

ENDNOTES

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End Notes

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Ten stories about loss, mourning and
commemoration

Edited by
Ray French and Kath McKay

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Research Council for funding this project.*

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to the memory of our late colleague, David Kennedy. He was a valued member of the AHRC Research Network: Crossing Over – New Narratives of Death, and the Principal Investigator on this project. David was also a warm and generous colleague. He will be greatly missed by all those who knew him.

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Sue Chard

Introduction

I have been an independent funeral celebrant for ten years, and have just finished an MSc at the Centre for Death and Society at the University of Bath. When I was asked to write this introduction I was banishing death from my office in an end of dissertation frenzy, by throwing books such as *The Revival of Death* by Tony Walter and *Objects of the Dead* by Margaret Gibson into cardboard boxes. My initial response was to say, *How nice of you to ask but...NO. I am not doing death at the moment. I am a bit over death-ed to be honest.*

The ludicrous notion that any of us can choose to *not do death* firstly made me smile and secondly moved me to type, *Yes, I'd love to, thanks for asking.* And so here I am with the joyful task of introducing *Endnotes*, a compilation of death stories, death truths, considerations of the afterlife and conclusions.

We often hear commentators say, 'We never talk about death.' I feel we do talk about death but it is often other people's deaths. Discussions are had about how, as a society, we die, when we will die and if it will be a 'good death'. But not talking about the specifics of our own deaths can leave those left behind struggling to know what we want as death approaches, and what we wish for our funerals.

One day in the mid-nineties my mum asked me to get a tax bill from the ‘important file’ in her desk. She was a retired midwife and very organised. She often said, ‘No one wants a chaotic midwife’. So her work and private life was alphabetised, underlined, labelled and filed. It should not have come as a shock when in amongst the paperwork was a green W.H.Smith spiral bound notebook with a neatly written label: ‘Notes for after my demise’.

I eventually opened the notebook, her endnotes, twenty three years later on a crisp autumn morning in 2013. Mum had died at 4.30 a.m. We had spent six days together waiting for death to come. It arrived gently, under a full moon, as night gave way to day. She had asked me to make sure her window was open as she was dying, to enable her soul to fly free. The open window also allowed us both to hear a robin’s early morning song loud and clear, like a fanfare inviting her on another adventure. At 9:00 a.m. that morning I opened the little notebook. Everything I needed was there, from her National Insurance number to the hymns and readings she hoped for at her funeral.

She had written it over fifteen years, adding ideas and changing her mind as she regularly contemplated her own death and what it would mean to me, her only child, as I arranged her funeral. In true Ruth style some hopes were more clearly stated than others. She asked that her brother read Psalm 138, “*with a little emphasis on the last verse*”, verse 8.

‘The Lord will perfect that which concerneth me: Thy mercy O Lord endureth for ever: forsake not the works of thine own hands.’

Amongst the letters left for those she loved, there was also a twenty pound note with more instructions, to buy myself a new dress for the funeral so I didn’t look scruffy. I spent one hundred and twenty pounds and looked fab.

This little green notebook was one of the kindest things my Mum ever did for me. It meant that I didn't enter the choppy seas of funeral planning without a chart. I knew where I was heading, and the funeral was a special day with the emphasis in all the right places, even down to bowls of Jelly babies dotted about the chapel. When she was alive anyone who visited her was offered one.

In my working life I support people to create funerals that travel the arc from secular, through religious, to seculigious: a word I use to cover the wide variety of ways people make meaning from death, and what may or may not happen next. I am a Quaker, and have thought long and hard about including religious content in the funerals I conduct, and I try hard to not trample over sacred texts. The drive to be a celebrant came from a desire to support people in creating the ritual they wanted: funeral rites that spoke clearly of their dead and, as in Ruth's case, ones where the dead spoke clearly too.

I am not ordained, I am not a humanist. I am an 'un-tethered' Independent Celebrant, who listens to families and friends tell *their* stories of the deceased. Hopefully a meaningful funeral then emerges from their narratives, funeral traditions and wishes. I have worked in crematoriums, churches, fields, round compost heaps and by rivers, but as is the modern way, mainly in crematoriums.

'*Oh just put me on the compost heap*' is not a very useful pre-death instruction as the family in general can't, and they often don't know what this statement really means. Though most of the time it means, '*I don't want a fuss*'. A couple of clients, both gardeners, did mean it though, and made their wishes clear. We arranged ceremonies around well-tended compost heaps and their ashes were added to the carrot peelings, grass cuttings and egg shells to return, eventually, to the earth and their beloved garden and allotment. Both funerals were very touching and had a great sanctity to

them that came from accomplishing what the deceased had wanted. They would be part of a growing medium that would support new life and, in the case of the allotment, feed other lives.

The expectations of how we die and how our funerals can be have changed. Funerals are often expected to be person centred, not redemption orientated. Even in contemporary religious funerals, there can be an acknowledgement of a life well lived. Many people no longer experience the world as a waiting room for heaven, and even fewer worry about the fiery pits of hell. These days, faith leaders often include eulogies of a life well lived, with these sometimes even replacing the sermon. Some churches allow secular music choices, and I also have conducted secular funerals in churches with the permission of the incumbent. I am always aware of what a generous act this is, as their work is soul work, and mine is body and life work.

The academic world of Death Studies is alight with discussions and research that will eventually influence policies and filter down into practice and social change. Ultimately this will encourage people to discuss their experience of dying. Research leading to new models of grief will allow us all to explore, in new ways, the pain that comes from grief; or to plan for the cost of dying in times of austerity. Researchers are looking at how we dispose of our dead as cemeteries fill up and land becomes scarce. Futurologists are considering how the digital age can offer a sense of immortality with, for example, undeletable memorial websites. Already stone masons are engraving q-codes that, when scanned by a smart phone, take you to memorial websites which tell the stories of the dead, or, more accurately, the stories the living have created about the dead.

The academic world talks about death, the world's faith groups talk about death, artists, authors and poets have their creativity fired by death, and projects such as *Endnotes* are there to nudge *us* to talk about death, and what it really means to us.

We can never think we 'don't do death,' as it is around us all the time, as is the miracle of birth.

Ruth's notebook was a work in progress, snippets gathered over many years. She didn't sit down one day and write it all in one go, it evolved over time. She then filed it under 'important', where it patiently waited to be discovered on the right day.

Each time we write or talk about death it gives us the opportunity to think about how we could approach our own end. It was with a sense of relief that I recently labelled a notebook *Su's funeral wishes*. Starting the process wasn't scary, it was an act of love, and so felt a perfectly natural thing to do.

The careful gathering of death tales in *Endnotes* offers every reader the chance to consider their death, and what it means to them and those they care about. Here lies its value and importance.

Su Chard. March, 2017

Mandy Sutter

Seed

From the back seat of the old Chevrolet, Sarah watched her father go round the house in the dark, rattling the shutters on the windows. Her mother sat silent in the passenger seat and the car headlights lit up a wedge of the garden, turning the aloe bushes to blazes of white fire.

They looked like spirit bushes.

‘Does Richard know we won’t be here tomorrow?’ Sarah asked.

The vinyl seat, red hot in the daytime, was cool against her legs.

‘What?’ said the mother, as if she’d never heard of Richard, or tomorrow. Three days ago, the doctor at the hospital in Port Harcourt had given her something to help her sleep. But now she seemed to be asleep even when she was awake.

‘Richard,’ said Sarah. ‘He might be worried if I’m not there to help him in the compound. The hen might not eat her seed.’

Her mother sighed. She obviously had no idea how skittish the hen was since the monkey had died. ‘Sometimes I think you care about those more than you care about us,’ she said. ‘And at a time like this.’

But what sort of time was it? Sarah was too scared to ask. Questions bumped in her head like bugs trapped in a porch light.

Her father's knees appeared in the beam of the headlights. He slid into the driver's seat and the car began crawling over the track that led to the Ikot Ekpene Road. The beam danced and he did not make his usual joke about how the suspension was killing him.

Sarah took a last look at the aloe bushes. Sometimes Richard made tiny goblets and swords from the silver paper that came with his Marlboroughs and left them under the bushes for her to find. She hoped there weren't any there now. Richard might think she didn't care.

The journey lasted forever. Somewhere in the middle, they changed planes at an airport where sand stretched for miles beyond the plate glass windows. In the Transfer Lounge, among acres of shiny red sofas and plants whose leaves shone like plastic, a man with a tea towel on his head put his face close to Sarah's, opened his mouth and pointed. Gold teeth gleamed. She didn't know what he was trying to show her and no-one told him to go away. By the time the London flight was announced, her cheeks ached from pretend smiling.

When they boarded the coach at Victoria, it was mid-day.

'We're nearly home,' said her mother, and fell asleep with her head bumping against the window.

Sarah stared out at the pavements and roundabouts, the red buses and the white buildings. It didn't look like home. Everything was too close together, and there were too many people. The roads were too smooth. Her eyes, hot and dry, wouldn't close, as if someone had put a juju on them.

She suspected Joseph Ochenugu. He had brought a shrunken head to school last week. It was grey and creased, the size of a satsuma. Bits of hair hung down and the eyes and mouth were sewn up. It was from South America, he said. Some of the girls screamed. He said it was used as a cure. What for, the teacher asked, headaches? Everyone laughed and the next day Joseph brought his uncle's finger to class, in a matchbox. The teacher said a bad word; the finger, crooked in the box, looked like a burnt chipolata sausage; Joseph rocked with mirth and banged his head on the desk.

They left the suburbs. Now everything was divided into fields, bright yellow and dark green, edged with stubby trees. Sarah thought of acacia trees, their canopies so tall that giraffes could stand under them without bending their necks. Richard chewed on acacia twigs to clean his teeth. Perhaps giraffes did too.

Nana's house had a pimpled grey front and a fat green lawn. Normally, when you arrived on the doorstep, her snowy hair bobbed behind the oval pane before you could even knock. But today Sarah's father fished a key from his pocket.

In the hall, Nana's hexagonal mirror still hung on its chain but leaflets and newspapers swam on the doormat. Sarah glanced up the steep staircase, at the swirly pattern of blues and browns that sometimes appeared in her dreams. At the top was the indoor toilet her father had installed, but which Nana never used. She preferred the outside one, she'd whispered once, with its spiders and air. Sarah preferred the outside one too.

'Where is she?' asked Sarah.

Her mother let out a sob and her father took her mother's arm. Her mother pulled away and ran up the stairs. Her father followed, head low. Time passed.

Sarah stood in the hall, the suitcases flanking her like obedient dogs. Her legs ached but she didn't move.

The stairs squeaked as her father came down again and sat on the bottom step.

'Where's Nana?' asked Sarah again.

'She's gone to sleep,' said her father. A red curtain had appeared in his left eye, drawn halfway across.

Sarah concentrated on the other eye. 'So, can I just put my head round her door?' It was an expression her mother used.

Her father sighed. 'She's not in her room. She's... gone away.'

'Gone away where? Didn't she want to see us first?'

Her father studied his feet. 'Well yes, of course she did. But in the end, it all happened in rather a rush.'

'A rush?'

'She couldn't wait. She'd come to the end of her time. Christ, why can't your mother be the one to speak to you about this?'

Sarah frowned.

'Look, she's gone to Heaven, love,' said her father. 'To be with the angels.'

'You mean she's dead,' said Sarah.

Her father looked shocked. 'If you want to put it like that, yes.'

'So, has she gone to the waters under the earth?' asked Sarah.

Her father shook his head and stood up. His eye was the eye of a demon.

Sarah ran to Nana's back room. The dining table still stood against the far wall, the table Nana used for everything; shelling peas, reading the Gloucester Citizen,

embroidering airmail paper with stories about going into town on the number nine and having cups of tea and buns at British Home Stores.

Sarah crawled under the fringe of its green chenille tablecloth. She hugged a heavy table leg, pressed herself into its hard spirals.

When she woke it was dark, and no-one had ordered her out or said only babies sat under tables. Something red and black growled and shifted in the grate. On the mantelpiece the carriage clock squatted next to the wooden mask they'd bought Nana at Christmas and which she said reminded her of a boy from school. It had blank eyes. Below them were slits. These were its real eyes; the ones it saw with. On the shelves, encyclopaedias held their knowledge. Everything was here, except Nana.

Her father was asleep in Nana's chair, his head on a green wing.

A day after the news came he'd told Sarah that her mother had gone AWOL. Sarah didn't understand. He was suddenly the one to tuck her mosquito net in around her bed at night and make her breakfast in the morning; the one to drop her off at school. And he did everything wrong. He left gaps in the net, gave her a tablespoon to eat her cornflakes with, forgot the penny for her poke of roast groundnuts at break.

She knew not to say anything. She lay awake listening for the wail of mosquitos, swallowed her Rice Krispies from a tablespoon, accepted a small handful of nuts from Joseph Ochenugu and worried about what he'd want in return.

'Are you allowed to sit in that chair?' she asked now.

He stirred. 'Uh?'

'That's Nana's chair.'

Her father mumbled something.

Sarah stood in front of him. 'Tell me where my Nana is,' she said. It came out loud. 'Or don't you even know?'

Her father rose, his hand raised. Her own hands went up to cover her head. But his arm stopped in mid-air, as if someone had caught him by the wrist.

She sat down bump on a dining chair.

'Your grandmother's gone,' said her father. 'You won't be seeing her again. That's all you need to know, alright?'

On the mantelpiece, the golden balls of the carriage clock revolved oilily. The fire rustled like crinkly paper.

Her father sat back and said Christ. Then he said, 'though when I say you won't be seeing her again, you will. In a way. She's coming back to the house tomorrow, so that your mother can say goodbye. So that the neighbours can pay their last respects. Then we can have the funeral.'

Sarah took the news in. 'I've never been to a human funeral,' she said. 'Will it be at night?'

Her father stared. 'You what?' he said.

'At this rate, we might decide you're too young to come to this one,' he added.

'I'm not too young,' said Sarah.

Her father raised his hand again, but not in a bad way. 'Alright, alright. Let's not talk about it now. Let's get tomorrow over with first.'

He sighed. 'You see, when she comes tomorrow, it won't really be her. I mean, it will but it won't. You do understand, don't you?'

Sarah nodded. But it was obvious he was the one who didn't understand.

'Is she having a procession?' Perhaps he at least knew that.

‘You what?’ said her father.

She sighed. In Africa, even monkeys had processions.

The servants’ monkey had lived on the end of a long chain. It was hardly ever let off because it made a beeline for the house and got in through a gap in the kitchen window. It loved to smash china and pull things to pieces, its whimper building to a scream, as if someone was being murdered.

When it died it was laid quickly in a Dunlop shoebox before more insects came. Richard had tied its chin and its toes up with cloth. ‘We tie mouth so monkey na speak,’ he said. ‘We tie toe so him na walk.’

Sarah stared at the tears that varnished his cheeks and dripped off his chin. She had never seen a man cry. From his shorts pocket Richard brought the monkey’s toy, a bent teaspoon it had spent hours turning over in its hands, perched on the handle of the garden fork that was its vantage point. He put the spoon in the box. Then he gave Sarah a bunch of twigs and told her to put them on top of the body. Looking at the monkey’s pink curled hands, still raised to fight the spider that had bitten it, Sarah was sorry she had been afraid of it.

‘Sesame tree, him grow hundred, hundred seed,’ said Richard. ‘Willi-willi come, him look for monkey spirit. But him na find. Him find only seed. Seed make problem for barawo devil, make plenty work. Him sit all night for to count. Monkey spirit is save for Papa God.’

Sarah nodded and didn’t dare speak. The lid went on.

The procession had to be done in the dark to stop anyone’s spirit following the monkey to the next realm. Back at the house, Sarah saw her mother passing to and fro behind the lit window in her orange dress, like a film star.

Before the first handfuls of dirt could rain down on the Dunlop box, the cook had to take Sarah's hand and lead her all over the compound behind Richard and the gardener. They walked round and round and up and down, twisting and turning. It was to confuse the devil and stop the monkey spirit finding its way back. It was important to do everything right or the spirit might be restless and they would have to do the funeral all over again. Sarah fell into a trance watching Richard's heels rise and fall in front of her, pale in the moonlight. She felt like a cog in a big, smooth-running machine and could have walked behind him forever.

Her father had fallen silent. She got up to put more coal on the fire, transferring the shiny, uneven pieces from the bucket using the heavy, blackened tongs. The coal made a thick blanket; the fire went out and the room cooled and grew darker. Sarah waited for a telling off, but her father's head had dropped onto his chest.

Sarah went round the house. She began with the front bedroom, where her mother was sleeping in the wide bed. Light from the streetlamp soaked the thin curtains and stained the whole room yellow. Sarah stood and listened to her mother breathe, soft as a distant sea.

She went back down the corridor to Nana's room, at the back of the house. The wardrobe loomed in the corner, like a night watchman. Sarah went to the single bed and ran her hand over the quilt, feeling its shine. She touched the bristles of Nana's hairbrush on the dressing table then opened her tub of face powder, sniffed the contents and coughed. She went to the window and peered down into the back garden, at the dark bulk of the shed. She wondered if the washing line and the apple tree were still there. Beyond the garden other houses had lit squares. There, normal things were probably happening, like Top of the Pops and Dixon of Dock Green.

No-one ever went in the front room. It housed the piano, three hard arm chairs and a thick white rug with a design of pink and blue dragons. The rug came from China and Nana forbade anyone to walk on it their outdoor shoes.

Last was the kitchen. Tink, tink, went the water from the long rubber snout of the cold tap. Sarah switched the light on. The brightness made everything seem too normal so she switched it off again. The kitchen was bigger in the dark. She crossed to the pantry, avoiding the black squares on the lino.

The pantry was indoors but felt like outdoors because the floor and shelves were made of stone slabs. Inside, Sarah touched Nana's tea caddy, black and shiny with red and gold Chinese figures. She reached inside a brown paper bag and touched tomatoes, cool and smooth. She peeped under waxed paper at sliced ham, shiny and white rimmed. In the metal bread bin was half a loaf that smelt funny and in the cake tin, half a cake that smelt of caraway seed, Nana's favourite.

The seeds were on the top shelf, in a jam jar. Sarah picked up all the jars in turn. Nutmegs nudged each other. Silver balls rattled. Glace cherries sat tight, glued together with syrup. Sarah thought of all Nana's recipes: rice pudding, Easter biscuits, queen cakes, trifle. She saw Nana serving up tinned peaches and condensed milk as if it was a treat; saw her mother put her finger to her lips to stop Sarah saying it wasn't.

In the quiet, chilly pantry, she stayed still and concentrated hard, in case any luck was waiting to happen.

'Are you there, Nana?' she whispered.

She wasn't really expecting a reply. Nana never said much about herself, always wanted to hear your news first.

The next morning, when the men came, they trod all over the pink and blue dragons.

‘Forget the damn rug,’ said her mother, starting to cry. ‘The important thing is that Mum’s home.’

People arrived. The neighbour, Mrs Rampstead, came round three times and after every visit a crystal sherry glass stood upside down on the draining board. Mrs Rampstead eyed the mask on the mantelpiece and muttered about graven images and black magic. But Nana, who read the tealeaves, had loved magic. She’d once taken Sarah all round Gloucester to buy a wand. When they could only find a toy one, she said she didn’t know what the covered market was coming to.

But Nana wasn’t there to put Mrs Rampstead right. Sarah went upstairs and lay down on the floor in the narrow room behind the bathroom that used to be her Uncle’s.

You could hear people going to the toilet. You could hear the front door open and close, open and close; hear muffled sobs and moments later, laughter. Sarah thought people should be happy or sad, not both. Nana had a fault after all: she knew too many people.

No-one came up to see her, except her father, to bring her a sandwich of rubber cheese. When he’d gone, Sarah threw it out of the window. It got dark. When a rind of light appeared under the door, she got up.

In the back room, Sarah’s mother sat in Nana’s chair, gazing into the fire. Hope leapt in Sarah that she would smile or speak. But she didn’t look up.

‘I want to see Nana,’ said Sarah.

Her father took cutlery out of a drawer. ‘Not a good idea.’

The room stank and there were empty glasses and sherry bottles everywhere. Three plump newspaper parcels lay by the fire. 'Please.'

Her father held something silver. 'Are these what you mean by fish knives, Maureen?'

Her mother nodded. She looked at Sarah, but Sarah was scared by the swollen, blotchy face and looked quickly away.

'I really want to see her,' she told her father. 'It's important.'

Her father shut the drawer. 'Well you can't. And there's an end to it.'

Sarah hoped her mother might look over again.

'You can see your grandmother in the morning,' her father said. 'Before they put the, err, lid on.'

'It'll be too late by then,' said Sarah.

'You what?' said her father, losing control of a newspaper parcel so that the fish flopped out onto the table.

Sarah glanced at her mother. But her mother's gaze had returned to the fire. There was something in there that she couldn't take her eyes off.

The front room was very dark. Sarah had waited in her Uncle's room, listening to the tick of the electric fire in the bathroom, the creak of the floorboards and the sighing of the airing cupboard, where Nana kept her ragbag and button box. The sounds had eventually stopped, and she had edged her way downstairs, hanging off the banister to stop the stairs squeaking.

The coffin stood on trestles in the middle of the Chinese rug. The black and white china dogs looked down on its contents from the mantelpiece, but all Sarah could see was an edge of shiny white.

She needed something to stand on. She dragged the piano stool across to the coffin and climbed up, feeling the rough brocade under her bare knees.

Nana's hands, chilly and soft as dust, were forever busy, stabbing a long pin into the hat that looked like a blackcurrant; conjuring the six o'clock news from the wireless; pecking crumbs from the chenille tablecloth. Or twisting the pages of the *Gloucester Citizen* for the fire, or pressing warm half-crowns into Sarah's hand.

But now they were still and Nana, her face secretive and waxy, held them on her chest crossed uselessly. Sarah sank back onto her knees. Her father had been right, for once in his life. This was Nana, but it wasn't Nana.

In the kitchen, it was light as day. The moon beamed down on the sink, the yellow Formica table, the kettle whose whistle was now at peace.

The stone flags in the pantry were so cold they hurt. Sarah smelt the ham again; saw the little men in golden robes drinking tea under the tree.

The moon shone through the high window onto the row of jam jars.

The jar she wanted stood between the angelica and the cloves.

She crept back through the kitchen, through the back room and into the hall where she stood, listening. Everything was still.

In the front room the dogs still gazed down, the piano still stood with its back to the wall baring its keys and the coffin still pointed through the open curtains. But the room was now filled with shadows, wedges and columns of dark that stretched out from the foot of things.

Sarah swallowed. But the piano stool stood firm as she climbed on. She looked down. Nana's skin was whiter, her nostrils darker and bigger, her eyes more deeply sunk in their sockets. She was getting deader by the minute.

Sarah was glad she knew what to do. She unscrewed the lid of the jam jar. The contents ran into her hand.

'I love you, Nana,' she whispered as she scattered the seed and watched it race over the dead face and hands and gather, darkly, in all the crevices and folds.

Brian W. Lavery

At Death's Door

Irritating loudmouths late at night in curry houses are one of life's constants, as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, I suppose. This one was off *Kings Cross* in the early 80s. Our table was a mix of ten or so regional newspapermen of varying ages, behaving like tourists. A *Jolly Boys'* outing, after closing time.

There were no women with us, so at least us younger ones didn't have to cringe at the goings-on of the older *haven't you got a sense of humour, love?* brigade. A handful of years before I joined my first paper there were only two women, one did the "women's page" and the other had to leave when she married a sub-editor. That rule thankfully was forced off the books by the *NUJ* (the journalists' union), but not so long since. Women journalists' numbers were increasing, but still in the minority with many forced into the "knitting and kittens" features.

It was the final night of a residential newspaper law and ethics course. Strong drink was taken, too-hot food ordered and our conversation was as far from ethics and law as possible. Myself, another young news reporter and Adam Findlay, a world-weary senior journalist forced to be there, made the most of our newspaper's expense account. Yes, even regional papers had expense accounts back then.

The diners who were just two tables away near the toilets let everybody know who they were.

‘Kelvin’s such a baastaard...gave Dylan such a rollicking for fucking up that death knock...eh?’

Dylan feigned shame and was drowned out by Mockney jeers as he tried to protest.

‘He only forgot to lift the bleedin’ album!’ Death knock. The god-awful phrase coined by journalists for door-stepping the bereaved. On my paper, in line with most regionals, this was done with the dignity and respect you’d expect in approaching a heart-broken widow, mother, father or whoever. Nobody enjoyed this task. I certainly did not and until that night had never met or seen anyone who did. But the redtop tabloid wannabes, who would not stop trying to outdo each other with tales from the doors of the bereft, loved them it seemed.

Lifting the album? An old hack’s trick. Basically, while visiting the bereaved, the reporter (or photographer) asks if they can take “the whole album, to get the best picture for the tribute in the paper.” In reality, it was to make sure the next hack who came along would have no chance of a photo. Some freelances who lifted the album, chose some photos for whoever hired them that day and then would try to sell the remainder to other outlets.

The high-volume conversation of the half-dozen loudmouths let everyone in the dark, flock wallpapered environs of *The Last Viceroy* know just who they were. *Sun* journalists and proud of it. But we on the regional tourists’ table knew the truth. These guys were not really “*Sun* Journalists”. They were shifters. Casuals. Kids that worked on local papers during the day and did shifts by night. That’s the way into to the national Press. Still is.

Today I believe they call them “twenty-fives”, that is, they are usually twenty-five years old, paid twenty-five

grand a year and burnt out or fired in twenty-five months. One in a hundred gets the *Golden Fleece* – a proper job with a real contract. The rest are newsroom fodder to fill rotas.

The more they bawled their way through their beers and biryanis, the more Adam Findlay's disgust became less concealed as newbie foot-in-the-door man Dylan took more slagging from his newsroom chums.

Adam was the senior guy on our trio and we, and our new-found pals from other regionals at the table, loved him. Adam was a great teller, and writer, of stories and was on form that night. An ex-Para, who had won the Military Cross in Aden, he had worked on all the big papers and agencies and had travelled the world on Beaverbrook and Harmsworth-King and IPC's money, among other big-name media moguls. Now he was seeing out his days on our local Yorkshire daily, where his news-desk role did not get in the way of his drinking. In his own words, he had a "glittering career behind me." That was Adam; self-deprecating, worshipped by the young wannabes and by his contemporaries. The tall, slim handsome fifty-something with the piercing blue eyes, now watery and oyster-like, had truly been around. A war correspondent, foreign desk man at *Reuters*, news desker on most red tops and once a renowned features writer on the old *Express*.

He could have been the next Donald Zec, the famed *Mirror* features legend, some said. But he settled for being the present Adam Findlay, with the whiff of Graham Greene's whisky priest about him. His sins were many and he knew this. His skills were high. He knew this too.

He was the journalist's journalist in our eyes, and in those of our new-found pals from the law course.

Back at the loud table, the five shifters and their boss, given the way he was holding court, continued to try to

out-bastard each other with tales of death-knock derring-do.

On our table even the college-leaver from the Stockport weekly knew most of the stories we heard were drunken, shaggy dog tales designed to impress.

‘The day Bob shouted through the letterbox of some minor celeb, “You tell The Sun or the police, mate it’s up to you.”’

‘Or when the copper shoved a whole sponge through the letterbox when Ted’s ruddy face was still pushed against it. The cop had been accused by a local charity of having his hands in their till. When the bold Ted rocked up, he shouted through the letterbox, “We only want to give you a chance to tell your side of the story.” When, “oof!” Ted gets a face full of Victoria Sponge!’ And so on.

“True” stories, but not necessarily theirs. *The Sun* crew’s boss man at least might have been speaking from experience. After all, he had been around, as he never tired of reminding the damned diners of *The Last Viceroy*.

We just got the impression these lads were making themselves the heroes of tales they had heard elsewhere. The sort churned out by journos in bars the world over.

But there was no shouting from them about the devastated widow who saw her dead husband’s photo in the paper the day after some hack lifted it from her mantelpiece while his mate had kept her distracted by talking, or about the heartbroken parents whose kids’ photos, nicked from the wall of the headmaster’s study while the school Assembly mourned the loss of seven kids in a coach crash, appeared in the morning paper, or on the evening news.

‘Nah, mate! None of that. Crash, bang, wallop! Get a picture!’

This sort of machismo was very much in demand at *The Sun* since Kelvin MacKenzie, the journalist who

proudly boasted that he left school with just one O-level, took charge a couple of years earlier, succeeding the quiet-spoken Geordie miner's son Sir Larry Lamb, the ex-*Daily Express* editor. He lent the initial respectability and leadership (along with the purchase of *The Times*) required to ensure Rupert Murdoch's new acquisition after he had bought his other British newspaper, *News of the World*, a few years earlier. MacKenzie was not long in making his mark, cementing the *Sun's* incredible sales figures which were now ahead of the big rival, the *Daily Mirror*. MacKenzie had previously been night editor at Sir Larry's *Daily Express*.

MacKenzie wanted his newsroom in his image. He claimed to understand the readers. He once told one of his news executives who questioned his methods: 'You just don't understand the readers, do you, eh? He's the bloke you see in the pub, a right old fascist, wants to send the wogs back, buy his poxy council flat, he's afraid of the unions, afraid of the Russians, hates the queers and the weirdos and drug dealers. He doesn't want to hear about that stuff. (serious news)'¹ The philosophy that no doubt gave him those memorable headlines like **GOTCHA!** (on the sinking of the Argentinian warship *Belgrano* in the 1982 Falklands Conflict); or **FREDDIE STARR ATE MY HAMSTER** (on a story peddled to him by the now-disgraced celebrity PR guru Max Clifford.)

Incidentally, what Kelvin didn't include so often in his "one O-level" spiel was that the certificate in English Literature came from the posh *Alleyn's School* in Dulwich, a leading public school where young Kelvin's journalist parents paid a pretty penny to try to avoid having him end up with the accent he had since adopted.

1 From Peter Chippendale, Chris Horrie's book *Stick It Up Your Punter* – an inside story of the life at The Sun.

As MacKenzie's foot soldiers ranted on at their table, I could not help but think of a death knock I had done just a few weeks earlier. It was not a house but outside a court room, at an inquest into the death of a little girl, aged four. She had died in a swimming pool in Spain on a family holiday. The court heard how the infant's distraught father ploughed through the pool where his little girl was last seen. The water was filthy. He was unable to see the bottom of the pond. He discovered his drowned daughter when he stepped on her. Even now, writing this the feeling knotted in my guts is as bad as it was that day. I did not want to approach this man. I just wanted to let him go home. He and his family were taken to a side room after the hearing to compose themselves. I called my news desk. It was Adam. I explained.

'Look son, it's no' nice. We a' know that,' he drawled in his Ayrshire accent. 'But you have to ask. Be mannerly. Try not to take no for an answer. Be firm. If they say go away, then go away, but if they want to talk, we owe to the readers to record it. OK, son?'

'Aye, thanks Adam.' Minutes later I saw the distraught man in the corridor. I noticed the corkscrew-like swirl of the smoke from the cigarette in his shaking hand. I plucked up my courage and spoke. 'Excuse me sir, I'm from the local paper. Could you spare a minute for a chat, please?'

His rage took me aback. He bawled, 'Fuck off. My little girl is dead and you want a story, you fucking vulture!' And with a venom I have not seen before or since he added, 'I hope you die of cancer, you cunt!'

'I deserve that,' the thought came out loud and the angry man mellowed briefly, his eyes a bit less hateful; but not by much. I turned and marched quickly from the court with the eyes of dozens of bystanders drilling into me as I tried to keep my dignity and hide my welling tears.

‘Ethics! Ethics! As far as fuckers like them o’er there are concerned, it’s a county near Sussthics!’ Adam Findlay’s punchline broke my reverie. He was on his feet. The rest of the table were laughing as Adam walked toward the toilet.

As he passed *The Sun* casuals’ table, their boss man shouted out, ‘Findlay, old boy! How the devil are...’

‘I’m not your old boy, mate,’ snapped Adam, fixed his gaze and added, ‘Still filling young heads with bullshit?’

Our table and theirs went silent with the rest of the diners.

Findlay’s former colleague attempted an answer but was not given the chance.

‘I’ve fucking shot better men than you,’ said Adam.

The old hack knew not to push him.

The Sun crew moved on quickly. The remainder of the evening was much quieter.

II

One of my earliest ‘death knocks’ was to the home of a young fisherman’s mother. Her boy had died at sea. It was thirty years or more ago and to my shame I can’t remember all the details. But I do recall that on my first daily paper it was approached with respect and care. Over the decades, the *Hull Daily Mail* had covered all too many such stories from the city’s Hessle Road fishing community. I also remember being briefed by my news editor to be non-intrusive and respectful. ‘You’re an ambassador for the paper, as well as a reporter.’

That’s the difference between local journalism and the *Fleet Street* lot. Many of the national guys were decent people but pushed by news desks into indecent tricks. Others, however, would sell their granny for a story. These

reporters would probably never see the town or people they had just trashed ever again.

For local newspaper reporters, back then, it was very different indeed. They were part of a community that they had to return to time after time for news. That community was the lifeblood of the paper and this was reflected in the respectful practices and rewarded by the support of local people, and not just in sales. My paper was such a journal.

I was 21-years-old and had not long completed a year in journalism, but I fancied I looked the part of an ace reporter in my belted mac, the sort Damon Runyon wrote about. In reality, I was just a nervous kid in a stupid posey coat. Until then, the most nerve-wracking assignment I had had was getting all the rabbit and guinea pig results in the correct order for my recent *Cottingham Show* report.

In the passenger seat of the *Mini Metro* driven by a snapper 40 years my senior my nerves were assuaged, in part. ‘Don’t worry kid,’ he said, from the side of his mouth without the cig dangling from it. ‘They’ll have everything ready for you when we get there. It’s like a tribute to their kid. Trust me, they’ll have it all, from his school swimming badges to his photo from the mantelpiece. They expect us to come round. I have even known families years ago when the fishing was big, phoning the news desk and demanding a reporter was sent around. It’s like a tradition.’

We parked outside the little two-up, two-down and the photographer gave me a further final piece of free advice. ‘Remember kid, if she gets the family album out make sure you take it with you. Don’t leave it for the next guy to pick up. Just tell her you need to take them all so the picture desk can pick the best one for the tribute.’ Now in this case what the photographer said was genuine. There was no “lifting the album” at the *Hull Daily Mail*. In fact, albums, once copied, were returned, often with complimentary

black-bordered eight-by- twelve prints, that would become the new focal point of many a Northern mantelpiece.

He went on: 'I'll get my pic and you bring me the album after you've done your chat. I'll be in *Rayner's* having a vodka. It doesn't show up on the breath, you know.'

I knocked on the door. It was answered by a little boy of about three years of age. On his upper lip was a little green Hitler-like snot moustache. All he had on was a vest.

'Can I speak with your mummy, please? Is she in?'

'I'm from the *Hull Daily Mail*,' I added like an idiot, as if an infant would know what that meant.

With that, the little kid screeched at the top of his voice. 'Mam, there's a mister from the 'ull Daily Mail 'ere!' Once inside the snapper got the head and shoulders photo of the bereaved mother and left me to get on with the interview.

It was about an hour later when I arrived at *Rayner's* – the Hessle Road fishermen's pub. Or more accurately the now-unemployed fishermen's pub (the industry was all but finished by 1980, which added to the tragedy of the dead boy whose mother had, as my colleague predicted, given fulsome tribute to her teenage boy.) The photographer was at a table in the bar. I pulled up a stool and took a family photo album from under my coat. It was with a significantly steadier hand that the seasoned snapper flicked through the album. 'Well done, kid,' he said. 'You've played a blinder.' I watched him neck another large vodka while I sipped a Coke (not because I was abstemious, I was simply scared of getting caught, after all it was not yet one o'clock).

'I'll drop you off, kid. I've got another job at two,' he added as he drained the glass. 'C'mon kid, let's get going.'

As we left, the photographer nodded over to a woman sat by the door. She was a big lady. In front of her was a small bottle of stout. She looked pre-occupied. 'Hi-ya, Lil,' he said.

‘Oh hi-ya love,’ she replied. Her thick dark beehive style hair protruded from her head scarf. I didn’t say anything but stared at her as we left. ‘That’s big Lily Bilocca, kid,’ said the snapper. ‘She’s the dame that fought the trawler bosses back in ’68. She’s a right character.’

On the way to the office I was regaled with tales of the fishwives’ uprising which followed the 1968 *Triple Trawler Disaster*. I learned how 58 men had died and how the sole survivor, Harry Eddom, fought for his life in the Arctic and came home a hero. Yet throughout this vodka-fuelled history lesson all I could think was, *that Lily woman looks a bit like my mother*. In years to come I was to learn more about the woman with the slight resemblance to my Ma than I ever knew about my mother herself. They were born a year apart in different areas and circumstances, but the more I learned about Lil the more I thought about the tough lives women like those had lived, strong women like my mother, hands that could rock the cradles, and the world.

III

Less than a decade later, as a freelance in the North of England, I was to write Lily’s obituary for *The Times*. The first person I called when I was commissioned to do the piece was that old photographer, and then Adam Findlay. Next day her *Times*’ obituary was only five pars – and they misspelt her name. I remember thinking that she deserved more. More than 20 years later I left newspapers, returned to further education and wrote a book based on my PhD. It told the story of Lillian Bilocca, the men that died that year and the fight that Lily and her *Headscarf Revolutionaries* undertook and campaigned to change the most dangerous industry on earth, deep sea trawling, for the better, saving countless lives to come. To think a “death knock” all those

years ago gave life to a full tribute to 6,000 men who sailed from Hull across a century, never to return, via the book I would write.

Today's version of the death knock is a more sinister affair, with no need for stealing from the mantelpieces of the heartbroken anymore. Nowadays far too many of the bereaved realise for the first time that their loved one is dead when they see their *Facebook* or *Twitter* profile photos in the pages of a national newspaper.

The technology has changed and everyone's a citizen journalist now. The untrained, the curious, the just-plain-nosey and the downright cruel are the wielders of ubiquitous mobile devices which in seconds send heartache around the globe in a flash.

At least before the digital revolution, the death knock was a face-to-face affair, and the journalist and the journalist met, however briefly, the story's subject.

Now the death-knocker is as Death itself; faceless and omnipresent.

POSTSCRIPT: MARCH 22, 2017

Reports of a terror attack came on the TV news from London saying a policeman was murdered and others killed and maimed after being run over near the Houses of Parliament as part of a terror attack. Minutes after seeing the first bulletin I checked my social media. On my Twitter feed, I read a desperate plea which said, 'Please people do not RT (retweet) images from the scene. These folks have relatives and they should not find out their loved ones' fate on Twitter.'

Directly above this was a photograph of a young woman laid out, possibly dead, on the pavement of Westminster Bridge.

Author's Note: This creative nonfiction/short story synthesis contains composite characters representing former colleagues to protect those still alive and respect those who have passed on. Adam Findlay is such a character – an amalgam of men I have worked with over the years, but every aspect in this piece happened. Nothing was “made up”.

Ray French

The Two Funerals of Patrick Cullen

The first one was held in St Christopher's, the church in Newport that Luke and Ellen went to as kids. Built with money raised by the Irish who worked on the buildings and docks, the priests were imported from County Wexford, Waterford or Tipperary. They were robust, rural men who always looked out of place in that grimy industrial town. One of them, Father Hayes, became famous for claiming in one of his sermons, 'We are a tiny island of Catholics, surrounded by a sea of Methodists.' So Luke was surprised when he saw the priest waiting for them at the church door on the cold February night they went to discuss the funeral arrangements. He wore a stylish black Crombie, single stud earring and shiny oxblood doc martens.

'Ellen and Luke?'

He was Welsh, softly spoken, from somewhere in the industrial south, but without the harsh edge to his voice you often got in Newport and Cardiff. Though still relatively young, mid-thirties at most guessed Luke, he already had the weary expression of a man battling against the odds.

'I'm Father Michael.'

He shook their hands, ushered them inside. Ellen had already spoken to him on the phone and now took the lead, while Luke, only half-listening, gazed around. He hadn't

been inside St Christopher's for over thirty years. The huge stained glass windows were still impressive, the same dark, grisly paintings depicting the Stations of the Cross lined the walls, but the place looked smaller, shabbier. The plaster was cracked and flaking, the benches worn and chipped, the high-vaulted ceiling badly needed repair. The powerful sense of loss took him by surprise. Memories surged up: the priest rubbing ashes on his forehead at Easter; the altar boys swinging incense on chains; being marched here from primary school to mass here on Holy Days, and ushered brusquely into benches by their form teachers. Ellen, four years older, sat near the front, never once looking around to see if he was there.

He sometimes felt that distance between them had never been bridged.

'It's a lovely church,' said the priest, when he saw Luke gazing up at the ceiling, 'but as you can see it could do with some investment.'

'It was always full when I came here with my parents.'

'We probably get about thirty for Sunday mass now.'

Luke tried to imagine how small that would look in a church this size. There must have been three or four hundred here for mass in the 1970's and 80's. His father stopped going years ago, but his mother continued to attend twice a week until the dementia took hold and they found her a place in a home two years before. He suspected she'd gone to get a break from their father, to sit quietly in a place where nothing was demanded of her except to rise and sit at the appointed times, and let the quiet, calm voice of Father Michael drift over her. She was still in the home, unaware her husband had died, rarely recognising him and Ellen when they visited.

'Most of the congregation were Irish back then,' Luke replied.

Father Michael squinted up at a damp patch in the ceiling.

‘A lot of those will have died or gone back home. It’s the Poles that keep this place going now.’

They moved on to the question of favourite hymns and prayers. This was an awkward moment, their father was not a man who ever talked about hymns, took Holy Communion, or offered any opinions about a sermon, unless it was to complain it went on too fucking long. He liked a priest who got through mass quickly, so he could get home and change, go to his allotment while their mother cooked Sunday lunch. He’d come back just as she was taking the chicken out of the oven, bursting through the door and shouting, ‘The working man is home! Jayzus, great grub.’

‘The usual hymns will do,’ said Luke, waving a hand vaguely. Father Michael took this in his stride, never missing a beat as he moved on to ask if there was any other music they’d like played. Ellen opened her bag and took out a CD, *Come To The Bower*.

‘The last track, *Fields Of Athenry*, was his favourite song.’

Father Michael took it from her.

‘If we could have it played at the end.’

‘Yes, of course. And will you be wanting to say anything?’

‘I’d like to read a poem,’ said Ellen.

The priest looked at her expectantly.

‘I haven’t decided which one yet.’

‘I’d like to say something,’ Luke told him. ‘I won’t take more than a few minutes.’

One thing he and Ellen shared was an aversion to people who went on and on at funerals and weddings.

‘And it’s a cremation after the funeral?’

‘That’s right, we’re taking his ashes to Ireland to be buried.’

Father Michael nodded, the migrant returning home in a box a familiar routine. Probably a lot of the Poles did the same.

Father Michael took down details about their father’s life, and made bullet points next to them, Luke noticed. When they’d finished he slipped the notebook into his pocket and asked if they’d chosen a place for refreshments after the service was over?

‘That’s next on our list,’ said Ellen.

‘The Golf and Country Club just down the road from the crem might work, that’s the place a lot of people use. It saves everyone driving back into town and finding a place to park. They won’t be busy on a Tuesday afternoon.’

‘Thank you, we’ll check it out.’

Luke could tell that Ellen wanted to go, that she needed to move onto the next thing, her way of coping. She looked pale, exhausted. On the way here in the car she told him how she kept waking in the early hours with a start, sure that something terrible was about to happen, then remembered that it already had. But Luke was touched by the priest’s thoughtfulness, his honesty, and it felt rude to rush off. He thought it would be polite to show some interest in his work, and asked him about the notices in the entrance, advertising other services, meetings, drop-ins.

He told them about the eight clock mass he held in the week for a handful of elderly people who had trouble sleeping; the parent and toddler sessions on Mondays and Wednesdays; the drop-ins on Tuesdays and Thursdays for the unemployed and retired – tea, coffee, biscuits and a chit-chat. A shame their father hadn’t attended these, but he’d never been a joiner. He’d have had no idea how to chat to strangers over tea and biscuits, and any attempts

to do so would have ended in disaster. Luke imagined him, those green eyes glaring, standing far too close as he roared, ‘Grand tea missus! Christ it’s great to get out of the house once in a while, ain’t it?’

Luke could imagine the priest as a social worker, or running a hostel for the homeless. It didn’t seem possible that someone like him actually believed that the Son of God died for our sins. He was young, had missed out on the glory days of packed congregations, reached adulthood in an era of plummeting attendances, leaky roofs, sex scandals and the risk of sequestration. A good man in a rotting institution trying to do the right thing in a dead end town. It would make a good midweek Channel 4 drama, barely scraping an audience but gathering respectful reviews in *The Guardian* and *The Observer*.

Later, over a drink, he asked Ellen what she’d made of Father Michael. ‘Very nice’, she replied and returned to discussing arrangements for the lunch at the Golf and Country Club. Even after all these years he was still taken aback by how uninterested she could be in other people sometimes. ‘That’s all very good,’ she would say, if he drifted away from the main topic too long for her liking, as if they only met to discuss action points, ‘But which of us is going to visit mam next week?’

They counted up the number of people coming, how many to the lunch afterwards. Discussed sandwich fillings, whether to have sausage rolls, samosas, or both, and which types of quiche. When they’d finished Ellen looked out of the window, and for a moment he thought she would cry. He was about to reach out and take her hand when she said, ‘Right! What’s next?’

She nipped off to ring Des, and Luke stared out of the rainy window at the cars zipping past on the M4, on their

way to somewhere more interesting. He wondered what a hip priest like Father Michael did with himself at night in a place like Newport? His cropped hair, that stylish coat and earring, was the One Holy And Apostolic Church comfortable with that kind of thing now? He doubted it. The posting to Newport was obviously their way of showing their disapproval.

The funeral went smoothly. Father Michael was respectful, understated and professional. There was no attempt to sound as though he knew their father well, but he made the most of what Luke and Ellen had told him. In his way he was a storyteller, constructing a coherent narrative from a jumble of snatched memories, fleeting impressions, and anecdotes. Luke liked the way he emphasized that this had been a church which welcomed people from different communities, both in the past and now, and, he hoped, in the future. There had been a mix of races in Luke's class – the Italians, some Asians and Ayo, the class comic, the black girl who wound up the teachers and cracked them all up with her whiplash replies. What had happened to them all? Had they got out as soon as they could, like him, or were they still living here, still meeting up with their old school friends, telling the old stories?

Their Irish cousin Katy and their cousins from Liverpool and Manchester had come. Luke noticed some old school friends and neighbours dotted around the pews. A few unknown elderly people sat the back. Maybe thirty people or so in all, not a bad turn out.

At the Golf and Country Club there was tea, sandwiches and drinks. This was posh Newport, plush red carpet, fake beams, on the walls photos of golfers, trophies in glass cabinets. Luke had brought a collection of old photos: him and Ellen as kids, then teenagers. Their parents at different

stages – their mother at eighteen, a shock of frizzy hair, face bright with expectation. Their father in his Royal Navy uniform, strikingly handsome, a glint of danger in his eyes, looking a little like Robert Ryan, one of his favourite actors.

‘No wonder your mother fell for him,’ said Brenda, one of the Liverpool cousins.

Their father in the garden in summer, wearing just a pair of shorts and an Australian bush hat, mugging at the camera, resembling one of those grotesque Irish apes in a *Punch* cartoon from the nineteenth century. Katy burst out laughing.

‘*That’s* the Pat I remember. Oh god, he was a gas sometimes.’

Des, Ellen’s husband, was a quiet man, but something in the photos made him turn philosophical, and during a lull he said, ‘*That’s* all we are in the end. A jarful of ashes.’

He seemed not to notice the uncomfortable silence. Then he added, ‘I liked Paddy, there aren’t many left like him.’

Luke had always thought the sober, thoughtful Des found his father crude.

‘In another culture he’d be revered as an elder, and kids brought to meet him so they could learn the old ways.’

Luke thought that was laying it on a bit thick. But then Des never had him as a father, hadn’t experienced the roaring, the swearing, the blood-curdling threats. Once, when Luke was about eight or nine, a couple of boys a little younger than him were playing football in the back lane. Twice the ball flew over the wall into their garden, twice his father had flung it back when they’d asked. After the second time he warned, ‘If you send that over here again I’ll put my fecking axe in it.’ He had an axe to hand, as he was chopping wood, and he showed it to them.

A few minutes later the ball soared into the garden for a third time, and his father made good on his promise, puncturing their ball, then tossing it back over the wall.

‘There’s your fecking ball. Are you happy now?’

There was a brief, stunned silence. Then one of the boys shouted, ‘Mister, you’re a bastard.’

Their father pushed open the gate and, axe in hand, chased the two of them down the lane.

‘I’ll fecking kill ya, ya little bastards.’

Father Michael mingled briefly. He shook a few hands, said a few words, had a cup of tea, left.

‘A nice looking man,’ said Brenda, nibbling a samosa. ‘A bit of a waste.’ She laughed at herself in case anyone made fun of her. Luke relaxed, accepted that it was going well, so grateful that people came, and behaved themselves. When the last guest had left he found Ellen pouring herself a large glass of white wine.

‘Do you think it went okay?’ she asked.

‘Yeah, very well I reckon.’

She looked at Luke as though she’d remembered something about him that she’d been trying to forget, then tipped back the glass, her eyes closed. For a moment he thought that was it, then she said something that shocked him.

‘I’m glad you’re here. I couldn’t have done it without you.’

This was a rare compliment, and he wasn’t sure how to take it. She looked at Des picking away at the last of the sausage rolls.

‘He’ll get fat again, after all that time he spent in the gym last year.’

She turned back to Luke, and now he saw how exhausted she was, her face drawn, those four extra years really showing. She looked ready to collapse.

‘You really think everyone was okay?’

‘Yes, I do. Actually, I think they enjoyed themselves – you know, the stories about dad.’

Katy had told them how patient their father had been with her when she was young, taking her out on mushroom hunts, showing her the best places to look, never once getting irritated by how useless she’d been at it. Luke had no idea his father was capable of patience, or knew where to find mushrooms. Brenda remembered the time he’d visited them in Liverpool, telling them war stories, terrible things; men on fire in the sea; men screaming for their mothers as they died; the terror of being a stoker in the bowels of the ship, knowing you’d go down with it if a torpedo struck. Luke had never heard any of this. Or about the time he and one of his brothers had got drunk in Ireland and tried to steal a pig, and staggered home, pigless, covered in shit. All these different versions of him, unknown to him, and to Ellen.

Ellen nodded faintly, pulling at her watch strap. She was somewhere else, far away from him. That distance, always there. On his first day in school he’d ran up to her in the playground, desperate to speak to her about something. She had grabbed his arm, pulled him to one side and warned him never, ever to do it again. Even now he remembered the shock of her anger, how it froze him to the spot, and knew this was something they’d be locked into forever.

Still, they needed to find a way of working together now.

‘They had a good laugh at the photos.’

‘Yes, they did, didn’t they? It was a good idea, bringing those.’

She stopped pulling at her strap, and sighed.

‘Well, that’s over.’

Luke raised his glass, desperate to raise her spirits.

‘Here’s to the auld fella.’

She smiled faintly, they clinked glasses and drank, then leant back against the wall in silence, shoulder to shoulder. Luke closed his eyes; the worry, the lack of sleep, that hideous moment, the one he’d been dreading, when the coffin disappeared through the curtain to the sounds of *The Fields of Athenry*, all finally fading into the background. They had no father, their mother didn’t know who they were anymore; now they only had each other. Right then, at that moment, he thought they’d be okay.

Ellen turned to him and said, ‘It’s the one in Ireland I’m really worried about.’

Luke carried the ashes in his backpack on the boat to Ireland, Fishguard to Rosslare, the route they’d taken so many times in the summer. When he collected them from the funeral director the day before he’d been shocked by how warm the urn was. Hard not to feel this was his father’s spirit enduring – the rage still burning. They waited till they were halfway across, and there was just one man left leaning on the railings at the back of the boat before they made their move. He unscrewed the lid and each of them took a handful of ashes and flung them into the Irish Sea. They put their arms around each other and watched the flakes dance madly before the wind suddenly changed and the ashes flew back, spraying their clothes, blowing into their faces.

Luke started laughing.

‘*The Big Lebowski.*’

‘What?’

Ellen looked at him as if he'd gone mad. He shook his head.

'Nothing.'

Ellen delicately picked a flake from her top lip with her finger and slowly swallowed, closing her eyes as if she were taking communion. Luke tried to think of something memorable to say, but felt his throat tighten and the bitterness rising.

'A drink,' said Ellen.

They drove to Katy's, Des behind the wheel, Ellen next to him, Luke squeezed in between their teenagers, Christopher and Alannah. Luke remembered their Uncle Mike picking them up at Rosslare in what called his *Flinstones* car, how it shook and rattled as they navigated the potholes. Mike would laugh when he saw Luke staring through the holes in the floor at the road beneath.

'Don't be worrying now, Luke, boy, you're safe with me.'

Now, in Ellen and Des's Volvo estate, he gazed out the window. White cottages with thatched roofs, auld ones sitting on benches watching the world go by, cheerless looking pubs advertising Sky Sports, bungalows, a standing stone in an empty field, bungalows, a ruined abbey, more bungalows.

Christopher and Alannah had spotted one of his paintings in the Premier Inn at Newport, and plied him with questions. This was a sore point. Liam had never made money as an artist, who did? His debts had been escalating until a friend introduced him to the hotel chain scene a few years ago. He'd become solvent by churning out bland landscapes, seascapes and lifeless abstracts to help relax budget travellers in their cut-price hotel rooms.

‘Is it well paid?’ asked Christopher.

‘Leave him alone,’ said Des.

‘No, it’s alright,’ said Luke, not wanting to appear defensive. ‘Yes, it does pay well, as long as you carry on churning out product and don’t gag.’

‘It pays the rent though,’ cut in Ellen.

This was one of her reminders of how he’d finally fallen on his feet, and should be grateful. Of how, before that, she had bailed him out numerous times.

‘When we were growing up he was the special one, the golden boy. Whenever we came back to Ireland people begged him to draw them.’

‘*Jealous*,’ cried Alannah.

Des shot her a warning look.

‘Oh, I was – nothing I ever did could compare with Luke’s art. It seemed like magic, he never seemed to work at it, it just came naturally, as if he’d got the gift at Lourdes.’

He played, she did the hard work. He had talent but frittered it away. She ran her own business, had raised a family.

‘One of his paintings is still hanging up in The Atlantic Bar,’ she told them.

‘We’ll have to see it!’

It was something he’d done in the sixth form, a crowd pleaser, the little old Irish bar at night, glowing with warm, inviting light. But Luke’s favourite piece was about his dad. A recording of the *Fields of Athenry* playing next to a painting of him sitting on a stool in his allotment in Newport, staring into space. In the background the steelworks and docks, on the next allotment a West Indian man, plucking a sweet potato from the earth.

When they reached Katy's house she, her husband and their daughter ran out to meet them with their usual cry of, 'Welcome home!' The house had been old, run down when they'd bought it, the last owners an elderly couple who'd been there since the 1940's. Katy's husband had transformed it – sanded floorboards, put in new plastic doors and windows, modern furniture, an enormous TV in the living room. Luke missed his aunt and uncle's house, ramshackle, messy, the dog lying in front of the fire, the hall strewn with things Mike planned to fix but never did.

Katy put on a spread: chicken, roast spuds, gravy, followed by apple pie and ice cream. After a decent interval, out came the drink. When they'd had a few Katy broke it to them, explaining that last year the priest had stopped people from speaking at funerals.

'Why?'

'He said they often went on too long, and got upset, and some of them broke down at the altar.'

Luke started laughing.

'They got upset at a funeral, how inconsiderate. Who is this joker?'

Katy looked uncomfortable. She explained that they'd had a lot of trouble getting a replacement when Father Dunne retired.

'He was lovely, but he wasn't able for it anymore, he had terrible arthritis. Sure it's hard to get priests in a parish like this now. Father Dunne lived over 20 miles away. He had to do a mass here in the morning, then get into his car and drive to Castlebar for the midday mass. He kept it up for nearly a year, but he was too old.'

'We were hoping for a Polish priest,' said her husband, 'They have one over in Kilmore, they love him, they say he can't do enough for people. But we ended up with this

fella.’ He gave Luke a sympathetic look. ‘I don’t think anyone else would have him.’

‘Hang on, are you saying he actually won’t allow us to take part in our own father’s funeral? That we have to leave it up to him, to the church? What century is this?’

Ellen shot him a look. Something clicked into place. He remembered her and Katy huddled in a corner at the hotel, talking in low voices, Ellen giving him a look that shut him out.

‘We can be quick’, said Ellen.

Katy looked embarrassed.

‘We were quick in Newport’, she added. ‘We already know what we’re going to say. We’ve already said it once, you were there, you can tell him how it went.’

He couldn’t believe she was talking like this, Ellen of all people, pleading for permission to say a few words at her own father’s funeral.

‘Let me speak to him,’ said Luke.

‘No.’

Luke was shocked by the fear in Katy’s eyes. He could feel Ellen watching him.

‘It’s better if I do it. I know how to talk to him. I’ll go see him tomorrow.’

‘I’ll come with you,’ said Luke, then excused himself and walked to the bottom of the garden, and said, ‘Fuck, fuck, fuck!’

Later, when the others had gone to bed, Luke and Ellen sat on the bench in the front, shivering in their coats, cradling whiskeys.

‘You knew about this already.’

Ellen nodded, pulled her collar tighter.

‘Why didn’t you tell me?’

‘You were right, the funeral in Newport went well. I didn’t want to let this spoil it for you.’

Luke shook his head.

‘You should have told me.’

‘Katy might talk him round. She lives here, she knows how to talk to someone like him, we don’t.’

‘It’s bloody feudal.’

‘This is not Dublin. Dublin is not Ireland.’

‘Thanks for that.’

Luke took a slug of whiskey, cringed.

‘Christ, I just remembered why I don’t usually drink this stuff.’

Faintly, in the distance, they heard the sea. The deep silence of the countryside at night something Luke always remembered from his family holidays.

‘Screw him, let’s do it anyhow, we don’t need his permission. We’ll just walk up there and say our piece. I’d like to see him try and stop us.’

‘Then we’d be gone the next day, and Katy would be left to face the music. We don’t have to live here. Katy does.’

Katy’s husband told them how their neighbour, Tom Keggoh, once questioned whether conducting a raffle for the local Hurley team in mass was really appropriate. The priest had glared at him and walked off. In his sermon the following week he complained about busybodies who thought they knew better than him, a priest, how to conduct mass.

The next afternoon Luke and Ellen went with Katy to the village. They sat in the empty church waiting for the priest to turn up at 4. By 4.15 the conversation had petered out.

Katy had brought some fresh soda bread as an offering, Luke noted with disgust. Eventually the priest emerged from the back, a tall, distracted looking man, moving briskly, not looking their way. Luke remembered the story about the Hurley team and imagined thwarted sporting ambitions. Katy fidgeted with the bread in her lap. The priest disappeared, his head down. There was no telling if he'd seen them or not. Katy waited another couple of minutes, then got to her feet and said, 'Right, here we go. I'll do my best.'

'I know you will, said Ellen.

They watched her walk down the aisle, skirt the altar and disappear into the back. Ellen took out her mobile, Luke sat with his hands in his pockets, slumped on the bench, staring straight ahead. After about fifteen minutes Katy returned. She shook her head.

'But he did promise that you could say something at the graveside. That was the best I could get.'

'*The Fields Of Athenry?*' asked Ellen.

'No, I'm sorry. I really am.'

The second funeral took place on a Sunday morning. The church was larger than St Christopher's, in much better condition, and it was packed. Luke recognised some of his father's family, but there had been many rows down the years and he couldn't remember which of them his father had made it up with. None of them caught his eye.

Katy had supplied the priest with a lot of information about their father, but he only offered a few sentences about where he was born, the names of his parents and the year he left Ireland. This, thought Luke, was the crucial factor for this priest, that he'd left and not come back, had chosen to live out his last days in another country. At one

point he got his name wrong, calling him Callaghan before quickly correcting himself.

Half way through the service the altar boys carried on a picnic hamper, boxes of chocolates and sweets, some toys and a DVD recorder, and the priest conducted a raffle for the local Hurley team. Luke reached for Ellen's hand and gripped it.

At the graveyard the priest blessed the grave and prayed for the soul of the deceased and all the other souls buried there, then he left. Luke had planned to repeat the speech he'd made in Newport. How his father had had Ireland tattooed on his arm when he was serving in the British Navy in the war; how he'd never stopped talking about how he was going to return one day. How different he'd seemed to other people's fathers when he'd been growing up, and how embarrassing that was at the time. But how, over the years, as friends listened to his stories about him, and laughed, laughed so hard, and demanded more, he began to realise just how extraordinary he was. And how now, at last, he was finally going back to Ireland, just as he wished. But that didn't feel appropriate anymore. Instead he stood over his grave in silence for a long time, then simply said, 'He was loved.'

Then Ellen read 'The Emigrant Irish', by Eavan Boland.

Just as they were about to walk away the grave digger, an ancient man with a ravaged face, dressed in a threadbare black suit, produced a tin whistle and played *The Fields of Athenry*. For a moment Luke thought he was having a supernatural experience, then realised that Katy must have asked him.

On the way to the car Ellen gripped his arm and said, 'I won't cry, not here, not now,' though she clearly was.

On the boat back the next day, after several drinks Luke began floating. He was enjoying the sway and dip of the boat, the vastness of the sea and sky. Ellen, exhausted, had drifted off to sleep on the seat next to him. Her features had relaxed, her mouth slackened and open, and she looked shockingly vulnerable.

There was only the slightest of swells and he knew, without looking, that the Welsh coast was already visible to his left, a thin grey strip. Home, not home. He thought about his visit to the registrar's office in Newport. The thin, middle-aged woman sitting at a desk, a huge ledger in front of her, taking down his father's details in fountain pen as he spoke. There was something comfortingly timeless about it. And he thought how appropriate it was that she recorded births, marriages and deaths all in that quiet, surprisingly cosy little room. She had blue-tacked children's drawings on the walls – new baby brothers and sisters in bright felt pens and crayons. His attention has been caught by one in particular, in which the young daughter was a twin of the mother, same size, same hairstyle, same stance, the only difference was the mother held a new born baby. Both women towered over the husband, who looked more like their child. Another drawing showed a couple getting married, bringing a string of children from previous relationships to the church. Another drawing depicted someone's grandma, hands clasped, smiling down at the still living from a fluffy cloud.

He'd felt puzzled by the wave of euphoria that gripped him as the registrar scratched away in the ledger. But now he knew why. He'd grasped something important, the way that nothing every truly finishes, how we're all part of a cycle of dreaming, living, remembering, the past, present and future all mixed up together. Yes, his father had died, was gone, but in another way he had multiplied. New versions of his father had appeared over the last couple

of weeks that Luke had never known about. The tender Paddy who'd taken Katy out mushroom hunting, the Paddy terrified in the bowels of the ship, the Paddy who'd tried to steal a pig and staggered home covered in shit. There were many more versions to come, he was sure. He'd ring Katy, Brenda and the others and collect their stories, those precious memories, and piece together the future Paddy, the one he would celebrate in his paintings. His father had always been his best subject. He would paint him standing upright in his coffin, ready to face the rising sun, like the ancient Irish. He would paint him trying to catch a pig, shovelling coal into that British Navy destroyer, patiently hunting mushrooms with his tiny niece. He would collect more stories, previous memories, and then there would be more paintings, another, then another, then another.

Moy McCrory

A Time to Grieve:

Women, Mourning and Remembrance in the Irish Diaspora Community.

There were many periods of mourning when I was a child. By the time I was a teenager half of my close family had died, including my father. This set us apart. Even as a child my family did funerals. It was other kids' families who did weddings. When Maddy Paxman, writing about the death of her husband, the Irish American poet Michael Donaghy, said that your forties are when you enter the 'age of grief',² she was mapping out normal progression. As my school friends were rostered in to be bridesmaids and photographed in ill-fitting frocks, I was never called upon. The generation eligible for weddings was gone and with the loss of these relatives, cousins were also thin on the ground.

The generation who experienced WWII and its losses meant that there were gaps in my family that would affect those of us yet to be born. If one aunt could find no-one suitable to marry after the war, her sister (my mother) made the best of a bad deal and endured marriage with a man older than herself, my father, who was always tight lipped about his childhood. His eradication of his past was

2 Paxman(2014) *The Great Below: A Journey into Loss*, Garnet, London.

efficient. No evidence of his birth remains. When the Post Office was razed in Dublin during The Rising of 1916, a generation lost their birth documents, but just as there are more men today who claim to have been fire-fighters during 9/11 than the entire New York Fire Department employed, many more Irish people claimed the burning of documents to escape their history. There are no documents or evidence of his family, and all my known relatives are maternal.

My family were Irish (Ulster) through my father, and Irish through my mother's father (from what is now the Republic) and both were Catholic. In England we had 'English' relatives, through a much older half-sister of my mother's, and that was it.

Not that long ago an elderly in-law told me that I had no family of my own. Their relative's version of the last war was that they had grown up as one of four siblings. All survived and all went on to have children and these became the next generation of cousins. Yet my mother was one of five, plus three older half-siblings from my widowed grandmother's first marriage and out of this total of eight, there is not one full-cousin I can account for. No family of my own. Like a dirty mark or a bruise, I was aware of this oddness when I was a child, that there were gaps and absences which I could neither account for nor explain, while those I called 'aunt' or 'cousin' for convenience, were really no such thing.

It was those deaths and their effects, such as the soldier who did not return and so removed a generation from this mix, and the other brothers who did, but who childlessness and early death took care of, and the aunt who could find no one to marry as a consequence of war and loss, which created a further gap where first cousins of my own age might have appeared.

What I remember is how my mother and her childless sister took control when the first deaths of which I have a memory occurred. However, they were well practised; two of their brothers had died and an elder half-sister ran away and was never heard of again, my grandmother and grandfather had died too, all before I was born, while on my father's side, there was already an absence in his refusal to claim any family, a loss usually associated with death, but in this case with silence and the unknown.

My mother's attitude was forged before the days of counselling, before what would have been called 'practical approaches' towards bereavement and loss which now might include grief therapy, and before studies in the field of death allowed a questioning of what she believed. As a Catholic her father's suicide (as it transpired) was still classed as a crime, but was also considered by her family as the worst of sins, because to despair fatally means the victim has denied the possibility of God's salvation. This is so strong a transgression that many people can still not bring themselves to name it. My mother never could.

All I knew as a child was that my grandfather was buried away from the family plot, cast out in what I only later realised was unsanctified ground. My mother's shame over her father's last desperate act was a terrible, silent experience no one spoke about until one day as a child I came downstairs in the old house, from the back room where he had taken his life and in which they let me sleep whenever we visited, speaking of a man hanging from the wall. I was referring to the foliage patterned wallpaper which had made repeating faces of men in green. I could not fathom their terrified looks nor why my aunt got a priest round to bless the room. And this way I was able to gradually piece together my grandfather's last moments, and be told finally why he was buried under a holly bush with no stone to commemorate him.

It wasn't a funeral any of them cared to speak about. I think, like the brother whose body never returned from the trenches, it cheated them out of the burial rites they needed. But there was further unfinished business over their father's death as there was no space to grieve publicly, no book of condolences to sign. The only significant thing they possessed was a story of what my aunt had experienced that same afternoon, when she 'saw' her father and felt a sudden dread. He appeared silently before her at work, causing her to fetch my mother from another part of the sewing factory. Together they left work without permission and walked home, my mother bewildered and disturbed by her sister's silence. There is a common experience of seeing the soon to be deceased, of experiencing them some way, usually through dreams or a sudden memory. Years later my mother would find herself thinking of someone and not rest until she got that phone call, simply to hear their voice, and know she had been wrong. My father, healthily sceptical, always took her seriously in those matters. Three dreams he used to say, and we call the priest and have a Mass said. Three dreams, like a link to an older spoken form where things happen in threes to allow the speaker to remember, describe, and enhance, the pattern of three was something he did not question, a trinity of meaning reasserting itself unconsciously.

Edward Jeremy Miller, writing for bereavement counsellors, explains the grief Catholics might feel as something akin to the Christian belief of Christ's death, where 'God experienced death'. The most striking aspect for contemporary Catholics now is the focus on risen life (the resurrection). He charts the shift in social practice – from black vestments to white, and how the music itself has changed, and he locates the *Dies Irae*, (a Latin hymn we sang as a school at the funeral of a girl in my year, in the 1970's) back into the medieval period from whence

it came, (Thirteenth century Gregorian chanting). If the words of this are ‘fearful and sober’ and the entire thing is a reminder of the deceased’s accountability before God, emphasis falls on the return to dust. Now there is apparently a focus on resurrection, on hope, on continuous life.³ I certainly hope so. We sang the lyrics, ‘The fire shall scorch thee to the very bone, and Christ receive thy soul’ for the family of a teenage girl who had been burnt to death in a freak accident. Not surprisingly many of us were distressed and faltered over these lines, causing a prefect from the lower sixth to bellow at us in the coach returning to the convent that we had been a disgrace for messing up the hymn and ought to be ashamed of ourselves. However, at the time we believed in the redemptive act of prayer on behalf of the dead, and the rites allowed us to act for them, which was usually a solace to the living.

Hard to imagine my mother’s family dealing with their pariah status, which allowed them none of the above. That no prayers could help their father was their life-sentence. All they had was a story of a sighting by way of a memorial to him. In aboriginal Australian tradition it is believed that the spirit goes ‘walkabout’ and the dreams and memories are when the deceased disturbs the living on their travels. In this way people are able to visualise and retain the lost soul, lost doubly in my family’s religious belief, which insisted that the suicide had no chance of redemption, but reclaimed through a common-sense process that reached further back beyond the teaching of the Catholic church, and connected them to a fuller sense of what it was to be human and fallible.

3 Miller: ‘A Roman Catholic View of Death’, in Morgan & Laungani, (eds.) *Death and Bereavement Around the World*, Baywood Publishing Co, New York, 2002

After suicide, illegitimacy was the other great taboo which in the past had resulted in acts of desperation, including infanticide as an extreme but not uncommon practice in 18th and 19th century Ireland. The mother's social transgression was never forgotten, and it was common for the family to turn her 'adrift', worn out by scandal and embittered with this disgrace, and no doubt in the 20th century was part of my father's silence regarding his origins considering how, 'even ... (the) children's children bore some of the brunt'.⁴

As an author of short stories, I wrote 'Dropstars Fall in Unknown Places' a story set in the early days of the 20th century, which shows these older traditions being worked through. I attempted to recast an infanticide as a last, desperate act of love, in order to spare an illegitimate child from enduring the life of such harsh social castigation, the unbearable 'shame'. Maybe I was reimagining the alternative for children such as my father, whose birth and existence seems to have been unwanted. In my story a mother takes the now dead body of her baby to a stone circle, linking the living and the dead to a time before the Catholic Church inscribed conditions onto female bodies. The elderly narrator who remembers the past thinks how 'the family after this generation would have survived its massive fall from grace, it should be forgotten'.⁵ Was my father's silence about his origin the only way he could stop what he believed was a disgrace from falling onto us?

Despite such outcast status or because of it both my parents, who had direct experience of events which the church condemned, sought the church's approval for themselves, rather than form a critique of such ideas, living

4 Connell, K.H. *Irish Peasant Society*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1968 (p52)

5 McCrory: *Bleeding Sinners*, Methuen, London , 1999, (p.115)

as they did in a close parish of likeminded neighbours. But those supernatural aspects of death and dying which the church equally did not condone, lingered and were harder to shift. My mother saw the beansibh (banshee), a supernatural female messenger or harbinger of death, at least twice in my experience, and her sister saw the lost spirit on the occasion of their father's suicide. There is little emphasis in Irish tradition for that latter form of revenant, while the supernatural wailing woman beyond the threshold of the house is a frequent and known image. This supernatural visitor, the harbinger of death, turned up in our yard twice, and it is the practical details I recall, that she appeared beneath a window that my mother claimed no window cleaner had touched for years. But our mother's fear was taken seriously each time by relatives who realised perhaps that some psychological elements were at work.

On mourning there was without doubt a fuller range of expectations and behaviours in the past. These usually fell heaviest on women, demanding silence in the official ceremony, and fulsome noise in private when beyond the jurisdiction of the church.

Looking at popular images of women as mourners Jennifer Hockey lists the Victorian widow in full mourning dress, the weeping mother of Christ and nineteenth-century grave sculptures of women 'grieving with abandonment', and the written accounts of women 'wailing during death rituals in traditional societies'. This leads her to claim a division in 'emotional labour' in which a role or performance of female grief might be expected.⁶ There is something about the uses of abandonment and wailing,

6 Hockley J. 'Women in grief: Cultural representation and social practice' in Field, Hockey & Small (eds.) *Death, Gender and Ethnicity*, Routledge, London, 1997

words that resonate and imply a state of theatricality. She questions if female grief – like female love, is depicted as something bottomless and different to that of men. Have we come to expect ... (an) ... ‘essentially feminine response to death’? However in public it is noted that women are equally constrained by what is acceptable, and there are only a ‘limited set of clues’ which hint at grief while the idea of the bereaved woman still resonates strongly.⁷

The women in my family appeared to compromise, allowing the official funeral rites to run their course, but becoming vocal back on home ground. Away from the church, they would lead the memorials. Here they would relax into stories, which allowed them to remember things which might not be spoken easily till after the person was dead, hinting at histories and mishaps and occurrences long held secret. There was no speaking ill of the dead, but instead a piecing together of stories which would reveal the deceased in different ways, and sometimes explain them and their actions, and it was the women who led this.

The process of attending the wake and the funeral mass, ‘provides the social supports...to the bereaved to begin the process of healing, of adapting to the loss of the deceased.’⁸

‘Even when a counsellor is dealing with a so-called “lapsed” or inactive Catholic, it must be remembered that such a person likely bears “Catholic instincts” at a deeply subconscious level’⁹ In an article written ten years after the death of her husband, Paxman notes that we do not cope with grief and feels that the Victorians got it right. ‘How I could have done with a black armband to alert people’ she says, citing ‘the obligatory black clothing, the withdrawal

7 Hockley J. *ibid*

8 Miller: *op cit*

9 Miller *op cit*

from daily life, the closed curtains' of that period.¹⁰ But if such visible markers were ubiquitous, they in turn became conventions, and as such may not have been as pronounced. In 'Women in grief', J. Hockey suggests that the high profile of the Victorian widow has been taken as an example for a more therapeutic if ritualised response to death. She disputes the image of Queen Victoria as the 'death encumbered figure, claiming this is a modern construction of what, at the time, was most likely being hidden in plain sight, 'social practice which can be described as conspicuous invisibility.'¹¹

In open social practice, the nineteenth century mourning clothes seemed to have reached a zenith when codes of dress reached through families, down to distant relations who may never have met the deceased.¹² Such dress conventions were always strongest for women, suggesting as always in the west that a woman's status and condition was dependant upon her relationship to a man and a woman must provide such external signs as are deemed 'usual' (the wedding ring, the change of name on legal documents).

While my mother took full advantage of the social conventions for my father's funeral, she relaxed into everyday wear immediately after. However there were unwritten codes of behaviour; to be seen laughing too loudly, to return to normal too quickly, was viewed as improper, and we remained largely indoors for the best part of a fortnight post my father's death and funeral, for decency.

10 Paxman, Why can't we cope with grief any more? *Daily Mail*. 07.06.14

11 Hockey, 1997 p.101

12 Exhibition of Victorian Mourning at Pickfords' House Museum of Georgian Life and Costume, Derby, U.K. Autumn, 2009

Today, there is a lack of instruction about how to behave, which leaves people craving some direction. 'This results from the loss of established death ritual, the requirement that private grief should somehow be signalled through a competent public performance, and a belief that expressing grief is the 'natural' and 'healthy' response to a death' writes Hockey.¹³

As part of female mourning the beansibh (banshee), with its grief stricken wailing, served as a reminder of an older form of female expression, the caoin (keen). This tradition of noise making and composing laments enabled women in particular to speak at burials. Knowledge of the beansibh (banshee) must have enabled an acceptance of women's voices as part of the ritual although long after this practice had died out by the early nineteenth century, the 'sighting' of the death visitor remained, and with the noise that frequently accompanied this, it certainly enabled mourners to talk about a death foretold. The shock of the image could be voiced openly, and maybe this operated like an echo, or memory of women's grief from the more distant past when it was acceptable practice to demonstrate mourning through wailing and creating noise.

On the practice of keening, Angela Bourke writes in 'Lamenting the Dead': 'To the extent that it offers women a licence to speak loudly and without inhibition, and frequently to defend their own interests against those of men, caoineadh (keening) may be read as feminist utterance'. She notes the collaborative nature of the process, that women took turns to weep 'in a chorus of stylised sobbing ... Ochon agus ochon o !'¹⁴ which suggests

13 Hockey 1997, p93

14 Bourke (Vol IV pp.1365-1397) in Bourke, Kilfeather, et al (eds.) *The Field Day anthology of Irish Writing : Vol s IV & V Irish Women's Writing & Traditions*, Cork University Press, Cork, 2002

an agreement in community, and a method of showing individual grief supported by this belief. The women, it seems to claim, are in this together.

While that might still be the case, the public utterance has changed. The original managed caoin (keen) and the ritualised phrasing of a lament could only take place on a stage today, not at the mouth of a grave.

Another aspect of women in grief is expressed through the widow's curse (malact na baintri). Here, women without men could vent and accuse on behalf of the deceased. A sort of post-life reckoning which those left behind would shoulder for those no longer able to bear a grudge. More graceful is the lament, traditionally composed by the widow. The Lament for Art O'Laoghaire, created by Eibhlin Dubh Ni Chonaille and dated as 1773, is one of the most famous of the female laments which were traditionally composed at the grave mouth and Bourke observes that this composition owes 'little or nothing to writing', and notes the flexibility of the tradition enabling 'poetry' to be composed, performed and remembered. A structured traditional pattern allowed the speaker to fill in the phrases and collect their thoughts before the next phrase is created. This spoken lament, composed in performance and its 'formulaic' structure can be compared to those studies made by Albert.B. Lord on oral poetry and storytelling in the former Yugoslavia.¹⁵ This is where a familiar pattern and tradition allows a story to be retold according to certain structures which contain those key elements which preserve the nature of the original; the theme, the meaning and the main characters, yet allow the speaker to digress and adapt the tale anew.

15 Bourke, cites Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (2002, Vol IV, 1372)

Can we consider these Lament poets as part of the evolution of modern day grief therapy? Bourke reckons we can, ‘they deal with the modern process of grieving, denial, anger, bargaining, sadness and acceptance.’¹⁶

In this structure the traditional curse can be safely fitted inside the pattern, and is employed here to accuse those who sought to harm the deceased during their lifetime. Art O’Laoghaire’s widow calls bad luck down onto the man who caused her husband’s death, ‘Ruin and bad cess on you ugly traitor Morris who took the man of my house.’¹⁷

The secular funerals I have attended as an adult have been remarkable for their freedom, and for the effort families have made to design the correct ‘sending-off’ even to the design of the coffin (the most recent being laminated with photographs of cats). Photographs of the deceased displayed by the coffin, which once would have been considered improper and only allowed post the committal, are now commonplace and with this is the general evolved use of the term ‘wake,’ for the post getting together of the mourners.

The wake traditionally is from a time when families dressed their own dead and kept them in their homes. The practice of ‘waking’ comes from this custom, a time of pre-professional death services, when family members took turns to sit with the deceased so they were never left alone. This for Catholics now is more likely to take place in the church the night before, and there won’t be any talking

16 Bourke, A. The Irish Traditional Lament and the Grieving Process’ in *Women’s Studies International Forum* vol 11, no 4 (1988) pp.287-91) cited in op cit 2002: vol IV

17 Kinsella, in Kinsella T. & O’Tuama S. *An Duanaire 1600-1900; Poems of the dispossessed*, Portlaoise, Dolmen Press, 1985 (p.209) & Bourke op cit 2002: vol IV (pp1372. trans p1378)

or laughing, so it has relocated to a post wake after the committal, when the remains are no longer present.

If the original function was to guard the deceased while their spirit or soul still lingered, the post committal seeks to remember the essence (spirit) of a person, and move into the stage of memories which we will carry with us on their behalf. The wake proper was one of the last things mourners felt they could do to assist the dead, now we seek solace in how we can assist each other on their behalf.

But grief is a burden we all carry, and all will. At thirteen the loss of my beloved aunt helped me as an adult to negotiate my own children's grief at the loss of one of their aunts some twenty-five years later. I knew it was essential to talk about the dead, to bring any stories out, and never consign them to a silence.

While my father's best intention was to never speak of his own past, the maternal line unofficially provided a link to our dead, in stories and memories. Even while grieving, the stories could still make us laugh. This is how those ancestors and the relatives who died before my birth were spoken about so they lived in my imagination, while those I had known were kept present through this manner of talking.

And throughout my father continued to sit tight lipped, never joining in, always in a different room, nursing his private shame for a past I can only construct from shadows. He told us he was an 'orphan', and had been brought up by relatives. He would never name who they were. He never knew who his mother was. There was nothing suggesting a father. In time my mother grew to accept this, and years after his death began to speculate that he was most likely illegitimate. She felt, like he no doubt had, that this was a disgrace that was better kept silent.

At his death, we relied entirely on the Catholic liturgy to shape the ceremony, and felt guilt at our relief that we would not be expected to offer any form of spoken memorial. After the funeral my mother's remaining family sat out long enough in our house to be respectful before they could depart awkwardly. I learned nothing about him during this session, as it seemed there was nothing to say, no stories to tell, no memories the women cared to voice. His partial version of himself prevented us from reaching beyond him to something further past, something which my mother could reach with ease for her side of the family, but was unable to access on his behalf. There was an ancient tradition of professional mourners, women who were paid to caoin (keen) and to cry, and there were even 'sin eaters' who went round from village to village taking on the sins of the deceased. As we gathered back at the house after burying my father, there was an odd silence that only a professional mourner from such a past could have filled for us, and so it was left. It was for my mother to ensure that we, as his children, at least gave every appearance of being in mourning in the days which followed, which was as close to a performance of grief as any of us could muster. We wore black, we stayed indoors and we did not speak ill of the dead. In that way tradition was served.

Yet it is in the construction of the past that we remember our dead, and with nothing to guide us, his life seems to have less substance now than those remembered relatives whom I never got to meet, but who were so fondly remembered that they took on a shape and impression, as the women spoke their stories. Because in the end, that is what we remember and what we take with us.

Kathleen Mckay

Finding Space

The woman at reception smiles at Marina as if she's on something. Marina's already regretting this. Respite care. She'd signed a form in a moment of weakness when the pain ground her down, after her kids had gone on about the facilities here.

But the next thing she knows a big Hackney lad is pushing her into an ambulance in a wheelchair. He's telling her a story about one of his other patients who also like dogs, and that maybe they could meet. She wants to curl up in bed and for him to stop smiling. It's sunny outside on this late spring day, all the trees in leaf, blossom on the apple trees. It's the first time she's been out for weeks. She's put on her dark glasses and a touch of lipstick, and hides her face from the neighbours. She doesn't want that cow next door coming over all sympathetic, eyes like knives. The suspension in the ambulance works well, not like when she came back from her back operation in Northolt, every pothole jolting her. She'd be returning home. The Macmillan nurse has said they'd fix her up, and then she could leave. Back to her lovely healer Max and he would cover her with blankets and give her megavitamins, help her forget the cancer gnawing away at her.

In the ambulance the Hackney lad lets her pat the Labrador next to him. She's never particularly liked

Labradors; too much of a pet, not enough of the wolf about them, but there's something sweet about this dog, its expression. Its scouring tongue is almost pleasurable.

The man smells faintly of lavender, rosemary and lemon. A scent of the good olive oil soap the man she knew as Uncle used hits her, in a sudden ache for Spain. He always swore by this soap, saying quality was worth paying for, and gifting her mother with packages from the artisan couple in Catalonia who, following ancient recipes, still cold-pressed olive oil, and gave it its distinctive hint of herbs and lemon.

This man has kind eyes, and a soft voice. She can imagine him cradling a baby. Something in her wants to cry. So hard holding on, pretending you are OK, when people ask how you are. 'Fine', she always says, giving them the answer they want, or sometimes 'Just a little trouble with my stomach', and they go on about how they have had a bug.

More often now she catches the shocked reaction of people who haven't seen her for a while. She stopped swimming in the outdoor pool, something she loved and did every day, when people started staring. The last time she went, a woman, gorgeous, tanned and slim, stared at her with a mixture of disgust and pity. She doesn't want that. Lucky that it was winter when the weight started falling off drastically. In the oncology clinic when they weighed her she'd joked with the nurse about having a touch of diarrhoea. She made sure she wore her padded jacket and a scarf, and had weights in her pockets when she went on the scales. The nurse said nothing, but you could see in her eyes that she didn't believe her. She'd probably been doing this job for years. Laughing and joking, chivvying her patients on, while outside in the waiting room grey-faced ill people sat on, one woman coughing and coughing for an hour. Such a miserable place, waiting to die. And the oncology

doctor all efficient and cheerful and asking her about her special birthday coming up and giving her a detailed dietary list, and it was full of all this crap -instant whip, and cakes and jelly and things she hadn't eaten for years. She'd stick with the organic kale juice and the bone marrow soup. And that dopy friend of hers, sending her to the shop to get organic kale and she comes back with cabbage, and you can't make juice from cabbage, cabbage is disgusting, makes her stomach contract, gives her gas, makes her fart. She worries about farting. And smelling. She never used to sweat. Now she sweats every night, and changes her nightie two or three times. Max says it's the toxins coming out, and to keep up with the bone broth, but she doesn't know if she believes him anymore. He no longer mentions cures. She doses herself with Chanel, but still, she's always sniffing herself. And she doesn't like looking in the mirror at her scraggy body – her tits have dropped, and the skin round her belly is slackened and puckered, as if it has been pressed, like paper left out in the rain. That's what she is – paper. She would like to float away on a paper boat in the sea, with the wind at her back in Tarifa. And how dopy people are, how unobservant. That friend, asking her to walk with her to the shops. She hadn't been out the house for weeks, and now could hardly get down the stairs. Her world has constricted to her bedroom, the bathroom and the kitchen. She rarely makes it to the kitchen, which is down a flight. Better to stay tucked up in her bed under her duvet, watching her iplayer. She doesn't answer the door anymore. The endless stream of people has dried up. Only her daughters and son have keys, and the cleaner has the key code. Marina doesn't have the energy anymore. People stay away. But the grandchildren, how her heart breaks when she thinks of leaving them. Her grandson Tomás, all the bright energy of him, the baby Neta. Neta wouldn't remember her. But Tomás?

Then her daughter Sara is talking to her. 'We're here, mum, we're here.' She must have drifted off. The man's hand is on her shoulder. His hand is warm. Touching hurts. She knows that there is no fat on her ribs anymore; she knows that her wonky spine rippled through her skin like a lizard.

The pain in her stomach area exhausts her, and makes her grind her teeth. She knows her cheeks have hollowed, as her gums shrink back and her teeth grow long. Why can't she stay home and sleep in her own comfy bed, watching *Cuéntame*? But the pain saps her days. Victor, her son, goes on about once she's been in respite a few days and is fixed up, she could become an outpatient, and attend the day hospice sometimes, 'get used to the place. They have massages and an art class, and yoga and Tai Chi, and something called Finding Space.' He has said he is going to counselling to 'learn how to cope,' and that it is free. He was always selfish, Victor, and lately she's begun to think he is a bit of a moron. Whatever he can get out of an experience for himself, he will. And he'd been such a lovely boy. What had happened to him? He never listens, and keeps on about them getting organised. For what? She's signed over the flat. What more does he want? Blood? Men always wanted to fix things. Sometimes she thinks that the only advantage in being ill is that it makes you see things more clearly. You couldn't be bothered pissing about. He does get her the bones she needs though, boiling them up, and throwing in a few vegetables for bone broth. The jellied solids float to the top. Max recommended it. 'Full of goodness,' he says. Max's prices have gone up. And now the fridge and the freezer are full of Tupperware containers of bone broth, alongside the frozen kale, and blueberry smoothies Victor makes in industrial quantities. Some broth is decanted into a giant tureen in the fridge. Marina eats so little she has hardly made a dent. She doesn't want

to tell Victor, but she can't stomach any more. The sight makes her retch.

'Welcome,' the smiling woman is saying. 'Welcome.' There is a smell of coffee from a café on the right, and small groups of people are sitting round tables, eating big slabs of cake. For a moment what is left of Marina's stomach heaves, and then she feels a new sensation- hunger. She has not eaten cake for ages.

She smiles.

While she signs in the woman prattles on, rattling off the list of facilities, and phones up the ward. Marina glances across at a wall of bright paintings next to a photographic display. Faces. All kinds of faces, all ages, with writing underneath. She is curious, and makes a note to see the exhibitions. When she feels awake. Most of the time nowadays she's sleepy. Everything is so much effort, she could fall asleep mid-sentence. The pain is clawing at her bones, surprising her with sudden sharpness in places it hasn't been before. When the pain takes you, there is no choice but to stop, breathe, and hope it passes. She is used to the dull persistent background pain, and the painkillers held it at bay for a while, but these sudden sharp shooting pains breaking through frighten and make her body tense up, shoulders hunch.

Light stipples through stained glass in the spring sunshine. Marina sighs, and the Hackney lad pushes her up in the lift to the ward, clutching her papers. Her daughters follow – Lucía fussing about, on the verge of tears, Sara practical and pragmatic – 'Look Mum, that cake smells great, shall I get you a small piece?'

She nods.

'I'll follow you up. Victor will call by later.' He probably wouldn't.

After the doctor, a dark-haired, Italian woman, and pregnant, which surprises her in a hospice, has examined her and prescribed, the nurses put a line in and she drifts off. When she wakes, Sara is smiling and holding a cup of Rooibos tea and a small piece of cake. Marina takes a few rich and buttery bites. The morphine and sugar make her feel floaty, but the dull ache is further away now, somewhere in the background, and the sharp pains have gone. So when Sara asks does she want to go to the Art Class after they've toured the hospice, she says yes without thinking. As Sara pushes her to the lift, she says, Lucía, 'finding it hard', has gone to meditation. Marina bites her tongue. Looking at Sara's handsome face and determined look she hasn't the heart to say she doesn't want to go to the class.

She wants to stop smiling. She's losing control. Then they're bumping along to a garden with her favourite purple flowers. She does not know their name, but she fills her eyes. The garden is next to the convent where the nuns live, and she imagines them in full wimple and headdress and voluminous garments, some with stern expressions, like in her school. But when a middle aged short haired woman in a tailored jacket and knee length pencil skirt walks by, and Sara whispers 'That's one of the nuns,' Marina does a double take. Her nuns were different. Their idea of a day out was to take the group of terrified small girls to hold the hands of a 'santo incorrupto', 'un incorruptible', a saint whose body had remained miraculously preserved. Nowadays, she knew, they kept the bodies behind glass, but back then the nuns had no such scruples. It still sent shivers through her as she recalls the sweet sickly smell coming off the body, which looked like a dried mummy. Sister Julieta claimed it was 'the odour of sanctity'. That smell, and the papery skin of the dead saint made her wake up with nightmares for weeks, and her mother must have

complained because next time the class went to see ‘los incorruptibles’ she was excused.

Sara pushes on to the chapel. Marina does not ask why. The chapel, in white marble, is peaceful, and the plain wooden Stations of the Cross have little of the gory detail you found in a Spanish church. But the stages were still there: Jesus condemned to death carrying the cross, falling, being helped, Veronica wiping his face, falling again and again, nailed to the cross, dying, taken down, laid in the tomb. It meant nothing to her now. All that fixation on Christ’s agony, there was something perverse.

The nurse takes her to the art class, and next thing she’s painting. For half an hour she forgets she’s dying, she’s in Tarifa with her grandmother, a tall, proud stately woman. There’s a giant bird behind them, perched on one leg, like the wire sculpture she made once. They are drinking horchata, and her grandmother, ever the lady, has a parasol and is telling Marina to shade her face, too much sun is bad for the complexion. Somewhere in the background an old gypsy man is playing flamenco on a guitar, and a young woman with a straight back, claps her hands and braces herself to dance. Marina’s mother is there as well, as glamorous as ever, smoking, with her thin waist, her dress that flounces out from her hips, that haughty expression that could change in an instant and become kindly when she saw small children or dogs.

She is back in an art room facing a garden in a hospice in Hackney and there’s somebody touching her arm. What is it with these people, always touching?

She could have been an artist. She’s always loved art. Her bird made out of wire, that thin bird, ready to take flight. She’ll make another.

‘Tea or coffee?’

They bring her rooibos tea in a good cup and saucer, with a plain biscuit. She sips her drink, suddenly shy. They all seem to know each other, and are laughing and joking and talking about their families. Then a surprisingly pleasant North London voice hits her ear. North London is usually too adenoidal for her. But this voice has a cadence about it, a slight tinge of somewhere else, a lilt, a suggestion of warmth.

‘Hello gorgeous? First time?’ His voice is friendly and welcoming, battle scarred. She has always been a sucker for voices. More than faces.

She looks, and her first instinct is to flinch. But her mother’s manners kick in. That time when their maid invited them to her house in the village, and Marina had complained, saying she didn’t want to go, she wanted to stay home and play with her friends. Her mother sat her down and gave her good talking to.

‘If Dolores is kind enough to invite us to stay, we will be kind enough to accept her invitation with grace. You must never make people uncomfortable. That’s bad manners.’

Marina forces herself to look the man in the eye. Hard to do so, as his face is pitted and scarred, with bits of his jaw missing, and one eye higher than the other. His mouth is turned down, and his ears seem pinned back, his face asymmetrical. As if he’s been through a war. But the one eye she can focus on has a kindly expression, amused and tolerant. And instantly she recalls her ugly friend Manolo. All her other friends were handsome in that Spanish way, with fine eyes, olive complexions and dark hair. But Manolo had acne and his features were irregular and somehow too big for his face, as if it had just been thrown together. Not plain, but spectacularly ugly. Yet Manolo was the one she wanted to spend time with. Manolo could seduce a woman with his voice; he often had a string of women hanging off

him. So now she keeps Manolo in mind as she looks at the man. And even within a few minutes the man's poor scarred face doesn't seem as bad. You got used to anything.

They start talking. He produces photos of his dogs, one a Belgian shepherd and one a Golden Retriever.

'I miss 'em. All I want is to get home and see them. And to go on the London Eye. I've been here nearly a week. Can't wait to get out. You dying as well?'

She laughs.

'We're all dying,' he says. 'Just some of us are going faster.'

She tells him about her Great Dane, now ashes in a purple container on her bookshelf, how he was frightened of mice, and only knocked children over by accident. They agree that big dogs are the best, easier to handle.

Afterwards she can't remember what they've talked about.

Next thing she is back on the ward and the masseur is pummelling Marina's tired shoulders and legs, soothing her like a baby. She does not touch where Marina's stomach used to be, but her hands hover over the spot, and afterwards it is as if there is more space in the little pouch that has replaced her stomach, and Marina wants to eat. They bring her plain lentils, like her mother cooked, and a small piece of chicken. She does not ask if it is organic. She sleeps.

When she wakes, she is disorientated, and frightened, as if she'd woken from a nap as a child on those scorching Madrid afternoons which sapped your energy. Everything closed, the only sounds of scraping plates after lunch, fans and air conditioners, and the occasional crazy tourist in the streets, heading for some bar with the TV blaring out.

Again her mother is near, elegant and smelling of Chanel.

The softness of her skirt, the smell of her shampoo; the maid cooking chicken and rice and vegetables. In the cool of the evening they eat on the balcony. After the meal her mother smokes. Later her mother's lover, the man she calls uncle, calls round and tickles her and produces chocolates from his hat. Marina goes to sleep listening to the sound of their laughter and endearments.

The wind is coming through the curtains and Marta, the Filipino nurse with a kindly face, brings her soup and a small portion of pasta. 'Small portions,' says Marta. 'Often.' Marina hasn't eaten pasta for weeks. It's delicious, and she laps it up. Later, it sits like a stone, and she writhes in discomfort. Marta gives her medicine, and she drifts off again. Eat/ sleep/ eat/ sleep. Like a baby, she sinks into it. This first night she sleeps, with the curtain open and the wind drifting through. There are whispers in her dreams, and she is not sure if they are from the past or present. She is aware of people touching her, kissing her on the forehead as if she is already dead, a sweet smelling nurse adjusting her position, and covering her feet with a blanket. She dreams she is in Tenerife, swimming in the sea. Waking in the night, she is convinced her mother is at the end of the bed, and whimpers like a child. Marta helps her to the bathroom and settles her. She sleeps until after 9 and she wakes to coffee smells, and Marta, who asks about her children, and pronounces their names the Spanish way, so they lapse into Spanish, and Marina agrees that yes, she will manage a 'pequeno' piece of toast with her drink. At the breakfast table there's a man in a formal suit eating scrambled eggs and toast. He nods. Something serene about the man, contained. As if he is ready. She can hear crying from inside one room, which turns to laughter and a delighted shout when a Scotty dog trots through.

Then the girls are back again, smooth skinned and beautiful. Sara says she will bring Tomás later, he has done

her a picture. Neta is at the childminder's, she will bring her over for a cuddle. Lucía has been crying, and says she is going to meditation again, she 'finds it a help.'

And so begins a routine. Each day the doctors adjust her doses, the nurses deliver the medicine, and Marina goes to the art class. She likes it here because nobody stares. They've seen it all, and the healthy and the sick are equal.

'We were once like you. You will become like us,' she remembers reading on a catacomb.

She doesn't think about death as much once she is settled in. She thinks about how nice the cake is, and if they give her the anti-emetic, she can keep it down. She thinks about when the next cup of tea is coming, how she wants to make another bird sculpture in the art class. They've said they'll get the wire. Being freer of pain makes her mind clear. She wants to do things. The last few months have been one piece of bad news after another. It has startled her how quickly her body has let her down. The oncology clinic is the worst. Every time you went something edged closer. No, the cancer is not responding, no, kale smoothies and someone laying their hands on you in a South London healer's would not beat the growing mass getting into your bones. Marina doesn't see the point of going any longer.

The third morning she wakes up, Dave is at the end of the bed, laughing.

'Hiya gorgeous,' he says.

'I'll give you 20 mins to get ready, and then we're going on a jaunt round the place.'

By the time she's finished breakfast, he's impatient. This time the porters push them to the library.

'Teach me Spanish,' he says. She plays a DVD, and teaches him the basics.

Buenos Días.

¿Qué tal?

Bueno.

Ella quiere. He's hopeless, and has a terrible accent, but he waves his hands about as if he's Spanish, and makes her laugh.

'Ella,' she corrects automatically, adding the y sound.

'Ella,' he repeats. 'Don't you want to go home?' he asks.

Yes, she wanted to go home. But where was home?

'When we get out of here,' he says, 'We could go to Tenerife.'

'Tenerife,' she says automatically, putting an accent on the last e. She plays along with his fantasy, knowing they wouldn't let her on a plane now. The last summer in Tenerife she should have made the most of it, soaked up the sun, burnt the bright light reflecting off the sea into her retina.

As he talks on about how cheap flights are, and how the Spanish medical service is better than the NHS, it strikes her that Dave reminds her of another North London Dave she used to know. With that Dave she would go to Arthur's Café on Kingsland Road, and eat sausage, egg, beans, tomatoes, mushrooms, toast. Another life. Was that Dave still alive? He'd drunk so much back then she doubted he still had a liver. She turns back to the present. They both have headphones in and are listening to David Bowie's 'Heroes.' She takes hers off. '...time just for today' blasts out.

'I don't want a funeral'. It's the first time she has said this out loud. Whenever she tries to broach the subject, Lucía and David get upset, tell her to stop being morbid. Sara goes quiet.

'David Bowie, he didn't have a funeral. Just throw me in the sea.'

Dave looks at her with such tenderness and an amused expression on his face.

‘But it’s not for you.’ He holds one hand, and places his other warm hand on her crooked back, her back that has caused her so much pain over the years. She hasn’t been touched there for a long time. It’s not creepy, or weird, or coming on, he’s just her friend, she just is. Like he just is, with his wrecked and rather lovely face.

‘I would have ended up in a wheelchair years ago if I hadn’t had the op,’ she tells him.

‘And look at you now. It’s like you’ve got wings. Anyways, funerals are not for the dead, they’re for the living. I want a big funeral, with my girls yelling and crying and wailing on, and laughing, and everyone getting drunk afterwards. And I want to lie in state in that viewing room downstairs. Like royalty. It’s the only chance I’ll get. Have you seen it? It’s lovely.’

She recoils.

But somehow later that day he arranges it so that they are pushed down together to the viewing room, where the porters check that the star outside is turned the right way round to show that the room is unoccupied, and he rants on about his dogs. Inside, Dave quietens. The nurse points out the refrigerated bed, and says how a person’s body is treated with respect, and handled as little as possible. Marina is looking at bowls and a display of twigs in glass. The colours are muted browns and greens and blues, 1950s colours. Something in the room makes you hold your breath for a long time, then release. No jokes from Dave this time. He seems satisfied.

Afterwards as they rise in the lift, he starts chattering again.

That night it is almost like a party in her room. Her daughters bring Cava, and tapas, and Sara reads from

Hello about a celebrity on her sixth child at 48 with her latest toy boy and how important it was to be ‘grounded’ and follow a vegan diet. Dave’s daughters rock up as well, and his dogs, and they all make so much noise the nurse has to ask them to quieten down. Victor’s at work.

Dave riffs on about his dogs, and the funny ways they have. He’s on a mission. Marina has a sip of Cava, and Dave a mouthful of beer. They concoct a plan for a trip to the London Eye the following week. Sara says it’s a brilliant idea, and books it on her phone. Early morning mid-week, the air might be clear, she says, and it’ll be less busy. Marina smiles.

Then Dave shows his true nerd colours, throwing out facts while their children laugh and joke.

She learns that the London Eye:

- Is the world’s tallest cantilevered observation wheel (whatever that means. She doesn’t ask for fear she won’t understand the answer)
- Is the 4th highest construction in London , at 3.5 metres
- You book a ‘flight’, not a ride. This makes them all giggle.
- It was built for the Millennium, in March 2000, supposed to be temporary.
- It revolves at 0.6 miles an hour and you get on it as it moves. That thought frightens her. ‘You’ll be fine,’ says Dave, seeing her face.

He is like a kid as they plan out their trip. She wonders how she ever thought him ugly.

Then they are both released home, and agree to meet at the day hospice on Monday.

The phone call comes early Monday morning as she is readying herself to leave. For a minute she wonders about staying home, but she has grown used to the place, and she is looking forward to the art class again, bringing on her spindly wire bird.

People greet her like an old friend, and say how sorry they are, and what a lovely man he was. His daughters arrive with his dogs, and the retriever licks her hand, and sits by her feet quietly. The Shepherd dog, with mad eyes, stays close to Dave's daughters, but deigns to sniff her, and does not bark. And then, without any words being spoken, they all go down to the viewing room. One daughter keeps her hand on Marina's shoulder, and takes a picture of Dave: 'He asked me to.' They stay quiet for a few minutes, and Dave's right, its peaceful here, and time doesn't matter. She holds his cold hand and kisses him on the forehead, murmurs goodbye. She feels as if she has known him forever.

Back in the communal area in Dave's ward, one daughter produces Cava, and they sip, looking out at the Iglesia de San Cristo opposite and the people in dark clothes making their way to mass.

Wednesday morning and they push her into the pod in the hired wheelchair. The girls giggle. Victor, in a sober suit going straight on to a meeting, tries to look serious. He seems old suddenly, not a boy anymore. But then his face cracks as he relaxes. The girls have all dressed up, and are arrayed in glittery scarves and bright necklaces, careful makeup, with bright lipstick. Dave's girls have made Marina up this morning, rubbed rouge into her cheeks and combed highlights into her hair, as the Macmillan nurses finish administering the morphine.

Marina looks at the young ones. So alive, so bubbly. She hopes that her girls will stay friends with Dave's afterwards.

Everywhere there are Coke signs – images of bottles outside, in the pod, on the back of the workers' jackets. In red jackets, they look like Virgin train crew.

Dave would laugh about that. Marina's disappointed at the Coke signs everywhere. Makes it less classy.

But the staff are smiley and friendly. Once the pod closes, they realise they have it to themselves. Maybe they arranged it, seeing the hollows in her cheeks, her becoming paper, becoming air.

'Hey Mum, that Finding Space place is all right.' Lucía is talking because she's scared of heights. Marina feels a sudden tenderness for her daughter, for they are rising already. She was always scared of things, this one. Marina tries to concentrate on what Lucía is saying, but she's more interested in the view. The river glitters in the clear morning light, red buses edge along, sun reflects off glass.

'I had a massage, felt like I was floating off, floating above, you know.'

'Yes, love, I know.'

They are nearly at full height now. She can see the Houses of Parliament and Big Ben, Waterloo, Tower Bridge, the Tower of London, St Paul's, Canary Wharf, and all those new buildings she forgets the name of, The Shard, The Cheese Grater, The Gherkin. The snake of the river, the softness of the day. Her body feels removed and far away, with no pain. She stands up and feels a rush of blood to the head. Peers down to get a better view. The loveliness of this city she has lived in for so long. Home.

Steve Dearden

All of them Equal

1.

We had big classroom windows in primary school that overlooked a path running between gates at each end of the grounds. One day, just after lunch, a horse trotted past – a carefree horse, no rider, no tackle. A few moments later we noticed S was crying. Her best friend put up a hand and explained S was crying because the horse was hers and must have got out of its field somehow. S left the room with her best friend's arm round her hunched sobbing shoulders and we didn't think much more about her or her horse until rumours spread that it had been hit by a lorry. I remember, but don't know if I actually saw – at afternoon break maybe, or home time as we were ushered out of the opposite entrance – the scene in the distance beyond the housing estate where vans and Z-Cars gathered round the dead animal. Whether I saw or imagined the huddle of vehicles then, it is them I recall now, not S, I cannot picture her face, just her heaving shoulders as she was ushered out of the classroom by her best friend.

It is the same with all the people who died when I was a kid: C's mum, their house on fire, unable to open the new french windows, H in his 17th birthday present Porsche going so fast over the hump bridge he flew the corner and

buried himself in a wall, M who celebrated his driving test by accelerating into a tree, N crushed by her horse jumping at a show, R going to bed one night and his heart giving up in his sleep. I saw none of their deaths, but imagined them over and over and those imagined deaths are easier to remember than their faces.

And there were faces I never saw; the engaged couple killed in the bank robbery my bus passed on the way home from senior school. Two boys suffocated by an avalanche of sand when Nefyn cliff fell onto the beach the day before we arrived for the weekend.

The two dead bodies I did see were also faceless. The first in pre-cone days when a motorway queue never meant roadworks only an accident, a sick in the stomach anticipation half hoping the hold-up was more than a shunt and broken glass, half wanting everything to be OK, no-one hurt. As we got close Mum did her usual thing of pointing the other way saying, Look over there. I can vaguely remember damaged vehicles on the periphery, but what I can see still is the long shape under a scruffy brown blanket on the carriageway next to a crumpled Mini van the same light green as my grandfather's garage door, and now I have been in a crash myself I imagine the Mini van making the same noise as when the Henderson panels buckle, only louder and just the once. In Sweden, a couple of years later, Mum pointed again and said, Look over there. We had arrived at the wooden jetties just as a diver brought the dark shape of a boy to the surface, a soft floating thing that lurks beneath me every time I have swum in a lake or sea since and whenever I think of the boy I hear the back of his head hit the jetty as he falls in.

It wasn't all sudden death, there were the usual family bereavements, distant, ordered, great aunts, great uncles, then grandparents who died at the age grandparents die in the places they die, wards, cottage hospitals.

Mum died long before mothers are supposed to die and she was the first person whose death I didn't have to imagine.

2.

People dying isn't a surprise. They die all the time – sometimes violently, sometimes in accidents and sometimes you know them. I am always puzzled by the neighbours you get on the news saying how stunned they are, how this is the last thing they expected to happen round here. What kind of lives do they live where the one thing you can guarantee comes as such a shock? Don't they watch the news they're interviewed on? Read the rest of the paper they're quoted in?

That is why I found 2016 so odd. The year even the young became a bunch of people in sheltered living, oohing and ahing over the obituaries each day saying: What's wrong with this year? Zsa Zsa and Leonard, they had good innings, sad but we knew it was coming, David though, I still see him as that boy Ziggy, Carrie going and her poor Mum so soon after, George, Prince before their time, but with all those pills hardly surprising. Caroline, Alan, all too young. What's wrong with this year?

Today I saw someone tweet Chuck Berry and Derek Walcott in the same week, 2017 is 2016 all over again!

What's wrong with 2017?

There are 7.5 billion people in the world. 56 million die each year. 153,424 a day. 2 a second. Most of the time we don't know them, sometimes we do, sometimes they know each other.

We point the other way. Even at the end of a long life we pixellate death with adverbs, he sadly died, he tragically died, or avoid the word altogether, she passed, he slipped away.

3.

I keep meaning to tell my family that if I die in a car accident or get knifed by a random terrorist or drown in a lake I don't want them to tie flowers to the railings at the spot where it happened. I know I can't dictate the way they choose to grieve for me, but I would be disappointed if they were to go on television and say how shocked they were, how they never believed things like that could happen to them, to me.

These shrines didn't appear in the days when H drove into the wall and M the tree. For years after their accidents you could see where the wall had been repaired, the blaze of impact on the tree, no flowers, no cards smirched by rain, no fading photos in plastic sheaths, no cellophane clogging up streams in our national parks, pre-Dunblane – what was wrong with 1996, pre Diana – what was wrong with 1997?

4.

Whenever my Mum read my stories or came to see plays I directed, she always used to ask, Why don't you ever write about nice things/why don't you put on something happy?

In 1987 when I came home for Christmas, Dad picked me up from the station and, as we parked in the drive, he said Mum was in bed feeling under the weather. Christmas Eve I went to midnight mass and saw my friend K, asked her how things were with her. OK, she said, but my dad died this year. At that moment I knew my Mum was not just under the weather, she would die.

Early in January Mum was diagnosed with terminal lung and liver cancer, and after a short period in hospital we were lucky enough to be able to nurse her at home, be with her every hour right to the end. We didn't ask why

this happened to us, we just got on with caring for her as she had cared for others. As a nurse she knew how the cancer in her liver would mess with the chemicals in her brain, she knew how quickly she would deteriorate and discussed with our doctor what drink she would like her last doses of opiates mixed with – she chose brandy.

Mum only let us involve two of her closest friends in what was happening, death was something you did in private, without fuss. She died during Sunday lunch, the nurse had turned her and had a feeling, called us, we put down our knives and forks, left the table, went upstairs. Afterwards, my sister and I left Dad with her, then I suggested Dad and my sister went for a walk. I sat watching a hair on her dead lip, convinced it flickered in her breath, touched the pucker pattern on the yellow skin of her hand. The doctor came, poured away the opiate mix, the undertakers came and took away her body. I sat looking out into our back garden, a bird hopped across the grass, my Dad and sister walked Alderley Edge.

The next day I nipped out for a quick day-after shop and met one of her best friends in the supermarket car park, mid-day multi-story artificial light, her with her full trolley, me dashing in. She asked, How's your Mum, I haven't seen her for a few weeks? There was not really any way I could soften the blow.

Our Cheshire church was packed for her funeral. Dad decided we should sing the same hymns they had at their wedding. All our family, her friends, her congregation, the choir I'd been in as a kid, volunteer friends from WRVS, Meals on Wheels, Guide Dogs, Lifeboats, sang their hearts out.

I can't remember the weather, but we put on something happy.

5.

Sometimes I think it is my fault she died, because at midnight mass when my friend K said her dad had died and I had that premonition Mum was going to die too, I just accepted it. Gave in. If we had all had faith, defied the cancer, believed she was going to get better she would be alive now.

I can't explain why I took twenty years to begin properly grieving for the person I miss most. Psychologists say this was because I was a leader in the process of her dying – suggesting the others left, ringing the number the doctor had given me, seeing the men come downstairs with the wrap around stretcher, vacuuming up a houseful of her hair, sleeping that Sunday night in the bed she died in at lunchtime to reclaim it for the living.

Or maybe my dogged fatalism came from that early litany of loss that made death feel regular, quotidian. I have always woken up each morning surprised to be still alive, I often say goodbye to people, people of all ages, wondering if this is the last time I will see them. I expect bad news.

Mum, despite a professional life full of hospital deaths, would have called that morbid. Morbid was the word she used to describe my aunt's decision to have my cousins see the bodies of my grandparents. She would have called the roadside shrines of photos and flowers morbid too, something Catholics did. She was Protestant and shielded me from death as if it didn't happen, tried to make sure I was looking the other way. As the drugs and the liver cancer began messing with her brain chemistry, we were losing the one person in our family with the experience to teach us how to manage death – not imagined, not heard about. The rest of us were first timers.

6.

What was wrong with 1988? Roy Orbison, Andy Gibb, Chet Baker, Divine, Raymond Carver, Christina Onassis, Nico from Velvet Underground, in a double blow for Carry On fans Kenneth Williams and Charles Hawtrey. Enzo Ferrari, Roy Kinnear falling off a horse. Lockerbie/Pan Am Flight 103. My Mum.

7.

In 2016, the year everyone seemed to get hysterical about the famous dying, my friend and publisher Janet Fisher died. Her funeral was held high on the edge of the Pennines above South Yorkshire, one minute snow and sleet, then bright sunshine, grey roiling cloud, bright buds on the trees. The ceremony was in a square Quaker meeting room, wood and white walls, high windows onto sky and branches, a simple space where we waited, sat, family and friends were silent and when they were ready family and friends spoke, full of light and modesty and laughter, quiet tears, where everyone was themselves, halting, eloquent, knotted with grief, philosophical, everyone equal.

As her wicker coffin was being lowered into the ground through horizontal April snow, I looked round thinking not of Janet's body, but of all the faces who weren't there, the people she had encouraged, published, who had benefitted from her being in the world. Death, like our literary world and ridiculous honours system, celebrates all the wrong people.

When everyone had gone, her co-publisher Peter Sansom and I stood shivering at the top of the lane, wind blowing under our coats and though our knees, the blue sky slipping into sleet again. He said he couldn't believe how sudden death was, how final, how it just shouldn't

be, like not-death was a possibility, and for a second it felt like it was.

8.

The more people throw up their hands and tweet in horror about who has gone now, the more friends die and the harder it gets to see those who died years ago, the more I value the silence in that high Quaker room where people sat with their eyes closed or looked up at the bright windows, filling themselves with all the things Janet was. The shape of the room in a fold in the Yorkshire Pennines looking over the plain to the Wolds and the coast, measured, balanced, everybody equal, full of light and modesty, laughter. Janet sitting there still. Her smile, her stoop, her intensity, her red cheeks and bright self-effacing eyes. And I imagine dead Leonard, Chuck, David, Carrie, the couple from the bank robbery, slightly shocked to find themselves made modest in that high, simple Yorkshire room, the faces we knew, the faces I couldn't remember, all of them clear now, smiling, Mum too, Erica, all of them equal, among us.

David Wheatley

Stretto

I was walking under the bridge on the way home when something fell in my hair. It was maggots. Some maggots fell in my hair. There was a woman who'd dropped her shopping and it turned out she had maggots in hers too. We stood there for a while picking them out, helping each other. I got three. It was hard working out which end was which, if that matters. There was a man in a hard hat up on the bridge who shouted down and said it was a dead pigeon stuck in a net, and he was removing it. I'd gone that way to get a bottle of wine. But since I knew you were out at yoga I thought I'd go for a bit of a wander before I came back, maggots or no maggots; and well now, did you have any idea there was an old Jewish cemetery across the way, by the railway line? You never know, rummaging around in these places, what you

Looking out the back bedroom window over the row of low roofs I found my thoughts turning to William John Huggins' painting 'Whaling Barque Harmony of Hull' in the maritime museum. Between the boat and a further craft in the distance, a tower of ice rises into the sky, eerily crenellated, as though it too were a seafaring craft, escaped perhaps from 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner', and haunting the northern ocean. It had been an empty afternoon and I'd not been to yoga. Instead

The cemetery was locked but I was able to get a good look. ‘Rudolph Cuckle, who turns away from evil... Eva Cuckle, a valorous woman, God-fearing and dealing kindly with the weak.’ Quite a few inscriptions in Hebrew too. I wonder if Hebrew was a spoken language for these people, or just something ceremonial. A fastidious old solicitor, reciting a Hebrew prayer at a grandson’s bar mitzvah, a conscientious old doctor and a stalwart of the bridge club: a small lost tribe of the post-war immigrant middle class. I wonder

Wondering where you might be, I looked up from my desk and watched the cat gingerly ascend the tree in the garden. The whaling ship stuck in ice proved a popular genre piece, as witness Thomas Binks’s painting of the wreck of The Dauntless, with the crew salvaging what they can from the stricken vessel. Scampering dogs are also shown, though on the polar expeditions it was customary to shoot and eat them, as the need arose. Gazing out the window I told myself: I have entered the phantasmagoria. I considered the Dauntless’ crew; whether they dug in and caught the next boat home, died off pitifully, huddled round their little pot stove, or turned to cannibalism, and what graves they found, if any. The prospect of eating human flesh could only, for any reasonable human being, have

It is a custom among the Jews to rend one’s garment on receiving news of a bereavement. Were these people Reform or Orthodox Jews, I wondered. This is the synagogue I built for myself, says the Jewish desert island castaway, when a passing ship rescues him... and this, he says, indicating another structure, is the one I wouldn’t be seen dead in. I heard that from a Jewish friend once. You’d be surprised at the amount I know about Judaism, really,

picked up, oh, here and there. Did you know for instance that in graveyards it is a custom

Among the most affecting of the whalers' stories is that of the Diana, trapped in the ice for six months in 1840. My yoga, the stretching among the middle-aged women in the community centre, the book on my desk, forgotten. I imagine the wooden leviathan of the locked-in ship, the heave and creak of its timbers, the sailors become Jonahs in the belly of their whale... Drawings, small and precise, of cormorants, ice-formations, and Inuit fishermen, adorn the journal kept by the ship's doctor. I think again of the lost sailors' graves in snow and ice, their unclosed eyes still staring out over the Davis Straits, amid empty bean cans and picked-over human bones; I look out over the unseasonal snow patches on the Avenues roof tiles and ask myself what ice floes these are, what nameless strait this is where I have come to be wrecked, in this frozen north of mine, and whose rescue expedition will ever

Thinking you mightn't be back yet I wandered a little further off and, how strange is that, I found an old pub with windows in the shape of the Star of David and when I asked the barman he told me there was an old Jewish cemetery next door and that he had the key. Not many Jews round here, I said, no, he answered, and someone a few stools along raised a mutter about Jews this and Jews that. I won't hear a word against them, the barman said, a solicitor came and gave me the key and told me to keep an eye out for anything untoward, so here I am then and what'll you have. Don't mind the parrot, just don't go sticking your finger into her cage, she swore at the Archbishop of York once called him a

Seeing a white object upon a large boulder we looked at it with the telescope – lo and behold it was a Ptarmigan – Geo. Charles crept near and shot it – 'twas a beautiful bird, snow white (except for a few black feathers in the tail) with brilliant red wattles over its eyes – saw a pair of Snow Bunting and these were the only living creatures on the island besides ourselves.' – Wondering if you'd bring booze home, your eight o'clock drink a five o'clock drink these days and always with the option of going back out for a second bottle. Should I say something, what should I say, you've changed you've

Jews though, what do they believe in really? Where does a Jew go when he dies? Nowhere, if I understand correctly. To follow the law is its own reward and to expect any more is unJewish. That's not quite right said the barman and explained to me how, or the way he saw it anyway, how

A whale-kill is marked in the captain's diary by the drawing of a bifurcated tail. Other small tokens, a shaving kit and a piece of scrimshaw, rehearse their small human narratives inside glass cases. The melancholy radio frequency of a whale's song is playing on a loop. Unrepresented and hard to imagine amid the old harpoons and flensing tools, however, is the splash of blood on ice, on the water, on deck, on a sailor's face, in the salty grikes of his sunburnt face, wiped on his sleeve and drying in the sun while the body of the whale is butchered, the thought of which makes me suddenly want to

Then it struck me that of course I have Jewish ancestry myself. That Italian sailor in the family tree, his name, could it be a corruption of? Thankfully by now the bar was beginning to fill up, and something imperceptible

told me I was among co-religionists, so I fell to discussing the poor, scattered Jews from beyond the Rhine and the routes they had taken to get here. A man on my left had a grandfather from Minsk who thought he was in New York when he arrived here, and stayed. They put him in the TB sheds behind the emigrants' platform and burned his clothes. He reminded me ever so slightly of myself, I must say, and then the drinker to my right, a Jewish undertaker of all things, interrupted me to

*But all these reveries of whaling, the poor lost whalers,
and Captain Gravill trapped in the ice – as though I
cared a tuppenny damn about all that when what I want
is the creak and warp of timber as the mast snaps in half,
the sharp freeze of the Arctic air on my face by the bright
light of shipwreck, and the silk of the seas and the Arctic
flowers. (Your phone off as usual earlier when I tried
ringing.) Give me my own personal Arctic with an island
named for a Danish crown prince or the Inuit word for
moss mistranslated as 'Cheerfulness Island' or better still*

My new friend took from his pocket a piece of paper and read:

There were songs that became old keys,
sources of rivers, cables laid under oceans,
tastes of fruit, scents of soil,
grandfather in a straw hat standing with a horse.

I asked him where he'd come by the poem and he told me it was a text his father kept in his wallet, who'd got it from his father, who'd got it

*Disputed islands, islands on the maps but not there,
islands not on the map but there, recently-formed
volcanic islands, old volcanic islands blowing away in the*

breeze, islands planted with the flag of no known nation, islands where no one has ever lived or died, islands where it is illegal to die. It is illegal to die in Longyearbyen, on Svalbard, by ordinance of the Norwegian government. Those wishing or intending to do so are advised to make alternative arrangements on the mainland. Islands that are the idea of north, my dreamscape, writ large. Islands that are this dreamscape, this fantasy, refuted, wiped clean, to reveal in their place

Considering more deeply who I am, deep down, I began to question how far I had come from my own emigrants' platform, and whether I might not, in truth, still be there, or still in its TB shed. I was reassured by my friends that this suspicion was commoner than I imagined, and when one said look, look around! when we stepped outside for a cigarette, I saw the star of David design I had noticed earlier on not just the pub façade but all the houses along the street. A family coming towards me, each parent dragging a pair of children in their wake, was engaged in noisy conversation in what I recognised as Yiddish. How was it, I wondered, that never before now had I fully grasped the reality of my

Question, who is the god of the Arctic? Who is the god of a land with no churches and graveyards? I imagine a Muslim Arctic explorer required to fast from dawn to dusk where there is no dusk, only permanent day, and what then, what then? But where there is nothing there is

And then leaving the pub and looking about me as though for the first time I saw not just Yiddish-speakers and rabbis hurrying to schul, but kosher bakeries, yeshivas, and Jewish cemeteries, and wondered how all this had passed me by before, how I could have been so blind. I greeted my fellow arrivals from the old countries, first-, second-, and third-

generation, thronging the streets on all sides now, from Lithuania, Belarus, Ukraine and beyond. The natives of earlier that afternoon had inexplicably dispersed, and the very place-names in English from the street signs so that

Over this landscape and for no reason, a woman alone in the house in the late afternoon who can't be bothered going to yoga, I choose to hear the keyboard music of J. S. Bach, the preludes and fugues of old Europe drifting over the tundra and the calving glaciers, with cool and unshowy precision. A tune is struck up in the icy silence, imagine, and then begins to talk to itself, joining itself upside down or do I mean backwards halfway through the melody, and so on and on. In exceptional cases the subject of a fugue will begin to repeat before the first statement has finished, perhaps in double-time, giving the effect of one melody buried inside another, which is to say buried inside itself, stretto deriving from Latin stringere, to tighten or enclose, the music become a burial chamber in which

The more I spoke to my new associates the more I saw how much I was needed here, rather than at work or at home, and how much was at stake. Have you looked at the inscriptions in the graveyard? asked the undertaker. So off I went to trace them, with my finger, scraping off the moss and taking rubbings where the Hebrew had become illegible. Among the first graves I tried was my grandfather's, who I had thought lost forever, a big kindly man in a waistcoat and stove hat when I picture him, wiping his hands as he came from the office each evening, and giving us pennies as we played. I thought of putting flowers on his grave but laughed and realized that in Jewish custom you never

There is a Bach fugue, Book I of the 48 Preludes and Fugues, in E-flat minor, called 'The Cathedral': the

*chords hang in the air like towers of ice, the arpeggio
chords shimmer and freeze into place; a cathedral
without God or worshippers or*

But what are you doing here? asked a random voice in the street and I

*To journey forever north precludes arriving even when
arrival takes place since to pass the true north is to travel
on and therefore southwards and rather than*

Turning I dropped my bottle of wine the red splash covered the paving-stone like a crime scene

*'But the iniquity of oblivion blindly scattereth her
poppy... Oblivion is not to be hired... Life is a pure
flame, and we live by an invisible Sun within us...' Ah
sweet savoured apocalypse how well have you served me*

I began to recite a Jewish prayer but stumbling over the words I wondered

*The slow satisfaction of a Bach chord settling into itself
and smoke drifting from chimneys and snaking its way
among snowflakes*

I see grandfather in his study and cousins Esther and Leah playing under the table and I call out to them

*And I emerge from the phantasmagoria: see, I am back,
small cat treading the windowsill on the outside and
frosting the glass with your breath and wondering what's
for tea, the sound of the radiators rumbling away in the
bedroom like a car-ferry*

There are cemeteries on every street corner I have traced
my finger through gravestone after gravestone and found

*Back from the Arctic and the snow on the graveyard
where the Victorian whalers lie: a woman framed in a
window opening a book and beginning to read*

I see columns of people in the street marching past the
cemeteries and I call out and no one

*Framed alone in a window at evening, reading and
wondering where has her*

Have I come to the wrong

*Eerily precise a Bach fugue plays on the stereo, Wallace
Stevens falls open on 'God is good. It is a beautiful night'*

What is this falling

*Come here to me cat, consider the fugue, one melody
folded*

into a hole I feel two bodies

serenely into the other, the two entwined as though

entwined embracing grotesquely as though dead

*

The poem quoted in-text is from David Kennedy's 'The
Hull Emigration Platform', in *Architexts* (Hull City
Council, 2007).

Name/Paper/Pebble/Grave

All day travelling eastward pebble in pocket name on scrap of paper then pebble on paper on grave. What paper whose name swept to these parts from Lord knows where what is your business here have you permission? Tramping past the jail and the factories a voice asks who are you say I lived here once I left and came back why what is your business. Past the jail and the factories where the estates' coiled riddles open onto vacuity to find of all things this. Where once a lens in an immigrant jeweller's eye and the rebbe's head inclined over his scrolls now a vision of civic erasure library public baths and gardens departed why not known but gone. I saw a road-worker stand eating by the side of the road our eyes locked briefly amiable colossus I saw his brisk hand sweep the ketchup from his chin. Here when I lived here I sat in the office filling out forms I still feel my nib pressed down on the paper knowing my smear would live after me box-files stacked like coffins over my desk. Swept to these parts my coreligionists from not known dispersed to where have they not gone not recorded but gone and I too a part of this story and not I alone was there a child intrusive question do not answer. Cemetery behind a locked gate overlooked by the church another locked gate Jews and Christians departed God of the tabernacles sent packing forgotten as though never there. What would bring a soul here today you might ask but I too lived here and what brings me back to tramp all day eastward if not that

dark knot of need name on scrap of paper then pebble on paper on grave pebble for permanence and paper for all that is fleeting dispersed on the wind. Quizzed what is your business how did you come to be in these parts yet again do not answer. All day sat in the office arranging rearranging my scraps of paper now a friendly now a sour face round the door to inquire of me I expect they are dead now and gone to their reward. How are you getting on the insistent questioner would you not feel more comfortable among your own kind there is still time to join them. Your kind they have passed this way before buried in plague or cholera pits I expect you must hymn their sufferings in the mournful songs of your people. What are your burial preferences do you expect to be a burden on the state in old age before you are tidied away to some pocket plot behind warehouse or pub and the key given to a local who would come visit you no one have you any family was there a child. I lived here for long grey years among strangers striking up conversations in shop bank or public house they would ask tiring after a while and when are you thinking of moving on spray-paint on a wall inquiring in rather crude terms a grave defaced knocked over it was thought shame. Coming with nothing leaving with nothing putting down and pulling up roots I nevertheless cultivated this alien soil a small cat I remember faithful companion found in a box on the street what were his views on natives and transients unknown what was his pedigree I carry his ashes with me interred according to the rites of a secret deity his name never spoken aloud. Tramping eastward memorial paper in hand on whose grave shall I lay it what is my business here merely passing through to bear witness to my having been and gone beyond that nothing. Yes but was there a child I hear tell of a child no answer enough. Haunting cemeteries as I do I know the children's section by the balloons and crumpled cuddly toys but only the

recently dead Victorian infants somehow less sad. And also their eight children who died in infancy so many small souls routinely lost when the balloons and toys trail off the nettles move in and then the developers to concrete it over. During periods of bereavement believers may refrain from bathing or shaving sit on stools to signify their being laid low I have seen a living man lie down in the grave of a dead man why not known accept the mystery. A man in a rented room rocks back and forth in memory of the nameless dead and no one need notice or care a scrap of paper I place under a pebble on an unknown grave will outlast the noisy and ignorant cult of the living. The jeweller with poor English buried in these parts would sit in the window regarding his diamonds with an eye to their flaws his business to notice what no one else could poor Spinoza in Amsterdam polished lenses until his countenance swam in them his lungs too swimming in dust shall I set sail from the docks to Holland to the old country the new country what is my country. Greeting one another for I am not without friends associates coreligionists we might swap a greeting in what tongue is that unknown an improbable but adventitious survival in which by the graveside allow me to say a few words. A touch of class in the offing then wouldn't think it from my harried gait and shambolic get-up avoiding eye-contact with locals mindful only of this cut-through or that to my necropolis my people are a patient people in life as in death. Yes but was there a child I heard tell of one and where is its mother might I ask swept to the four winds now come from God knows where and dispersed I am finished with the personal questions. That provision be made for the municipality's resident aliens the dundrearied alderman announced to dissenting coughs from the assembly and here I am walking eastward to pay my routine respects these rituals unwitnessed and possibly meaningless yet somehow consoling the consolation

possibly empty no matter. What is that pebble what is that scrap of paper in your hand inquires the voice do not answer mere trinkets I carry about my person such as in breast-pocket or even waistcoat pocket account for your antique get-up no answer. Why if no child the name on the paper forming no part of the ritual unless the name not on headstone and otherwise unrecorded no answer enough. What is your business here no answer I have seen a living man lie down in the grave of one dead and why not if ritual demands. I have come here to witness and be witnessed by no one name on scrap of paper then pebble on paper on grave the fingernails dirty and lingering as though something more to it all than gesture. Empty gesture for all you know the alien rites of those who pass among you unknown leaving no trace but this and with no questions answered and gone.

Jewish Cemetery, Church Lane, Marfleet

Note: 'Dundrearies' are overgrown sideburns, as popularized by the fictional Lord Dundreary.

Tiina Hautala

Grönvik Manor – The story of a ghost story

‘I am very happy to meet you and tell about the ghosts of this place. But I have to warn you: do not be offended if I do not invite you in. Lately we have become careful. But as soon as we meet the house will tell me what to do.’

I voiced my thanks after this mysterious greeting from the owner of the Grönvik estate, in Ostrobothnia, on the Finnish West Coast. The place had caught my interest years ago when I read an article about a family renovating an old manor. In a side note there was mention of paranormal activity during the renovation. I had also frequently heard the place referred to over the years when talking with people about ghost stories of the region.

I had just made an appointment to visit one of the most famous haunted houses in Finland.

Of course I had done my homework and knew about the estate in general. The fate of thousands of men and women has been linked to the history of this house, so it is no surprise that the place is also known for its ghosts. A merchant called Grönberg set up a glassworks in the grounds, which became the largest producer of window glass in Europe. As the business flourished a sizeable community grew up around the property, employing nearly three thousand people. Most of them left this world

like the rest of us, but not everyone was to meet a natural death. I had read the local history books and newspaper articles, seen local museum exhibitions about haunted places, watched the Grönvik episode in a television series about haunted places in Finland, and heard the stories of the local history group. But still, I wanted to hear it all from the owner's lips.

For years now I have been collecting and retelling local ghost stories, mainly from Ostrobothnia. My approach to ghost stories is that of a ghost story enthusiast and collector, not a researcher or a scholar. Ghosts evoke both fascination and scepticism in modern, rational people. When listening to a ghost story, we can't help but hear the reassuring voice of reason at the back of our minds, saying it's just a story after all. Fortunately there is the other, older part of us that make us feel strangely uncomfortable and glance over our shoulders. The part that keeps ghost stories alive.

When I started to collect local ghost stories I confronted lots of doubt. It was sometimes difficult to get people to talk about these things even if they were just stories they had heard, not experienced. In Finland, ghost stories, especially the more recent ones, seem to be a special form of folklore that has more or less remained in the oral tradition. A worry that they might be forgotten was one of the reasons for my own work. Later I discovered that my fear was misplaced.

The stories are strong and alive, but the idea that someone else was writing down and collecting tales that people would normally tell to friends or colleagues over coffee or meals, or round the campfire on weekend hikes, felt strange to some at first. As if the ghost stories then became more 'official' and somehow more real.

But the attitude towards ghost stories is changing in Finland. Cemetery, ghost and horror walks have started to appear around the country. If you look at older Finnish folklore, ghosts have always been with us and now their stories are just taking different kinds of forms in our daily lives.

Ghost stories have many meanings and they have changed over time. Older versions often have themes – morals, sins, judgement or remorse. The type of haunting depends on the revenant's innocence or guilt. Was there a crime committed? Or mistreatment after the death, unfinished things, or information that needed recording? Traditionally, dying before your time has been one reason for haunting to take place. The ghost stories might have protective purposes by teaching children to avoid dangerous places. In Ostrobothnia these elements are often present in the older ghost stories or legends from the archipelago or countryside. Modern ghost stories set in cities are often told as entertainment, but remind us that spirits exist even today, at least in these tales. Sometimes they are evoked as the protective spirit of a place (*genius loci*). I call these ghosts *salon eligible*.

Ghost stories exist all over the world and often have common themes, yet retain their particular character. The world is full of White Ladies and Ladies in Black, ghosts of castles, mansions, theatres and lighthouses. But there is a big difference between general and global themes, familiar from popular culture, and local stories of The White Lady, for instance from Grönvik Manor. People are proud of their ghosts. At the same time they connect us across the world, and between worlds.

Ghost stories tell a different kind of version of local history, enlightening us about a building, or a person: stories not told in official histories, viewed as insignificant or slight. They tell us about past lives and deaths from

a human or ghostly perspective. Histories of people, families, buildings or areas go hand in hand with more general history.

But what do the local ghost stories tell us? They show how ordinary or extraordinary people lived and died, how the history or politics of the time affected everyday life, tracing what is common to people throughout time: love, loss, betrayal and violence. In many ways I see them as older versions of soap operas.

In 2009 I published a collection of ghost stories from my hometown Vaasa. (*The Ghosts of Vaasa*). I visited Grönvik in 2013. The same year I published the Grönvik story in a collection from the Ostrobothnia area, and it has become one of my favourite ghost stories. Since then, I have told the Grönvik story in many storytelling events and in 2015 it featured in a ghost perspective in a Ghost Ballads Project as a song. In 2016 it was performed in Vaasa City Orchestra's concert *Vaasa Gothic*, conducted by chief conductor James Lowe. Ghosts can be a vital, informative and fun part of cultural life for locals, visitors and newcomers. They tell stories about life and death in a certain area at a certain time – and something about us, the living, too.

So one February afternoon I was about to visit the manor myself. That is, if the house and its unseen hosts allowed us to enter. My Sceptical Friend was also interested in the estate and offered to be my driver and companion, so he too needed to be welcomed.

The beautiful wooden manor was built around 1780, right by the seaside on the Baltic Coast. Nowadays it is located inland since here in the Kvarken area we have land uplift, where land, formerly underwater, is rising from the sea. This unique landscape and ecosystem is listed as a Unesco World Heritage site.

The manor was in a small village a short drive north from Vaasa. When we drove, the landscape turned quickly into a dense spruce forest. Deep green trees looked almost black in contrast to the white snow and the clear, sunny sky. Then a bridge and the sea and all of sudden there it stood, the Grönvik manor house.

I knocked on the door of Grönvik and finally met the owner. We greeted each other and made small talk. Would the house accept me?

It was a beautiful day with lots of snow and the low sun still shone, colouring the landscape with welcoming shades of orange, yellow, turquoise and red. But the sun would not stay for long, although here in the North the days had already started to lengthen after the dark winter months. I thought that we could maybe have a stroll in the garden, as it was not too cold.

Then he invited us to step in. Just like that.

‘It’s quite all right, don’t you worry. You are indeed welcome!’

The house had large rooms, with high ceilings, and walls covered with old style decorative wall paper. The windows still held old glass from the Grönvik glass factory, the type that slightly distorts the view, and were engraved with the year of their installation, 1901. Renovated to its original glory, everything was done with respect for the way the house had once been. Even some of the antique furniture was original.

The first floor was updated for modern living and, although the kitchen was well-equipped, it too felt old. When we stepped to the second floor it felt like we had travelled back to an eighteenth century bourgeois home. According to the stories I knew this was the most haunted place in the building. We looked into a small pretty room, its only fault an ugly ceiling with the paint peeling off.

This had been a room for one of their daughters. We saw another room on the opposite side of the building, where the owners had made a small improvement by covering an extra doorway to the room next to it with a solid wall so it could be used as a bedroom for a second daughter. After the tour we sat down in the gorgeous parlour. The portraits of the previous owners looked down at us from their gold frames.

Our host started telling the history of the estate. I felt warm and comfortable in the soft armchair, hot cup of coffee in my hands. Ghosts here? Dead souls wandering around? In this cozy environment? He talked about the history of the estate and the glass factory, how the masters of glass blowing around the world came here to work, with their techniques well hidden from their competitors. Pieces of green Grönvik glass are still found around the site. He spoke about the manor's strategic importance, near one of the shortest ice roads to Sweden, and how it had witnessed fighting in the Finnish War of 1808–1809 and the Finnish Civil War in 1918.

One of the charms of Grönvik Manor is that the whole history of Finland can be seen in a nutshell in its history. When the house was built Finland had been a part of the Kingdom of Sweden since the 13th century. In the Finnish War of 1808–1809, one of the Napoleonic Wars, the Russian Empire ceded the area from the Kingdom of Sweden and made it the autonomous Grand Duchy of Finland. The glass factory flourished for about a century until new trade regulations drove it down. Towards the end of the 19th century the drive for autonomous nationhood grew stronger, and in 1917 Finland declared independence. At that point the manor was sold to Baron Erik von Troil, who had been a strong supporter of the independence movement. Only a few months later in 1918 the Finnish Civil War between the Finnish Red Guards and the White Guard came to the gardens of Grönvik.

The present owner told how the people who had lived on the estate had made their living. And how people had died on the estate over the centuries, many from natural causes, old age, illnesses, and accidents at the glass factory.

The clock ticked.

There were comfortable noises from the kitchen downstairs, sounds of glasses, porcelain and cutlery clinking. My nose told me the lady of the house was baking something delicious. Cars drove by; the old house creaked, squealed and groaned.

We sat for a good hour and I became anxious. He had told me everything about the house except for the ghosts. He knew what the purpose of my visit was. What was he waiting for? Permission from the ghosts?

Then he paused, looked round the room, and started to talk about them.

Some of the stories were based on the experiences of the previous inhabitants, a few he had found when studying the history of the place and many were still told by people in the village, most of them still living in the plots where their ancestors lived when the manor was built.

Then he returned to the present and started to describe life in the haunted manor. Strange incidents had started immediately after they began the renovation work. During this, the family lived in a small house on the premises. They had installed an alarm system linked to the renovation site, and they started to call it the ghost alarm as it went off so often without a reason.

The owner explained how he got to be the master of the house. When he and his wife bought it, it was in ruins. He'd bought it because of the strange grip the place had on him all his life. The manor had fascinated him since he was a little boy. Tracing its history brought up some curious links: the birthday of Grönberg, the former lord

of the manor, is the same as that of the present owner. His children's names are the same as the children of several owners living in the house in the past. Then his wife had an odd experience. The past and present mistresses of the manor met in the garden. A well-dressed spectre appeared to her in broad daylight: only her face was in shadow.

The way he talked about the ghosts was full of respect, even gratitude. In many cases the family had felt as if friendly forces had guided them during the restoration.

But I also sensed fear in his voice, maybe even regret. Living with the ghosts had not always been pleasant. When they bought the place they were well aware of its reputation for being haunted, but decided to share the house with its inhabitants. Most of the time it had worked out fine, but there have been, and still are, times when their home is not a peaceful place to live. Then, he said, you can sense tension in the atmosphere and everyone feels restless. Then the haunting, usually harmless, takes new forms. They lost their dog during one of those phases. It freaked out when it saw something, ran into the road and was hit by a car. Then the owner brightened up, smiled and added that their cats have had no problem with the ghosts, they seem to get along just fine.

I believe in the stories and have always refused to ponder too deeply the question of the actual existence of ghosts. I was there as a collector. But there was a sudden change in the atmosphere as soon as our host began talking about them. It seemed the house, so full of sounds earlier, was now completely silent. The homely sounds from the kitchen had gone, the old house had stopped breathing and even the street outside was completely quiet.

The owner kept pausing, as if considering how much to say.

I felt chilly.

He told me about the pretty little room behind me where the paint in the ceiling was peeling. Above was the attic where the estate's overseer hanged himself a century ago.

I peeked over my shoulder.

When he continued I heard a loud thump from the room.

He stopped talking and looked over my shoulder. We held our breath.

Then he talked about a portrait of the lady of the house that was moved to the attic by earlier owners. They thought it might have something to do with the haunting. The painting was now back in its original place, and he pointed it out for us on the wall.

Then I heard noises behind me, between my armchair and the wall. Whispering?

Nothing but an old radiator.

He told me about the room on the other end of the parlour. Their daughter said she'd seen the shadow of a lady in a long dress walking towards the wall. Sometimes, she said, she stayed in the room. In her teens her daughter used to leave her radio on overnight. Of course the parents did not like this, thinking it a form of adolescent rebellion. As an adult she revealed that it was not the music channel she was so keen to listen to. A lady would sit on her bed. She could feel the weight on her legs and hear her breathing. It was more pleasant to listen to music than watch the spectral woman fiddling with her dress at the end of the bed, and hear her rasping voice.

Thump.

My Sceptical Friend was pale, and rubbing his shoulder anxiously.

I was alert. And a bit suspicious. Was this all a well-planned manipulation, beginning with the phone call? The estate is a tourist attraction during the summer and it is

possible to rent the cellar for dining and meetings. Everyone knows about the ghost stories. The owner himself would tell stories to anyone who asked.

Unlike many other parts of the world, Finnish hotels, restaurants and museums have not really used ghosts or local legends to attract visitors, until recently. Maybe we Finns tend to think that real ghosts live elsewhere, in old European towns or castles. Or maybe we are worried about losing our reputation as sensible, down-to-earth people who believe in technology, not ectoplasm. I have participated in ghost walks and tours of haunted places and seen some very well-orchestrated tricks used to chill the audience to the bones. Here in Grönvik there were no tricks. Just a casually dressed man who was telling his story. In my eyes he was sincere and truly loved the place, with all the good and bad things it has brought him and his family.

Through the window it was already dark. And getting colder.

He told us the Grönvik Manor attracts mediums and people interested in the spiritual life. The family got phone calls regularly from psychics who offered their services or warned them about evil spirits that are passing by the manor. Some visitors contacted the family afterwards and told them how the place was strangely familiar. A few have had breathing problems and feel they are choking. I started to understand why the family – or the house – wanted to control visitors' access.

Some of the psychics claim that the estate is located at the intersection of ley lines, spiritual and mystical alignments connecting ancient or prehistoric sites. Ley lines are often associated with paranormal activity. The compass does not work in this place. It goes berserk.

At the end of the visit I asked if there was a certain time of the year when the ghosts appear, or are more active, or whether there is some way of knowing when they are close. He was silent for a while, smiled and said: 'Oh no. They are here all the time. Even now. As we speak.' We looked around, as if greeting those present.

We thanked our host and left the house. I had more than enough material and was yearning to write everything down as quickly as possible.

In the car I asked my Sceptical Friend his impressions. He had been unusually quiet the whole evening. 'If I did not know better,' he said 'I swear I felt a touch on my shoulder and heard whispers behind my back.'

I often imagine ghosts as guides to local history. In Grönvik Manor, the ghostly inhabitants include the deceived army courier, the overseer who hanged himself, the victim of a murder at the well, the souls of executed soldiers and the white lady seen in the window, the garden or by the bedside. With them we can travel in time. Come along, they say.

The Ghosts of Grönvik Manor

- **When** a newcomer arrived to restore the manor house at the end of the 1990's, seventeen layers of wallpaper came to light. There were also many layers of ghosts.
- **The earliest ghost story** has to do with the war with Sweden in 1809. Russian soldiers stopped at the manor on their way to occupy Umeå, a Swedish town on the opposite side of the Gulf of Bothnia. In the winter of 1809 an army courier arrived at Grönvik bearing a consignment of the troops' wages. He stopped at the house for a rest overnight, and was the victim of foul play. However, the murderers never got their money.

People believe that it still lies somewhere in the grounds of the mansion, and that the body of the courier was buried in the cellar.

- **When** one of the estate overseers was dismissed, he took a bottle of spirits and a rope up to the attic, and never returned. At the beginning of the last century, a doctor's wife sleeping there said someone was trying to strangle her. The children of the present occupants claim to have heard a gasping noise in the room, as if someone couldn't breathe. The room is a beautiful one with a fine glazed porcelain stove, but no one can sleep there anymore. The painted ceiling is peeling off.
- **The first map** drawn of the estate, in 1833, showed a well in the courtyard near where the body of a man was later discovered. The victim had entered the estate on the run from pursuers, but his cries for help were never heeded and he was killed with an axe.
- **The courtyard** was a site of another terrible event in 1918 during the civil war between the Reds and the Whites that followed Finnish Independence. A group of Russian soldiers was executed in the yard. When Baron Erik von Troil bought the property a year earlier Russian soldiers were living there. Soon after the property had been sold, Grönvik went up in flames. Arson was suspected, as the sale had not gone ahead amicably. Some believe this grudge lies behind the bloody events that took place at the time of the Civil War.
- **The manor** flourished once more during the craze for summer villas in the 1920s, but late night celebrations there in summer were overshadowed by its reputation. A grieving woman's face was often seen gazing from an upstairs window.

- **Tracing** the history of the house has become a passion for the present owner. He has compiled an archive of the old documents and photographs. While doing so he found an old photograph of himself as a young boy smiling at the camera, with the silhouette of the deserted house in the background. When he enlarged it he saw that dimly visible in the window behind him was a woman. She was staring at the figure in the picture, the little boy who would become the future owner of the house.

Kath McKay

Seven deaths, seven funerals

Name: Annie Phipps, former factory worker, mother of eight.

Date of death: 25 December 1998.

Age at death: 77

Cause of death: Heart attack, after being ill with cancer of the ear.

Religion: no stated religion. On her person when she died were a Catholic medal and a Buddhist medal.

Place of death: University Hospital, Aintree, Liverpool. A and E department, resus bed, after waiting in a wheelchair, then on a trolley. Arrived in A and E at 01.45 a.m. Examined 20.40 (had refused full examination until daughter arrived). 21.10 cardiac arrest while waiting for bed. 22.55 died.

Death notice, and later her funeral notice, put in the *Liverpool Echo*.

Before the funeral, Annie's coffin was brought home for a night, and several of her children stayed with her, surrounded by the Christmas presents she'd been preparing all year.

Funeral – 7 January, Anfield Crematorium, Liverpool

Type of funeral: Crematorium service organised by Annie's daughter in-law, and six of her seven children. One son arrived in handcuffs from Pentonville prison, flanked by warders. Ordinary plain brown coffin from a local undertaker. Flowers from the family. Other relatives and a few friends attended, plus a policewoman Annie had become friendly with, who had been on a stakeout in her flat a few weeks earlier in pursuit of a thief preying on elderly people. Two brothers and two sisters carried Annie's coffin in to Paul Robeson's *'Motherless Child'*. Annie's daughter-in-law officiated; charting her life in an orphanage aged 2-18, where she was voted the 'most popular girl in the orphanage'. When she left, she went into 'Service' cleaning houses, married an older man and took on his children, before having eight of her own. She never got over the death of her infant daughter Shelagh.

Annie's children and in-laws played an active part in the service. Four poems were read, and her daughter-in-law, officiating, said at one point, 'In this situation we are all feeling a confusion of emotions...people throughout the ages have felt the need for comfort and support. I find the next reading of great help, as have others for over two thousand five hundred years: *Ecclesiasticus 5, v 1-8* – "For everything there is a season". Those assembled filed out to *Amazing Grace*.

Afterwards friends and family went to the local social club, where they displayed pictures of Annie, ate and drank, and sang Irish songs. Several months later the family gathered to scatter her ashes in the River Mersey. One daughter, by mistake, also dropped in the plastic bag containing the ashes, provoking an argument between the siblings and in-laws about environmental unsoundness. To calm the situation, the eldest sister suggested an ice-cream,

which they ate with Annie's ashes still on their fingers, as the Pier Head toilets were closed.

Name: Phillip Maxwell Glasheen, Environmental Protection Officer. Father of three.

Age at death: 56.

Nationality: Australian

Place of death: At home, suddenly.

Cause of death: Ischaemic heart disease, after developing angina.

Date: 5 October 2003.

Place and time of funeral 16 October 2003. St Immaculate Heart of Mary Catholic Church, and Lawnswood Crematorium, Leeds.

Type of funeral: Liturgy of the Word in the Catholic Church, followed by cremation. Carried in to the church by his sons and friends, to *Abide with Me*, in a coffin painted by an artist friend, with images of garden tools and vegetables. (Phil was famous for his tomato sauce). Eulogy delivered by an actor friend, who said how he 'was a man who made a mark', coming from a family that 'prided themselves on their independent approach to life'. After working in the law, and later in a building co-op, he undertook an Environmental Science degree and changed career. His college dissertation was on a Hackney rag and bone man. A book he swore by was *Common Sense Compost Making*. The eulogist drew attention to his hands on approach to being a father, including drying nappies on the line, and added that he enjoyed the challenges of living in an area 'where people from widely diverse

backgrounds co-existed, mostly in peace'. He ended with memories of Phil on the huge march against the invasion of Iraq. Others on the coach down from Leeds recalled him as 'The Sandwich Man', as he had prepared a huge number of sandwiches, organised into different categories and numbered.

The Crematorium service was booked as a double time slot (40 mins instead of the usual 20), and organised by friends and family. His sons and friends carried the coffin in, and Phil's partner, friends and family delivered tributes, told stories of his life, and played music. The music included Van Morrison's *Don't Look Back* and Dylan's *He was a friend of mine*. People filed past the coffin, putting their hands on it before they left. A friend handed out snowdrop bulbs at the door. Curry and drinks at Phil's family home followed.

A few months later his family scattered his ashes in North Shore Sydney, near his childhood home. One old friend complained that there were 'too many bloody ashes being scattered, the whole place was filling up with ashes.' Later, more ashes were scattered at Restoration Island, Northern Queensland, where his brother lived. A silver birch tree (*Betula pendula*) was planted in his local Leeds park by the Environment Agency. The Cicely Herbert poem 'Everything changes (After Brecht's *Alles Wandelt Sich*)' was read... 'We plant trees for those born later'.

Name: Patricia Parkin, teacher, mother of three.

Age at death: 50

Time of death: 11 March 2004

Cause of death: Car accident, Morecambe

Place and time of funeral: 19 March, Rawden crematorium, Guiseley, Leeds

Type of funeral: Cremation, officiated by a Humanist celebrant, arranged by Pat's girls and her estranged husband. A few friends and family gave tributes.

Plain coffin, with tulip display, her favourite flower. Afterwards her girls, on their own initiative, lined up and shook everyone's hands. Followed by the Red Lion pub, for food, drink and a toast.

A few weeks later her ashes were taken up to Ilkley Moor, near one of her favourite walks, and scattered by her children.

10 years later many of her family, colleagues and friends met in a pub on the top of Ilkley Moor to eat, drink, tell stories and commemorate Pat. Two of Pat's daughters now had children, and two of them had married. Friends and family talked about how they had always worried that Pat would die early of the genetic disease that killed many of her family. A scientist brother (who later died of the disease) had seen the patterns in family illnesses, and helped initiate treatment for Pat, which kept her in good health. They said how glad they were that not long before she died she had been to Paris, somewhere she had always wanted to go.

Name: Maureen Hammond, née Mckay. Former midwife, mother of two, grandmother of three

Age: 67

Date of death: 16 May, 2011. At home in Taunton, Devon, in her bedroom, with her family, on a bed borrowed from the Palliative Care team. She had been at home for a

week, being cared for by Macmillan nurses, after receiving unsuccessful treatment in hospital.

Cause of death: Acute leukaemia

Date and place of funeral: 23 May. St Andrew's Church, Taunton, followed by cremation at Taunton Deane Crematorium.

Type of funeral: Maureen was an Anglican churchgoer, and when she knew she was dying, had arranged her own funeral with her husband and the vicar, down to the fine details of telling her sister what to include in the eulogy. The vicar officiated, and spoke of what an unusual parishioner she was – a questioning, principled believer, who fought for social justice. And how he had never before had a dying parishioner who insisted he baptise her grandchild in her conservatory before she died, and hung on until it happened. A sister read the eulogy, other family members paid tribute. Traditional Anglican prayers and hymns. The church was packed with her extended family and her husband's family, friends, work colleagues, trade union colleagues, women she had delivered, over two second generations, alongside colleagues from her voluntary drugs and alcohol counselling and advice work, as well as friends from the choir and barber shop quartet, and from dancing.

After the short cremation, people gathered at the local golf club, with food, drink and a toast.

A few months later, her family visited David Austin Roses, specialist rose growers, and each bought a rose for their own gardens, a tradition started by Maureen, with a rose bed for friends who had died.

Sometime later, her extended family scattered her ashes in the River Mersey, Liverpool. Her husband recited the Lord's Prayer.

Name: Colin Mckay, social worker, union activist and Industrial Tribunal member. Father of two, stepfather to one, grandfather to one.

Age: 63

Cause of death: Stroke, after continuing heart problems due to a genetic condition.

Date of death: 11 June, 2013

Place of death: Stoke Hospital Stroke unit, after being in a coma two weeks, since he'd been found collapsed at his isolated North Wales farmhouse.

Funeral: 10 July (his 64th birthday)

Type of funeral: Blacon Crematorium, Chester. Service organised by his family and his girlfriend's family, with his sister officiating, friends, extended family, work and union colleagues delivering tributes, singing, reciting poems and telling stories. Colin's son, nephews and girlfriend's family and friends carried the coffin in to the music of *Grandola Vila Morena* by Zeca Afonso, which became the anthem of The Carnation Revolution in Portugal in 1974, and was played at the beginning of democratic rule. Colin had chosen this, as he had Partisan's *Bella Ciao* by the Modena City Ramblers, a song from 1943 from the Italian anti-fascist resistance movement (This is the blossom of those that died here /For land and liberty); Christy Moore's *Does this Train Stop on Merseyside*. Other music and tributes including a rendering of *Weila Weila Weile*, a 'merry little folk song about murdering a baby with a penknife', which Colin would sing to his daughter and step-daughter as children. A French friend of Colin's recited 'O Mort, Mon Capitaine' by Baudelaire, for her 'Francophile friend'. A brother sang an unaccompanied song he'd composed.

People left to Leonard Cohen's *Hallelujah*, chosen by his girlfriend. Afterwards the crematorium worker said 'It was the best family funeral I have ever been to.'

This was followed by food and drink in The Little Owl pub, Chester. Then his immediate family continued eating, drinking, reminiscing and dancing at his ex-wife's home in Chester.

A few months later the family had another trip to David Austin Roses.

Colin's girlfriend's family scattered his ashes on the Wirral side of the River Mersey a few weeks after his death. Colin's siblings and ex-wife waited a year before scattering them on the Liverpool side of the Mersey. Afterwards their group ate and drank at the Albert Dock, Liverpool.

Name: Conchita Varnes

Age: 60.

Nationality: Spanish

Religion: Roman Catholic background, non- practising. Mother of two, grandmother of two. Film buff, lover of art, bag-maker.

Place of death: St Joseph's Hospice, Hackney

Cause of death: Stomach Cancer, after being diagnosed 16 months before.

Date of death: 12 June, 2016

Date and place of funeral: 28 June Golders Green crematorium.

Type of funeral: simple cremation, attended by immediate family and a couple of close friends. Friend officiated,

with contributions from family members, including her grandchildren.

Followed by a celebration of her life several months later, at Hackney Picture House, with photos of Conchita on a loop, cava and music, and many attending from different periods of her life – her early years in Spain; time spent in Denmark; and in London. Conchita was said to have had ‘a great capacity for friendship’, with one friend pointing out that ‘all her friends were so different’. Neighbours came; friends she went to art classes with; from her squatting days; her days of political involvement; those whose children had grown up with hers; from her children’s nurseries and schools; from her punk era; from her wild partying days and her more sober going swimming every day in the outdoor lido days; ex-lodgers she had stayed in touch with; friends she went to films with...

A few months later her ashes were scattered by her children, partners and grandchildren in the sea at Tarifa, where she lived for a while.

Name: Charles England

Age: 64

Former librarian. Two children, one grandchild.

Cause of death: Peritonitis

Date and place of death: 26 July 2016 At home. Newcastle upon Tyne.

Religious background: none

Date and place of funeral: 10 August 2016. Newcastle upon Tyne Crematorium

Type of funeral: Humanist celebrant officiated. No family members spoke. His death was sudden and unexpected, and his two grown up children wanted someone to take charge. The celebrant summed up Charles's life as a former librarian, noting his great interest in music, his organisation, and his collections of models, musical instruments and books, after seeing his array of collected items when visiting his flat. Afterwards friends and family went to The Tyne Bar in Newcastle, a well-known music pub.

When my mother died it felt important that we had some input into the funeral. With three brothers and four sisters, we were never going to agree on anything, so we appointed our sister-in-law to officiate. A drama teacher, her attitude was that a good funeral had to be choreographed and planned, like a performance. So she allocated tasks – who would carry the coffin, who would read, who would sing, who would be responsible for the music, who would put the notice in the local paper. She knew that a non-religious funeral had to adopt some of the dramatic arc a religious funeral can take, bringing the congregation together in sorrow, and sending them out with hope.

From my mother's funeral, I learnt that she was a much more political, active and forward looking person than I had thought. You tend to see your parents in fixed roles, so it is good to see them from different perspectives. My sister-in-law said that my mother rarely had money and when she did, 'she gave it away.' What a fantastic quality. She described how she was 'totally anti-racist', and proud of all her children's achievements. It moved me how she, a clever working class woman who had never had the chance for higher education, delighted in her children enjoying it.

When it came to my partner's death and funeral, I felt that I was literally held up by my friends and family. People congregated in our house, travelling for miles

unbidden, producing bottles of wine and food, going through paperwork I couldn't stomach, bringing DVDs for my children to watch, cleaning the house. People organised themselves, figuring out what needed doing, setting up rotas for food, taking my daughter to the pictures. *Finding Nemo* came out five days after my partner's death. He was from Sydney, and when a small group of us saw the film, the epic quest of Marlin to rescue his son Nemo so that they could live in freedom in Sydney Harbour, broke our heart. I learnt that that going the pictures and swimming were both useful when you were suffering grief, as you could cry as much as you wanted, and no one knew. We went to the pictures a lot. There are photos of me in shorts and tee-shirt in Australia with a black armband I wore for a year. I wanted my bereavement marked. No one ever asked me what it meant. Maybe some knew. But some people still crossed the road, as if death was contaminating, others said things like 'you must be over it by now' (after three weeks), some people murmured words about 'moving on'. That hurt.

In the funeral the eulogist was able to frame a narrative round my partner's life, tracing his environmental interests through his work and leisure pastimes. A member of the Shoddy Mungo canoe club, Phil wanted to canoe across Canada, a way of traversing the country without leaving a footprint. I found this image comforting. And I'll never forget the lovely painted coffin, with images of garden implements, vegetables, teapots, tomatoes, fish, trees, nappies drying on a line. My artist friend had listened to the stories and made images. In the church, my eyes stayed on the coffin, and the autumn butterfly circling it.

The priest said no mass, but performed a Liturgy of the Word, for when people of other or no faiths are present. Few knew the words to the hymns, or how to respond to his calls, but I remember phrases: '... sadness in parting, but

we take comfort in the hope that one day we shall see Phil again and enjoy his friendship.’ The priest acknowledged the pain of a premature death. And in the Song of Farewell, I heard the phrases ‘Eternal rest’ and ‘Perpetual Light’. With a nod to unbelievers, he said, ‘Resurrection can mean getting up in the morning.’

‘Dust to dust’ and ‘ashes to ashes’ brings you back to the world of the senses. You can see dust, and smell it, feel it in your fingers.

The cadence of the language contrasted with how the Humanist Celebrant at my friend Pat’s funeral said, ‘Her body will be broken down into its constituent parts.’ I grieved for her teenage girls, and for the lack of poetry in the words. There was no comfort in those words, and nothing of the senses.

I can recall the strong spices of the curry we ate after Phil’s funeral, piercing through grief. And a Muslim neighbour dropping in to give his condolences: ‘He was a good man. He is with Allah.’ I offered him chicken curry. It was Ramadan. He did not take offence.

And when it came to my sister’s turn I can still hear her shouting through from her palliative care bed while I typed up her eulogy in her kitchen – ‘Make sure you get in about the acapella barber shop quartet.’ And the joy she took in her grandchild’s christening. We all drank champagne, and, ever the medically trained, she whispered ‘I am no longer mobile.’ Those last few days and hours with her felt like a privilege, something almost religious about it as we turned her poor tired body and helped soothe her and comfort her. In her last week, her choir sang at her door, and she joked ‘Who else gets a heavenly choir before they’re dead?’ And on that last day, after Maureen, a midwife, had given instructions for the grass to be mowed, a cleaner to come, the bird feeder to be filled, and her husband, obsessed by

cleaning the small pond, had finally cleaned it, my two sisters and I sat in her conservatory while in the back room my sister kept on dying, with her children and husband around her. As I looked out at the garden, I saw my sister in a long turquoise sleeveless dress that caught the colour of her eyes, with her infectious grin, walking round the garden, inspecting everything. Yes, the grass was mown, yes, the bird feeder was filled, and yes the washing was off the line.

‘I’ve just seen her,’ I said to my sisters. Shortly afterwards, she died. We each downed a big glass of wine; her husband put a backpack on and went for a walk. Later, I placed my sister’s hooded round one daughter, and she burrowed into it, sniffing her mother. That night the other daughter insisted on sleeping in her dead mother’s palliative care bed. The sheets unwashed, she sank into her mother’s last smell.

I remember the full high Anglican church of my sister’s funeral, and how alien the words sounded, with the emphasis on ‘The Father’, and everything ‘He’. I found it difficult to reconcile my sister’s faith for a patriarchal church with how most of her life was spent working for the good of women and children. But these were the choices of Maureen and her husband.

The lovely music at my brother’s funeral gave a flavour of his political involvement, and his beliefs. One of the first generation from a working class background to go to university, he had embraced the cultures of France and Spain, discovering that working class people took their food seriously, something close to his heart. We told the story of Colin on a demo in France which stopped for lunch, complete with tablecloths and wine, ‘and the police never touched us.’ Other tales surfaced: the time he’d been lying peacefully in his bed in an NHS Cardiac Recovery Ward, after serious heart surgery. ‘They told me to rest. I

had quite a nice view of the cemetery. Next thing a nurse rushes in, says they'll get fined if I don't move wards quick, and to get up. So after lying flat on my back for a few days I'm legging along the corridor with all my stuff in a Tesco plastic bag.' And a work colleague told us how Colin found the best preparation for the madness of Welsh Civil Service bureaucracy was to watch every episode of 'Yes Minister'.

At my Spanish friend's funeral, the family tried to honour her wish not to have a funeral by keeping it as simple and small as possible, and having a party months later. The simple cremation felt right. Between the sadness of her death and the funeral, there were moments of comedy of course. When we met the funeral director, my friend's son asked could he keep the titanium rod my friend had in her spine. The guy didn't miss a beat. 'Why?' 'Maybe to make jewellery,' he said. 'Not for me,' piped his girlfriend. That idea was soon forgotten. And registering the death, two of us waited outside the Registrar's Office for her children. We heard laughter, and after a while they popped out: 'The Registrar wants to know what to put as our mum's job.' My friend, disabled, had rarely had a job. But for a while she had made leather bags. We arrived at 'Leather Accessories Designer', which made her sound like some kind of porn queen.

In a Compassionate Friends video, for bereaved parents, they talk about how you need to *do* things to grieve, and I think that's right. At my brother-in-law's funeral, because they were in shock, his children let the officiant do everything. He made a pretty good job of picking out details of Charles' life. But then he read a poem which he had written and framed, and presented to my niece. It was a crap poem, full of sentimental generalities, nothing to do with the man. I didn't want to end up in an argument, but I thought 'What a cheek,' and that this 'celebrant' had

overstepped the mark. And that's one of the dangers when we rely on 'professionals'. They can miss things, get it wrong.

What I have learnt is that it is a lot of hard work sorting out funerals and commemorations, but that people love to be involved, and 'do' things. If someone is no good at speaking, don't force them, they might be good at sorting out the typeface for the leaflet for the service, or arranging the food, or the music, or the millions of other things we can do to remember others. Let's not rush to 'celebrate' too quickly, not allowing space for sadness.

Let the grief come. Don't do well. Feel crap.

Recently I heard a young guy on a train moaning about someone he knew, who had lost his partner five years before. 'He has a picture of her on his desk, and he hasn't been out with anyone else. Why doesn't he move on? What a loser. A right loser.'

We are all 'losers'. We experience loss, and we die. I come from a family where we write things down, and keep them. Maybe I knew I was going to write a piece like this one day, but I still have the hand-written envelope with the scrawled notes for my mother's funeral: *Go see undertakers. Phone the prison. Put notice in the Echo.* The details may change, but we still have to mark the dead, pick up our feet, and go on.

Ray French

Here, Now

The night before Nathan began to panic. It had been a week since he'd launched his idea on social media in a rash of tweets, emails and posts, and at first the signs were good, within a couple of hours people were congratulating him on his idea.

You're doing a small good thing in a shitty world.

I have a friend this might help – thank you!

Great idea, said Oz, his best and oldest friend, *why hasn't anyone thought of this before?*

Then, after that first rush, the replies suddenly dried up. He kept checking every few minutes to see if he'd attracted any more. When there weren't any he was crushed, then depressed, and finally furious. Social media was for airheads, people who wet themselves laughing at babies farting in the bath, then gawping in surprise at the bubbles. Try and tackle a serious problem, you were completely ignored.

However if there was just one person who'd seen his message and turned up tomorrow then he needed to be there.

He got to the park at eight, bagged a picnic table overlooking the lake and stuck his placard into the ground. He took out his stones and carefully formed them into a

large pile – that took up quite a bit of time – then added notepaper, The Book of Memories, his decorative candle, a box of tissues, and sat down to wait.

It was a nice day for it, a pleasant spring morning, and the thin mist on the lake soon cleared as it began to warm up. A marvellous day to be alive in fact, to reflect on your incredible good fortune not to be born in a war zone, or a country gripped by famine, or in Morecambe, where he'd spent a year as a student. He watched the ducks and geese drift past, the early dog walkers on their circuit of the lake, the slowly growing parade of joggers. He sipped his take away coffee, nibbled at his bagel. He opened his fat Sunday paper, which he never had time to give more than a cursory glance at home.

People walked past but no-one stopped to read the sign or ask what he was doing. Sometimes he'd look up and catch someone quickly looking away. He was beginning to feel as if he was doing something shameful, and was causing offence. What if someone reported him to the council?

He gave up on the political review of the week, far too depressing, and tried the sports section instead, but just couldn't concentrate. It was 9.20. Nathan felt like a complete schmeckel. He imagined people sniggering behind his back, already looking forward to telling their friends about the loony in the park. Or worse, ringing the police.

Then they began to turn up.

The first was a small, thin, middle-aged woman in her fifties, dressed in a white blouse and black slacks, round tortoiseshell glasses, greying hair cut very short. Her walk was brisk, business-like. She stopped in front of the sign and read it aloud.

‘Mourn Here. Have you lost someone and never got to let them know how you really felt? Then do it here, now.’

She gave him a quizzical look.

‘You’re the guy.’

‘Yes, I’m the guy.’

‘I thought you’d be older, have a touch more gravitas. Maybe a beard.’

Nathan shrugged, ‘I tried to grow a beard once,’ he ran his fingers under his chin, ‘but I got these nasty red patches here, and here, they really itched.’ He shrugged, ‘It just didn’t work out, the beard thing.’

‘When was this?’

‘About twenty years ago.’

‘I’m sure you can get some ointment for that kind of thing now.’

She examined the notepad, then opened *The Book of Memories*, and raised her eyebrows.

‘So I’m the first.’

She picked up the candle, feeling its weight, examining the brightly painted scenes of Jerusalem streets, palm trees, sand. Nathan drummed his fingers against the seat. He wished she’d stop touching everything. Next she prodded his carefully arranged pile of stones, then picked one up and caressed it.

‘Symbols of permanence. You’re Jewish?’

‘My grandmother was Jewish, but we didn’t know that until a few years ago when my Aunt looked into our family history. I’m still getting used to it.’

‘Good luck with that.’

‘Leaving a stone on a grave is a Muslim tradition as well,’ he pointed out.

She tapped the candle.

‘And this? The yartzheit candle?’

‘I chose it for the painting of Jerusalem, a Holy City for Jews, Muslims and Christians. It’s a kind of mix and match approach.’

She looked amused.

‘It’s a bit eclectic, isn’t it? Nothing here for Christians or Hindus, Buddhists or Sikhs, not to mention the Zoroastrians or the Jains.’

He tried to keep calm and remember the reason he was there.

The woman looked around her, hands on hips, slowly nodding to herself.

‘So I can mourn here anyway I want?’

Nathan spread his hands and smiled wryly, a gesture he’d been practising in readiness for this moment. He’d modelled it on a scene from *Dog Day Afternoon* – Al Pacino did a great shrug.

‘It’s entirely up to you.’

‘Okay.’

She took off her petite mauve backpack, put it on the seat. Then she removed her glasses, folded them up and held them out.

‘Can you keep hold of these for me?’

She closed her eyes and began to take deep breaths, slowly rolled her head, then worked her shoulders up and down. Gradually she became still, her breathing slowed and she hung her head. She stayed like that for a few moments before letting out a howl that nearly made Nathan fall off his seat. It was startling to hear such a primal expression of sheer agony coming from this small, meticulous person. She began to tear at her blouse, the harsh sound of cloth ripping set his teeth on edge. A couple who’d been walking their dog by the lake stopped to gape. When their dog

started barking Nathan smiled at them inanely, as if a woman rending her garments in the middle of a park on a Sunday morning was just one of those things. Move along now, nothing to see here. The woman, oblivious to how anyone else felt, far beyond that now, had dropped to her knees and was scrabbling madly at her blouse, wrenching it so violently the top button flew into the grass. It was as if she was possessed. She sobbed and moaned; she threw her head back and cried out at the sky; she shook and rocked.

This went on for quite some time.

‘Is she alright?’ asked the female dog walker, while her boyfriend grabbed the beast, up on its hind legs, demented, and tried to tug it away. Other people had stopped, appalled, on the path above. Some were looking accusingly at Nathan, as if he were responsible. Which, of course, he was.

Nathan stood up. He beseeched them.

‘Can you please give us some space? This is a private moment.’

‘It’s a public park,’ a man pointed out. ‘There are children here,’ he added.

The woman continued to make hideous sounds and tear at her blouse. Boy, was she going for it. Nathan and the man swapped increasingly tetchy replies. The man grew more aggressive when he realised that Nathan was only half listening. The woman’s howling was having a hypnotic effect on him, tugging him back to something more raw and alive. This city, this park, the people in it, his life, felt suddenly contingent, a flimsy, badly constructed thing. This woman was the only one there who was truly alive, here, now.

‘Are you even listening to me?’ cried the man.

‘For Christ’s sake, can’t you see she’s upset?’

There was a brief exchange of insults, the man jabbed his finger at Nathan and used a four letter word.

‘There are children here,’ Nathan reminded him.

The man went for him, but a couple of other people pulled him back. He hurled a few more insults over their shoulders as they bundled him away. ‘Leave him, the guy’s a loony,’ one of them said. The crowd dispersed. Nathan was relieved, he’d never been much of a fighter, and the man looked very angry.

He sat back down, tried to calm himself. The woman had lowered her head and was now moaning like an animal. Who could have guessed that such a person would be capable of that volcanic eruption of grief and rage?

When she finished she came back and Nathan returned her glasses, and handed her a couple of tissues.

‘Thanks.’

Nathan quickly looked away when she started to take off her tattered blouse. He heard her unzip her backpack, and after a minute she told him he could look now. When he turned round she was wearing a new blouse, and was stuffing the one she’d torn into the backpack. She sat down at the table and opened *The Book Of Memories*, and wrote for quite a while, filling three pages. She took a stone, again caressing it tenderly in her hand, staring into space. It hadn’t taken her long to regain her composure, but her face looked different somehow, softer maybe. She put the stone in her pocket, looked at Nathan.

‘So what are *you* hoping to get out of this?’

‘I don’t know. It felt like a good thing to do.’

She nodded, ‘Zechus, the reward that comes from a good action. But maybe you’re doing it for yourself too.’

‘Maybe I am.’

‘That I can understand.’

She got up, slung her backpack over her shoulder.

‘I hope you don’t think this is going to provide closure for people, or for you. I hate that word. Good luck.’

She left.

Once she was out of sight Nathan was desperate to see what she’d written, but no, he’d promised that he wouldn’t look at anyone’s memories until the end of the day. A few minutes later a mother and her young daughter arrived. The woman had a canvas bag slung over her shoulder, the girl, who looked about seven, was cradling a shoebox with both hands.

The woman took a long slow look at Nathan, checking him out. When she’d finished her appraisal he saw that if he hadn’t exactly passed with flying colours then at least he’d been given the benefit of the doubt. She leant down and put her arm around the girl.

‘This is it, Sophie. Are you ready?’

She was a slightly overweight little girl in a lime green top, brown hair in pigtails, and she scrutinized him for far longer and much more frankly than her mother. So long that Nathan began to wonder if there was something wrong with her. Eventually she, too, decided he might just be okay and tenderly placed the shoebox on the table.

‘This is Marmalade, my guinea pig.’

Marmalade had died while Sophie had been in hospital, and her mother had kept him in the freezer in the garage until she came home. Sophie had seen Nathan’s posting when she was in hospital and persuaded her mum to take her. She took off the lid and invited Nathan to look inside.

‘He died because I’d gone, and he thought I wasn’t coming back.’

‘No Sophie, you don’t know that,’ he told her. She gave him a pitying look; what did he know? They discussed

their mourning options, then Sophie took a stone and a piece of paper and she and her mother climbed up to a copse, and buried Marmalade under a tree. When they came back Sophie wrote something in the book, then her mother handed her a pencil case, she took her felt pens and drew a picture of Marmalade lying on the floor of his cage, his eyes rolled up into his head, his tongue hanging out. Underneath she wrote *Dead of a broken heart*. When she'd finished they both thanked Nathan.

The woman took Sophie's hand and said, 'Come on, let's go to Shaky Jakes, I'll buy you a Milky Way Magic Stars Milk Shake.'

Then it began to get busy.

Nathan listened to a woman who had an argument with her mother the last time she saw her before she died. This was the kind of thing Nathan always had in mind. The only problem was, once she began talking he wasn't sure he was cut out for this kind of thing, her story was so upsetting. For several years she and her sister had been trying to persuade their mother to sell the house she could no longer manage, and move into a flat closer to one of them. She had been struggling to navigate the stairs and had taken to sleeping on the sofa in the living room.

'I don't sleep much now anyway, and when I wake up I can just reach for the remote and turn on the TV,' her mother told her, as if she'd come up with a very sensible solution.

The house was in a filthy state, they found food in the fridge that was months out of date, unpaid bills, so that they worried constantly about her having her gas, electricity or phone turned off. But her mother was stubborn, always had been, told them she knew very well the two of them wanted to get her hands on the house, the only thing she had left.

'I snapped, the strain of the last few years just came out before I could stop myself. I started shouting at her. I called her a stupid, selfish old cow. I said, "you're impossible. You've always been impossible. Suit yourself then, live in filth!" I stormed out and slammed the door behind me, got in the car and drove straight back to Sheffield, went home and got pissed. That night I got a call from my sister, telling me our mother had died.'

Nathan could think of nothing to say, apart from the fact that the two things weren't connected, that her mother could have had a heart attack at any time. But she would have been told that countless times already. So he got up and sat down next to her, put his arm around her shaking shoulders, because he didn't want to insult her, because she looked like someone who hadn't been touched by anyone for some time, because he needed to hold someone. When she collected herself Nathan asked if she'd wanted to write something, but she shook her head.

'I compile crosswords. I wake up seeing words, I go to sleep seeing words. I'm forever twisting and turning and re-arranging words in my head, looking for hidden patterns and associations, anagrams. A late bloomer? Evening Primrose. A poor opportunity for a snooker player? A bad break. A female supporter? A bra. An event for which one is late? A funeral. I could go on. And on, and on. Sometimes I drive myself crazy. No, no more words.'

She took a harmonica from her bag.

'Will you listen to me play something instead?'

'Yes, of course.'

She played *Christo Redemptor*. She was pretty good too, but it was the feeling behind it which made it extraordinary. That, and watching her face, more eloquent than any words. When she'd finished she said, 'We used to listen to that together sometimes, late at night, she with her sherry and me with my red wine. The Donald Byrd version.'

‘I know it, on the trumpet.’

‘That’s the one, the Blue Note album. She had a photo of the statue on the top of the hill above Rio on the wall. She was a Christian, in a quiet, understated kind of way.’

They sat together for a while, his hand on hers, then she pecked him on the cheek and left.

A man with a portfolio case hanging from his shoulder approached late in the afternoon. He looked a little older than Nathan, but had the look of a perpetual student.

‘Hi,’ he said, easing the case off, then propping it against the bench. He sat down and folded his hands in front of him on the table, and smiled at Nathan.

‘This came at just the right time for me. I’d just finished working on something when my sister forwarded your tweet. You’ll be the first person who’ll see it.’

‘Right, okay,’ replied Nathan, a little unnerved by the man’s manic enthusiasm. Boy, was he pleased with himself.

‘You see my father died a few months ago, in February, and we had two funerals for him – that’s what he wanted. The first one, in Wales, well that was fine, we had a lovely priest. Actually, we’ve been swapping emails, I’m going to run some art workshops in his church for the elderly and unemployed.’

He unfolded his hands, slapped the table.

‘Anyway, so yeah, the first one was good. The problems started when we took his ashes to Ireland.’ He shook his head, ‘I still get angry thinking about it.’

He sighed, turned away and looked down at the lake, where an old woman in a headscarf was tossing breadcrumbs at the ducks, coots and swans.

Nathan waited.

‘I’m Luke, by the way,’ he said, turning back and offering his hand.

Nathan shook it, and told him his name.

‘You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to.’

‘No, I need to, before I show you what I’ve done.’

Luke told him about the Irish priest’s arrogant attitude, how he’d held a raffle in the middle of the service, then got his father’s name wrong, and about the fear he inspired in his cousin.

‘Basically the guy’s a tyrant.’

Luke bit his lip, gazed at a red kite hovering over a copse – they came from Eccup Reservoir, a few miles away. Then he looked at Nathan again and smiled.

‘It’s funny.’

‘What?’

‘I thought you’d be older. I pictured you wearing glasses.’

Nathan did his Al Pacino shrug.

‘Anyhow, I’ve been thinking about how the church in Ireland, the church everywhere really, concreted over all the old pagan traditions, flattening everything, sanitised the ways we remember the dead, got rid of anything they thought might be too much for us. Did you know that cremation was practised in Ireland before the Catholic Church got control?’

Nathan didn’t.

‘But now the only place you can be cremated in Ireland, in the Republic that is, is in Dublin.’ Luke held up a finger, ‘One place, just one place.’

Luke was talking rapidly now, every word accompanied by angry gestures. He resembled a man swatting away insects.

‘The pagan Irish used to bury their dead standing up, with their graves facing the sun, so that they could see it rising when they woke up again. Isn’t that wonderful?’

Luke raised his finger once more, and pointed it at Nathan.

‘But best of all, I love this, they buried their chieftains with their weapons, so they’d be ready to go to war against their enemies when they rose again. My father’s grave has this headstone – my relatives meant well, they insisted on paying for it, they were very generous, I mean... but it’s just not him.’

He paused, relishing the moment.

‘So I painted this.’

He stood up and unzipped the folder, slowly, carefully pulled out a large canvas and held it on the table, facing Nathan.

‘This is how I want to remember my father.’

Nathan just managed to stop himself recoiling. It was a stark, disturbing painting. He was no expert, but he could see more than a touch of Francis Bacon’s Screaming Pope. A fearsome looking man trapped under the ground, screaming with rage. He gripped an axe in one hand, a dustbin lid in the other, looked ready to leap out of the canvas and split Nathan’s skull.

‘Its, ah... very striking.’

Luke gave him a knowing look.

‘It’s a portrait of a madman. That’s what he was, a crazy fucker. He was other things as well, he could be hilarious, sentimental, generous, welcoming, but once you saw the rage underneath you never forgot it.’

He paused, his eyes filling.

‘You can love a madman. It’s perfectly possible. I really did love the mad fecker.’ He gazed fondly at the screaming

warrior. ‘The last of the wild Paddys. He should never have come to this country, he should have lived in a cave on a wind-lashed island off Kerry or Clare – somewhere out west, wild Ireland.’

He smiled at Nathan.

‘Don’t feel uncomfortable, it’s alright that you don’t like that.’

‘No, I -’

Luke waved away his objections, slid the canvas back into the folder.

‘Can I write something in your book?’

‘Yes, please do.’

When he was safely out of sight Nathan buried his face in his hands and began to laugh.

‘Jesus,’ he spluttered, ‘Jesus Christ.’

A couple sat down opposite Nathan without a word and held hands, and lowered their eyes. Nathan watched the man squeeze the woman’s hand tightly. He knew, instinctively, that that one of them was dying, that they would leave the other behind, on their own. And that was when he knew he was out of his depth. What could he possibly say to these people? It took him a while to realise that they didn’t expect anything from him, except to bear witness. At that moment he wished there was some prayer, some kind of ritual he could immerse himself in, a proscribed series of actions or words he could follow that would allow him to shape and guide the three of them through this. But he was not a believer, and somehow he knew that neither were they. So his only choice was to stay with them.

At no point did either of them make eye contact with each other or with him. They simply continued to hold

hands, their eyes lowered. He was so close he heard their breathing, the creak of the bench when they shifted position, the woman sniffing; hayfever he guessed. Nathan had no idea how long the three of them sat there in silence, but it felt like hours. He found it torture. It took an enormous effort to stay where he was, he was desperate to escape from this ordeal. His legs shook, he dug his nails into the palms of his hands.

He felt exhausted by the time he heard the bench creak again. When he looked the couple had stood up, and each wrote something in the book, then left without a word. They continued to hold hands as they made their way down to the path by the lake.

By the evening Luke was flagging. The light was beginning to fade and no-one had been to see him for over an hour. He was about to pack up his things when an old woman appeared.

‘Are you leaving?’

She was somewhere in her sixties, but still elegant in a blue and white headscarf, blue mac, white dress. Middle Eastern, he guessed.

‘No, please sit down.’

She looked familiar.

‘Were you sitting on the other side of the lake?’

‘Yes, I come here every day to walk, to feed the birds. I like this place. I walked past earlier, when the woman was mending her garments.’

‘You’ve been here all day?’

She shrugged, elegantly, making his Al Pacino shrug look clumsy, affected.

‘I come, I go.’

‘I didn’t see you.’

‘People don’t see women my age. But I’ve got used to being invisible. It has its advantages. Can I ask you something?’

‘Go ahead.’

‘Why are you doing this?’

‘I’m here for others.’

‘I’ve read your sign. I’ve watched you talk to these people. But how can you help them if you don’t know what’s ailing you?’

‘Who says there’s something ailing me?’

‘You’re different to everyone else?’

When Nathan looked into her eyes he knew she’d seen terrible things, things that he would probably only ever read about. How could he talk to her about what troubled him without feeling like a lightweight?

She waited.

‘I had this friend, well an almost friend, a-could-have-been-friend, called Imran. We met a few years ago playing football,’ he smiled ruefully, ‘when I was fitter. We’d talk before the game, after the game, and we went to the pub a few times, well most of us did, but me and Imran always seemed to end up sitting together. We made each other laugh at things no-one else found as funny, we talked about our families and things we enjoyed doing. We discussed maybe doing some of those things together.’

‘But you didn’t.’

Nathan stared at her.

‘It’s the way you talk you about him. You miss him. But it’s too late now, isn’t it?’

Nathan looked away, blinking rapidly.

‘He died in a car crash before we’d really got going. I had a young child, I was so stressed at work, really under

the cosh. I was knackered all the time. “Come on bro, look at you,” he said, “you need feeding up, man, why don’t we go for something to eat next week after the game?” But I always had to get back, there was always something. I was so tired. We’d do it another time, when things got a bit easier I told myself.’

Nathan looked at her, sitting calmly on the other side of the bench.

‘Why does this hurt so much?’

‘Every time you don’t make an effort with someone you care about, every time you choose the option that’s easier for you, a little bit of you dies. This I know.’

They sat in silence for a couple of minutes, then she got up and said, ‘Ma’aasaalaama.’

Nathan watched her for a while then said, ‘Wait, I’ll come with you, it’s getting dark.’

She waved a hand, no, and disappeared behind the bandstand a little further up the hill.

Nathan collected his stones, notepad, the Book Of Memories, and packed them into his shoulder bag. He pulled the placard from the ground and slung it over his shoulder and began walking to the exit. It was nearly dark now, the park was almost empty, the grass wet with dew. He’d no idea if he’d really helped anyone. But he hoped, at least, that he hadn’t made things worse. Then he thought of something Imran said once, as they walked to their cars after the game.

‘Do you know what the most used word in The Qur’an is?’

Nathan didn’t, of course.

‘Compassion. No, it’s true, people don’t believe that when I tell them, but it’s true. That’s what you’ve got to remember, bro, all your learning, all your degrees, none of it is worth anything if you don’t have compassion.’

Nathan said, 'Yeah, maybe.'

Imran stopped, forcing Nathan to stop too.

'You're like this, man.'

He put down his bag, hunched his shoulders, twisted his head this way, that, like a small, worried animal.

'This is you – "what's going to happen next? Something bad, I know it." Listen to me, I'm going to tell you something, as your friend. You gotta let it out, man, all that stuff boxed up inside you, it's going to drive you crazy.'

He gripped Nathan's arm.

'Next week we'll go for a curry, yeah?'

But next week Nathan made an excuse, and they didn't.

The park gates were in sight now. A woman and child waited there, the woman looking down at her wrist, checking her watch, the child walking round in circles, chanting something to herself. Nathan dropped the placard, his bag slipped from his shoulder, stones tumbled behind him into the grass. He had a stitch, his heart was burning, but on he stumbled, desperate to reach them, to hold them, tell them how much they meant, how much he'd missed them both, that he was so glad that the three of them were alive, together, now.

Contributors

Steve Dearden's short stories have appeared in magazines in the UK, Finland and Australia and an e-collection, *Single Skin*, is published by Smith Doorstop. He has been Writer in Residence at Bluewater Shopping Centre and Wakefield Literature Festival, for whom he created the online photo-novella www.wakelost.com. After being Director of Ilkley Literature Festival and the National Association for Literature Development, he set up and runs the Writing Squad, a development programme for young writers across the north of England. After living in Durham and Yorkshire, he recently returned to his home city of Manchester. www.stevedearden.com

Ray French is the author of two novels, *All This Is Mine*, and *Going Under* (Vintage), *The Red Jag & other stories* (Planet), and a co-author of *Four Fathers* (Route). His stories have been published in magazines, Humber Writers anthologies, and *Best European Fiction 2013* (Dalkey Archive). *Welcome To The Reservation* will be published in 2018. He teaches at the University of Hull. His talk on second generation Irish identity can be heard at: https://www.rlf.org.uk/showcase/wa_episode106/

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Dr Brian W. Lavery is a former national and regional journalist, who returned to higher education in 2008. His first book, *The Headscarf Revolutionaries*, (Barbican Press, 2015), the story of the Hull Triple Trawler Disaster, has been optioned by a major television production company and was derived from his PhD research at the University of Hull. His next book, *The Luckiest Thirteen* (Barbican Press, 2017), tells of the St Finbarr trawler Disaster of Christmas 1966.

Moy McCrory is a writer of Irish parentage who writes about the second generation and nationality. She has published three collections of short fiction and a novel. Her work had been translated into fifteen languages; it is widely anthologized and included in the seminal Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing. She is a Hawthornden Fellow, a Senior Fellow of the HEA, and is Senior Lecturer at the University of Derby and a PhD examiner. Contact: Dr McCrory, Department of Humanities, University of Derby

Kath McKay, from Liverpool, lives in Leeds. She has published two novels, two full poetry collections, a poetry pamphlet and many short stories. Her latest novel, *Hard Wired*, (2016, Moth publishers) won the Northern Crime Novel competition and was selected for *Read Regional* 2017. Her most recent poetry collection is *Collision Forces* (2015, Wrecking Ball Press). She teaches at Hull University.

Mandy Sutter grew up in Nigeria and Bromley but now lives in Ilkley with her partner and a large black dog called Fable. She has co-written two non-fiction books about the lives of Somali women. Her first novel *Stretching It* was published in 2013, her third poetry pamphlet *Old Blue Car* in 2015. *Seed*, condensed to win 2nd prize in the Ambit short story competition 2015, will be part of her forthcoming collection with Rarebyte Books. She won the New Welsh Writing Awards in 2016.

David Wheatley is the author of various collections of poetry, including *Mocker* (Gallery Press), *A Nest on the Waves* (Gallery Press), and *The President of Planet Earth* (Carcanet). During a thirteen-year stay in Hull he contributed to numerous collaborative books of the Humber Writers, including *Architexts*, *Drift*, and *Hide*. He now lives in rural Aberdeenshire.

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