'His memory has been tarnished.'

In her mind and in her memory, he was just a big brother, and while he may have battled with highs and lows, for long periods he was just himself.

She misses John greatly. They were so close in age. They started school on the same day in St Bernard's National School

ABBEYLARA

in Abbeylara. They sat beside each other in the classroom. They walked home together. They played together. It was a childhood bond that grew stronger as they got older and as they went their separate ways in adulthood, they were still tightly bound together.

Marie still has many questions about what happened to her brother; the only time there is any indication of bitterness in the things she says is when she is pressed for her opinion on the gardaí who responded to what happened here in Abbeylara in 2000.

The only garda who was present at the siege with whom they ever have any contact is Sergeant Mary Mangan. She was one of the officers who sat with Rose for many hours from the time the gardaí were called to the moment when news came that John was dead. After the incident was over, after John had been laid to rest, after Rose had moved into the new house and after Marie had reluctantly gone back to resume her working life, Sergeant Mangan continued to call in from time to time to see how Rose was doing. At least, Marie thinks, that was something.

Marie's ill-feeling towards the force was aggravated greatly by the press coverage that was given to the allegation that she was drunk on the night of the siege.

'[Drinking] was the last thing you'd be doing. I was never drunk in my life. And all that stuff was printed in the papers. People that wouldn't know me, they would probably believe it and I couldn't blame them if they did.'

From the conversation, it becomes clear quite quickly that Marie is critical of everything the gardaí did throughout the course of the incident. She still doesn't understand why there was a need for such a large garda presence at the scene and she is adamant that if they had been subtler in their approach, the

end result would have been very different. John would have simmered down, she would have talked to him and the episode would have passed.

‘If they had just kept away and left him alone, he would have been fine,’ she insists.

If Marie had had her way there would have been no garda presence at all at her old home that evening. She remains certain that if she had been at home when John fired the first shots that evening, she would never have called the guards.

Having had years to dwell on the issue, Marie has her own thoughts on why John emerged when he did and why the gardaí reacted as they did. Marie was sitting in a car with Dr Shanley up the road from the cottage when John came out and she believes there are two possible reasons why John chose to suddenly come out after being holed up in the house for twenty-five hours. In her view, he was either leaving to buy cigarettes or else he was making his way up the road to talk to her.

‘Why he didn’t get the cigarettes? He could have been coming out for cigarettes – he was a chain smoker. Plus, they told him I was up the road with Dr Shanley, so he could have been coming up to talk to me,’ she says.

I urge her on. What else does she remember of those moments. All she recalls, or perhaps all she wants to recall is the sight of guards running up the road. She feels there was ‘definitely panic there’, but that’s as much as she wants to say about it.

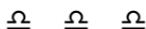
‘You’re going to make me cry now.’

Driving back through Abbeylara after my visit to Marie and Rose Carthy, I see again all the familiar sights and landmarks that have now been immortalised in the column inches that

ABBEYLARA

were devoted to the death of John Carthy. Progress over the coming years will add and subtract elements from the place it was when it first became famous. New developments will spring up, and perhaps most relevant to what John Carthy's life might have been, a new handball alley was built a few years after his death. He would have been there, working on the new alley, if he had survived, but to honour him an annual competition is now held there where players compete for the John Carthy Memorial Cup. A fitting tribute in itself.

Like Abbeylara, Marie Carthy has moved on. She is currently in the second year of a four-year counselling degree at NUI Maynooth. She has come full circle, from dealing with a major tragedy herself, through the grieving process, and back to the point where she wants a career where she can help others to cope with their own traumas. In particular, she is hoping to specialise in counselling those who suffer from depression.



Much of the content in this account of the life and death of John Carthy is based on detailed notes taken throughout the proceedings of the Barr Tribunal of Inquiry set up to investigate the shooting at Abbeylara, and also the comments, criticisms and praise contained in the official Report on the incident compiled by the Honourable Mr Justice Robert Barr.

The Tribunal of Inquiry examined the garda operation that was put in place by the officers tasked with responding to the incident. It was quickly noted and accepted that what unfolded at Abbeylara was unique in the history of policing in this country, and the garda response had to be appreciated in such a context. Due recognition was paid to the undoubted pressure that was placed on those officers who were in-

structed to man the front line of an incident involving an armed and volatile man, and in particular, the tough decisions that faced the Emergency Response Unit officers who were on duty that day.

In his Report, Justice Barr refers repeatedly to the incident as ‘the disaster at Abbeylara’, and while he pays tribute to certain gardaí and certain garda actions, his seven hundred and forty-four page analysis reaches one overall conclusion – the death of John Carthy should never have happened.