

Part One:

Chapter One: The Birth of Bobby Boran --

It is 1915. Bobby Boran is born on a cold December morning. Grim. A neighbour (Gertrude) acting as midwife. Third person narrative from Bobby's father's point of view. His name is Gerald Boran. Anxious. Waiting in the parlour. Smoking his pipe and pacing. Been here before. Never a time he enjoys, and yet one he always looks forward to.

Screams from above. He's heard men scream like that. And then the squawking cry of a baby.

Relief. He runs up the stairs.

Next scene: inside the bedroom. Katherine Boran (nee Bell) sits up in bed holding the baby. She's a strong woman but upon entering the room Gerald thinks how tired she looks, and how disconcerting this is. She shows him the baby. The neighbour quietly leaves.

Next scene: Gerald is in the backyard fixing his bike. An old work colleague, Frankie Smith, opens the gate, enters and leans against the outhouse wall. Gerald looks up at him but doesn't say anything. They don't need greetings. The conversation will start when it starts, if it starts.

"How's the babbie?" Gerald puts down his spanner and straightens up. Mother and baby are fine. Though he's a quiet one. Hardly makes a peep. Frankie tells him that he's lucky. All four of his never shut up. Take after their mam. Got a name for him, yet? Robert -- Robert Boran.

Nice. Bobby Boran. Got a ring to it. Frankie asks him when he "goes back". Couple of days. Rough? Gerald just nods. Already, the "war to end all war" is something he is learning he doesn't want to talk about.

"A contemptible little army', indeed," Frankie says. Gerald doesn't respond. He thinks of Ypres, his wife, daughter (Polly -- 3) and his new son. Damn the Germans. Damn the war. Damn all of them.

Next scene: Polly is fascinated with her new baby brother. She stands on a footstool by her mam and dad's bed, looking into the cot. Katherine watches her -- smiling but suddenly very afraid for Polly and Bobby. She's been lucky, she knows that. Gerald is a good man. Yes, he likes a drink, but he is an amiable and only occasional drunk, and his family always takes priority. Or it did, before new priorities were forced upon them.

She doesn't want him to leave. Not now. Not ever. But neither of them have a say in it.

On the bedside table is a piece of shrapnel. Gerald gave it to her. It was that piece of shrapnel that brought him home this time -- an injury that wasn't severe enough to cause

him serious, long-lasting problems but one which was, nevertheless, significant enough to bring him home on time for Bobby's birth. She prays, ironically, for another piece of shrapnel just like it. An injury just bad enough to get him home again.

She pushes the thought out of her head. It's too much like tempting fate.

Polly wants to pick the baby up. Katherine pulls her away -- a little roughly, she's still thinking about Gerald going back -- and sits her on the bed beside her. Polly seems to be developing a cough. The last thing Katherine needs with the new baby and Gerald going away. She tells her story about what it was like when she was a little girl.

Polly cuddles in. Katherine tells her how, when her Uncle Joe was a little boy, she used to look after him like Polly will look after Bobby. It was Katherine's job. Her mammy and daddy were very busy people -- she had five more brothers and sisters -- and she had looked after Bobby he would have got into all kinds of trouble. Well, one day, she wasn't paying as much attention as she should have been and Joe went in fell in the beck. "You won't let that happen to Bobby, will you, Polly?" Polly shakes her head.

Gerald is leaving. Katherine stands at the backyard gate holding Bobby in her arms, bundled up against the cold. Polly stands close to her, holding onto her leg. Gerald tells Polly to be a good girl for her mam etc. Kisses Katherine. Quite chastely and then more passionately.

As he walks down the alley, Frankie Smith waves him off.

Gertrude walks up to Katherine as he's leaving. They don't speak. Gertrude watches her carefully.

"He shouldn't have to go back, Gert."

"None of 'em should, pet."

Chapter Two: A Winter of Illness --

Christmas Day is fairly bleak for Katherine. She tries to make something of it for Polly's sake, but it's difficult. They have a little chocolate for her, an orange and a little rag doll the Katherine has made. Gertrude drops by with her two eldest children, James (13) and Jenny (15) to wish them a merry Christmas. She's brought some sherry with her and they have a little tipple -- well it is Christmas.

Her brother, Joe, and his wife Emma come round for Christmas dinner. Joe supplied the turkey and vegetables from his allotment.

Katherine hasn't been speaking to her mother (her father is dead) for a few months. Margaret Bell has a cruel tongue when the mood takes her and they'd had an argument at

the family shop about how, previously his going into the army, Gerald had not been providing for Katherine and Polly well enough. Katherine had to admit, if only to herself, that it had been difficult -- but Gerald really had been doing everything conceivable. They were comfortable by the standards of many people when he was working on the railway, but it was not what she was really used to, her childhood being one of relative privilege. Joe tells her that he thinks the time is right for her to attempt to make it up with their mother, but Katherine will hear nothing of it. She'll decide when the time's right.

Katherine doesn't get on especially well with Emma. Emma is a staunch Catholic (Joe converted for her -- something which Katherine has always quietly resented) and whilst Katherine does believe in God and encourages Polly to say her prayers, she finds all that churchgoing a little wearying. Emma's holier-than-thou attitude doesn't help.

During Christmas dinner, Emma talks about something Father Halloran told her. Apparently some people believe that we are descended from monkeys! Have you ever heard anything so absurd? Emma shows a distinct lack of education. She laughs, thinking the whole proposition is ridiculous. "Everyone knows we are God's children." Katherine points out that God's children are currently murdering one another on the Western Front.

"But we are fighting God's fight," Emma insists. I'm sure the Germans think that, too. "Myself," Katherine says, "I find it very easy to believe that we are descended from monkeys."

"Katherine!" Emma says in a whisper. "It's our Lord's birthday."

Joe smoothes things over by singing Polly a song (decide what, exactly, later.) Joe has a fine singing voice. Polly is enchanted. Katherine and Emma cease their bickering. Katherine notices that Polly's cough seems to be getting worse.

The day ends nicely when Gertrude, James and Jenny drop by again. While Jenny and James look after Polly and Bobby, Katherine, Gertrude, Joe and Emma sit in the parlour sipping sherry. They don't say much. Joe raises his glass in a toast to absent friends.

Katherine silently prays that Gerald knows they are thinking of him, and that he is safe.

Next scene: Katherine has been up all night with Polly. At three o'clock in the morning, she banged on the wall for Gertrude who came round in her dressing gown and agreed with Katherine's diagnosis. "Aye, lass, it looks like the poor love has the cough." Whooping Cough.

Days of illness. The baby is kept well away from Polly, even though they realised that it may well be too late. Gertrude takes over somewhat, prescribing a remedy that her mother always swore by:

"Dissolve a scruple of salt of Tartar in a gill (1/2 a pint) of water - and ten grains of Cochineal fine powdered - sweeten with fine white sugar - Give to an infant a tea

spoonful 4 times a day - to a child of 2 or 3 years two tea spoonfuls and to a child of 4 or upwards a table spoon ful each time."

Katherine is awake almost all night for four days solid. Gertrude helps when she can, but she has her own family to think of. Joe and Emma come round often, but Emma isn't much use. She's squeamish and really quite pathetic.

One night whilst Polly is, finally, sleeping, she checks on the baby. He's awake and, as she enters the room, his eyes follow her. He seems to smile at her, understand what she's going through, and as reassuring as she finds it, she tells herself that what she's feeling is only her imagination. She sings to him under her breath and watches him as he falls asleep.

Katherine falls asleep herself in a chair. She dreams about the trenches of France, her imagined representation of it. Gerald is there, standing in the middle of no man's land -- his arms outstretched, head tilted back to the sky as shells and bullets explode around him and zip by him. She tries to call out to him but before she can say anything, she notices something by his feet. At the same time, he looks down. It's Bobby, bundled up in blankets. Gerald bends to pick him up and as he does so, a shell explodes nearby. Metal and debris fly through the air, barely missing Gerald. Had he not bent to pick Bobby up it would have decapitated him.

Katherine wakes up suddenly. Afraid. Desperately needing to urinate. Polly is coughing again. Coming out of the dream, Katherine doesn't know what she should be doing. Bobby is awake and looking at her. He seems to be smiling again.

She goes to Polly. As she enters the room, Polly coughs violently and finishes by vomiting on the floor beside the bed. She sits up, staring at her mother looking bewildered. "Daddy?" she says.

"He'll be home soon, pet."

Next scene: within three or four days, Polly is considerably better -- not what Katherine or Gertrude had expected at all. Bobby is as lively, if quiet, as ever, and Katherine actually starts to believe that things might work out all right, after all.

And then she has her first turn. Sitting by the fire talking to Gertrude, she goes to get up to put the kettle on and the room starts to spin. Her legs gave way and she sits back down with a thud. Gertrude is concerned but Katherine dismisses it. She's just tired. The worry's caught up with her etc.

She'll be just fine... she has to be.

Chapter Three: On the Way Home from Mam's --

It is March. Katherine has taken the children to see her mother. Although they got off to a rocky start, the tea they shared had been pleasant enough and they had parted on good terms. Margaret had, even, come close to apologising -- and she'd been simply delighted to see a very healthy Bobby and Polly, holding Bobby for a full hour and spoiling Polly with crystal fruits.

Walking home in the snow, Katherine is surprised by just how happy she feels to have put things right with her mother. She feels well and buoyed by Gerald's latest letter. Plus she hasn't had one of her turns in at least three weeks.

As they cross the fields, not too far from home, now, Katherine and Polly are laughing and singing a silly song that Katherine has made up. Bobby in his pram is looking as his mother, rosy cheeked and content. He smiles that knowing smile of his and Katherine finds herself smiling back at him.

Suddenly Polly stops singing and skipping. Something is wrong. Katherine looks up from Bobby to find a black dog in their path. Silently threatening. Katherine pulls Polly behind her, watching the dog carefully. It approaches. Pauses. Bares its teeth and snarls. It comes close. Katherine, not knowing quite what to do -- the behaviour of this unfamiliar dog completely alien to her -- stands her ground. As it gets close to the pram, she tries to move it away but stops when the dog growls again. It looks at the pram. Katherine is ready to act, about to start hitting and kicking at the dog.

Bobby makes a gleeful screech and the dog walks peacefully away.

As they walk the rest of the way home, the dog watches them from a distance. It is no longer a threat, however. Its stance is protective, it seems to Katherine.

Next scene: later that evening, Bobby and Polly asleep, Katherine sits down with Gertrude and Jenny in the parlour. Jenny, an accomplished pianist (for her age) is playing Fur Elise. Katherine tells Gertrude about her day -- the reconciliation with her mother and then the encounter with the black dog.

Katherine tries to make light of it, even though the memory still unnerves her, but Gertrude's silence adds to her discomfort. "What is it?" It's nothing, really.

[Barghest](#). Gertrude doesn't tell her about it right away. She says it's nonsense but Katherine pushes her until she tells her everything she knows about the myth. A black dog, preys on solitary travellers. That's all she knows about it. Katherine has known Gertrude long enough to be able to see when she's not telling the truth.

"What else, Gert?" The stuff of the devil. A portent. "Of what?" It's nonsense -- nobody believes that rubbish, anyway. "A portent of what, Gert?" Death.

Next scene: Getting ready for bed, Katherine looks at the piece of shrapnel on the bedside table. She picks it up, turns it over in her hand. Thinking of Gerald, of all the things he

must be going through that she can't even begin to imagine. If he's still alive. How long would it be before she knew? If he died, would she feel it the way some people said she would? Or would she have to wait some stranger to turn up on her doorstep?

Laying down to sleep, she remembers the difficult times they have shared together -- the times in Gerald's childhood that he told her about. Being passed around relatives etc, food short, never having shoes... it had been different for her. Yes, she'd known hardship, times when her parents found it hard to make the shop pay, what with her dad's drinking and everything, but nothing like Gerald had experienced. He'd had it hard, and now he had to contend with this -- fighting a war because he felt morally obliged to do so, to protect his family and his country (in that order.) It was unjust. Unjust that they should find themselves in this position... unjust that their lives should be taken from them in this way...

Gerald deserves better. She falls asleep, finally.

During the night, she dreams the dream again. Gerald is standing in the middle of no man's land -- his arms outstretched, his head tilted back. The war is being fought around him but when he looks down this time, he doesn't find Bobby at his feet. Instead there is only a black dog. A shell explodes and Katherine wakes up screaming.

Chapter Four: Happy Birthday, Bobby --

It has been a year of waiting and uncertainty, the possibility of Gerald's death Katherine's constant companion. It has taken its toll on her. She has lost weight, is quite often pale and enervated, and more often than not introspective to the point of being catatonic. Gert has expressed her concern many times, sending Jenny round to help whenever she can, but Katherine simply dismisses Gert's anxiety over her.

She hasn't told her or anyone else that she's been having more of her turns just lately.

Washing the breakfast pots, she looks out of the small window on to the back yard with its outhouse, tin bath and coal bunker. Gerald would be walking through that gate in a day or two. Christmas was just around the corner, Bobby's first birthday preceding it. Gerald would be here for the latter but, yet again, not the former. One fortnight a year, including travel. That's the best they could allow him, after everything he'd given up for them. It was a bloody crime -- a crime for which only the innocent would ever pay.

Jenny is watching her from the door to the whole way and Katherine realises that she's been talking to herself. They smile at each other. Jenny tells her, carrying some sheets into the room and setting them on the table ready to be washed, that her mam does that all the time. They joke about it, but Katherine knows that Jenny will report back to her mam at the first opportunity and Gert will be round yet again to check on her.

She makes Jenny promise that she'll keep it to herself -- Gertrude will only worry

unnecessarily, and she really is just fine. Reluctantly, Jenny promises.

Next scene: Polly is playing with Bobby in the backyard. They chase each other about whilst Katherine stands watching them, smoking a cigarette. Joe arrives, to see if she's got anything she needs doing before Gerald gets back. She notices that he looks distracted and asks him if everything is all right.

He shrugs his shoulders. It's Emma. She's leading him a merry dance. Getting ideas above her station. She doesn't seem to understand the value of money. He tells her that they can't afford something her friend has and... "... well, Kath, lass, she just won't let me near her," he says in a whisper.

Katherine is very quick to tell him that he needs to put his foot down with her. "You let her away with murder, Joe."

"She makes my life hell if I don't. And it's not exactly like I can divorce her, now, is it?" He should have thought of that before. These Papists are all alike. Joe takes exception to this. He's one, too, now, don't forget. "You'll never be one, Joe, however hard you try. That's the problem."

They fall silent, noticing the Bobby is standing by the outhouse door watching them. He's smiling. His serenity is infectious. Katherine feels suddenly moved to say something else to Joe. She takes hold his hand and squeezes it. "You'll work it out, love. I'm sure you will."

Next scene: Gerald arrives home at the station. Katherine is there to meet him. From Gerald's point of view. Katherine has changed in the past year. She's somehow frailer, tired and sunken around the eyes. But it's more than that. The most obvious change, for him, is the way she reacts to him. Obviously pleased to have him home, hugging, kissing him etc, she clearly sees the changes in her husband and doesn't seem to know quite how to react. Gerald tries to make it easier for her -- doing his best to step away from the things he has seen and experienced over the past twelve months. But it isn't entirely comfortable. They walk home together, Katherine telling him about the children. Polly livelier than ever, talkative, inquisitive -- "and her intelligence? I don't know where she gets it." Bobby quiet and serene, growing into quite a little boy now he still manages to make his mam feel calm when all around them is turmoil.

Down the sooty streets, along the back alleys with their washing lines and emaciated-looking dogs. The day is grey but, momentarily, the sun breaks through in Gerald is reminded of his time in France -- the brief moments of respite from the tedium, from the hard graft, from the pain and suffering that seemed constant. She'd stood with him and watched the sunset. Just the once, and that had been all there was to it. A girl called Paulette. Neither of them speaking the other's language. Stepping into a moment that would never exist again. Fragile. Fleeting.

Gerald wishes for that kind of serenity once more -- with Katherine and the children. If

only this bloody war was over.

Home. From Polly's point of view. She sits patiently in the kitchen with Bobby, Jenny (who she loves) and Gertrude -- waiting for her mam and dad to come home. Mam has told her that dad is coming home from fighting in the war. Her dad is brave and strong and she barely remembers him.

When the two of them step into the kitchen, she stays with Bobby, holding his hand, while Gertrude greets with the man she, Polly, hardly recognizes.

Point of view switch. Gerald puts down his kit bag. He looks over at his children. Bobby sits on a chair, largely hidden by the table, holding his sister's hand, a placid smile on his face. He feels love for them, but also grief and fear. Grief for all he has missed and lost. Fear that he might never regain what he once had.

Gerald greets them -- kneeling down on the floor in front of them. Polly is initially quite shy, but with encouragement she gives him a cuddle. Bobby is more reserved. Not suspicious, simply calmly reticent. He smiles almost constantly, Gerald notices, and when his father pulls a shiny coin from behind his, Bobby's, ear, the child giggles with delight. "He's growing into a big lad," Gerald says and Katherine nods. "You've done well, lass," Gerald tells Katherine.

Next scene: Gerald is finding it difficult to settle. He knows he won't be home long and that he should be making the most of the time he's got with this family. But still he needs to be alone with his thoughts. He takes a walk to the hills, remembering how his father -- dead to the past ten years, now -- had once brought him up here, not long before he, Gerald, had to move in with an aunt he barely knew. It had not been the carefree time he wants for his own children. Granted, as a child he had not had to fight in any war, but it still been time of hunger and uncertainty. A time to which he does not wish to return.

It's cold, but he's still far more comfortable than he's been during the past twelve months. He eats some dry bread and drinks from a bottle of water he's brought with him, recalling the mud, the blood and the horror -- quickly struggling to push it away by recalling Paulette. A brief, innocent time. A break from the suffering. Paulette dead mere days later.

This isn't helping. He's wasting valuable time. Wallowing in thoughts he'd rather forget.

Gerald returns home.

Polly and Bobby playing in the street with the other children, wrapped up against the cold. Katherine stands on the front doorstep with Gertrude watching them. It's evident that Polly is determined to take care of her little brother. When an older boy jumps in a puddle close by and splashes him, she lifts up the hem of her skirt and wipes some mud from Bobby's face. Gertrude smiles, elbowing Katherine gently and nodding in Polly's direction. Katherine experiences a moment of gratitude. Everything could so easily be

snatched from her at any moment -- she realises this -- but right now, with Gerald finding his place again, however fleeting he stay might be, she senses hope -- an almost unrecognizable feeling of well-being.

Gerald is walking down the street towards them. He kicks a ball about a bit with some of the children and Gert asks Katherine how he's settling. Well enough, Katherine tells her, but his having to return so soon is nevertheless hanging over them.

Giving the football one final kick, ruffling Bobby's hair as he passes him, Gerald joins them -- striking a Lucifer and lighting a cigarette.

Gerald wants to know what's planned for Bobby's birthday. Katherine's knitted him a new pullover, Gertrude has some old building blocks of James's that she found in the attic and Katherine's mam has sent some liquorice for him ("It'll probably give him the runs, but he right enjoys it.") As well as this, Gertrude and Katherine have pooled their resources and made him a cake.

"Fit for a prince." Gerald goes inside. He seems happier, but still Katherine detects his underlying suffering.

Next scene: Bed that night. Gerald is more tired than he remembers being all year. Katherine holds him and they eventually, slowly and with tenderness, make love.

Afterwards, they talk for a while. Katherine wants to know what it's like. Not as bad for him as it is for some. He's largely been keeping the supply lines open -- bridge and railway repair, that kind of thing. Beyond that, he will say very little. "I don't want to talk about it, lass. It wasn't pretty. Let's leave it at that."

Katherine reluctantly lets the matter drop. She wants to tell him about the black dog -- how important it is that he takes extra care. She can't, though. He'll think she's being silly. Superstitious nonsense.

Feeling unwell again, she sleeps.

Next scene: Bobby's birthday party. Fun and laughter. Joe is there, though Emma isn't. Gertrude has brought James and Jenny around and they all join in a game of Blind Man's Buff. Gerald, as the blind man, catches Bobby -- who actually wants to be caught. Gerald deliberately says that it's James rather than Bobby, however, and Bobby is set free... only to be caught again a few seconds later.

Joe sings a song. The adults have a tippie. Gerald stands with his arm around Katherine's waste watching the children eat cake. And he manages to forget that in 24 hours he will be leaving for the front again. These moments have to do sustain him for a whole year and he therefore makes the most of them.

Katherine, looking flushed, leaves the room. Concerned, Gerald follows her.

He finds her sitting on the stairs. He knows right away that she isn't well. He calls Gert in from the kitchen and the two of them take Katherine upstairs, getting her into bed. Gerald wants to send for the doctor but Katherine is having none of it. She's fine, just a bit tired. Been overdoing it. When their insistence starts to upset her further, they relent and leave her to rest.

On the landing, Gerald asks Gertrude how long she's been like this. Months, at least. Gertrude thought at first that it was just stress and fatigue, but now she's not so sure. "There's no talking to her, though." Katherine will only do what she wants to do. Gerald nods. Her single-mindedness and determination were the things that most attracted him to her.

They turn around to find Bobby standing at the top of the stairs. He looks like he's about to topple back down so Gerald quickly grabs him. Bobby smiles his smile and points to his parent's bedroom door. Gerald starts to explain that Bobby's mam needs to rest but Gertrude stops him. "Let the lad see his mam." It's not as if it's Polly. Bobby will just sit quietly with her.

Gerald takes Bobby in to Katherine. She's sleepy but nevertheless pleased to see her baby boy. He sits on the bed beside her and as she strokes his hair, she tells Gerald, "No doctor. I'll be all right."

Gerald tells her that they'll see how she is in the morning, kisses her and Bobby on their foreheads and then leaves the room.