

**2<sup>nd</sup> Place Short Story**

**Last Rites – by Teresa Godfrey**

It's only a short flight from Dublin to London. He is sitting squashed into the window seat waiting to take-off and wishing he'd booked the aisle where he could stretch out a bit more. Or even better, a front seat with plenty of leg room up beside the galley. He is wearing his dog collar and his black anorak that he can zip up if he has reason to fear that the collar is drawing hostile attention. He doesn't know how long he'll be away. He packed a clean shirt and a couple of pairs of underpants into his ancient briefcase this morning, along with a few other essentials. If he needs anything else he can buy it over there.

He watches the other passengers shoving on board. Businessmen in suits. Suited women. All with laptop bags slung over their shoulders. Young fellas in jeans and trainers. Girls all dolled up and caked in make-up, ripped trousers spoiling the look of them. Older couples heading off on a break – an anniversary maybe. Him going to his dying brother, Tom, whom he hasn't seen or spoken to in forty-one years.

A few months after Tom had left home he'd heard from the daughter of a neighbour that he'd turned up in London, was working in a bar in Camden and living in a squat in Islington. Well good luck to him. That's what he'd thought back then. Tom didn't write home, nor had he expected him to. Their mother cried for months after he'd gone until their father lost his temper and threw the kitchen chairs against the walls. If she cried after that she kept it to herself.

When their father got the cancer Michael gave in to his mother's pleading and went to the neighbour to ask for news of Tom. But the neighbour's daughter had got married and moved away from Camden and could tell him nothing. He could've gone over and looked for Tom himself but he didn't want to leave with his father so close to the end and his mother needing him. Six months later his father was buried with only one son at his graveside instead of two. Michael had been a priest seventeen years by then. Tom had been gone thirteen. He'd have been thirty-seven.

Michael became Parish Priest a year later. He had a fine house on a hill above the town, dressed well, though not too affluently, drove a good car, and enjoyed the respect of his congregation. He'd known his mother had been proud of him and felt that his success made up a little for the loss of her younger son. The strange one, as he'd heard his aunt describe

Tom once when they were still only children. What had happened couldn't have been any other way in those days. He had acted in everybody's best interests, including Tom's.

At Stansted he boards the Airport Express and sees a couple of the made-up girls from his flight swing their tight bottoms into two seats facing him further along. They show no recognition of him. Why should they? An old man zipped up in an anorak is of no interest to anybody. Everyone else on the train seems to be either heading into central London on business or returning from long-distance flights from places far more exotic than he'll ever see.

A large Italian woman gabbles loudly on her mobile as she takes the seat opposite him and makes an exasperated face at her male colleague, who slides in after her and places his laptop on the narrow table separating the two facing pairs of seats.

A tall youth, all gangly arms and legs, forces his rucksack into the overhead locker and flops heavily down into the seat next him and immediately begins bouncing his knee while he deftly thumbs a text to someone.

Michael grabs the already falling apart free newspaper from the table and hides himself behind it.

At last the train takes-off and he discovers that once again he has picked the wrong seat as he hurtles backwards towards Hampstead Heath.

It's only a short walk to the Royal Free. His stomach rumbles as he passes a café. He would like a coffee, breakfast, a full Irish, but he'd better keep going.

He arrives at the hospital. It's still only mid-morning but the entrance area is a buzz of people coming and going. He unzips his anorak enough to show his collar and heads towards the queue for the reception desk. No one pays him any attention. When it's his turn he explains that he's here to see his brother, Thomas Finnerton, who came in with a stroke yesterday. The receptionist keys in the details as quickly as Michael says them and tells him Tom's ward. He wants to ask her for directions but the woman behind has already elbowed him out of the way. He gazes up at the signs all around and finds the one pointing to the stroke wards.

The door to the ward is locked. He has to press the intercom three times before a voice suddenly barks, "Yes?" and startles him.

"Eh, Father Finnerton here. I've come to visit Thomas Finnerton."

“Visiting doesn’t start until two-thirty,” says the voice.

“I flew in from Ireland this morning. I’m his brother.”

The door clicks as it unlocks. He pushes it open and sees the busy nurses’ station up ahead. He strides towards it. It is hard to catch someone’s eye. He grabs at a passing nurse.

“Excuse me. Can you tell me where I would find Thomas Finnerton?”

“Are you a relative?”

He’s said it twice now. He says it again.

“I’m his brother. I know it’s not good. I was sent for last night.”

“Come in here a minute.”

He realises she is a ward sister as he follows her into a small office. She closes the door and invites him to sit.

“Your brother was very ill.”

Her tone tells him all he needs to know.

“He’s gone?”

“Yes,” she agrees. “Everything that could be done was done but I’m afraid that, despite all our efforts, he made no response. I’m so sorry.”

“Can I see him?”

“They’ve already taken him to the morgue.”

“I’d like to see him.”

“Of course. I’ll get someone to take you.”

He stares at the desk and the filing cabinet and the posters on the walls as he waits.

A young staff nurse enters followed by a smartly dressed man in his forties. Michael stands up and offers his hand to the man, whom he assumes is a doctor. He is wrong.

“This is Luke,” explains the staff nurse.

“I’m sorry I missed you,” says Luke. “I just popped out for bit.”

“It was you who rang me last night?” asks Michael.

“Yes,” says Luke, still holding his hand. “I had to look you up on the Internet to get your number.”

“I couldn’t get here any sooner,” says Michael.

Luke removes his hand and places it gently on Michael’s back.

“Shall we go?”

Michael allows himself to be guided out of the office and he and Luke follow the staff nurse to the lift.

The morgue is cold. An attendant pulls out a drawer and folds down the sheet and there is Tom. Michael doesn't recognise him. All he sees is an old man – a stranger – not the twenty-four year-old boy he'd ordered out of the house and out of his sight all those years ago. Michael is seventy-three. Tom is sixty-five – a gap of eight years and only ever the two of them.

Their parents never knew the things he'd said to Tom. The row that went up. The shouting. The rage. His rage. Their mother went to her grave still longing for her lost boy. By then he'd known for years that she would have loved Tom anyway but he couldn't tell her what he'd done. That he'd done it for her to save her from the shame.

He stares at Tom, then turns to Luke. There are tears in Luke's eyes. The penny drops.

“Were you his..?” He doesn't know what term to use.

“Partner? No. Paddy died almost two years ago.

Michael is suddenly and unexpectedly aware of a sharp twinge of regret for the unknown Paddy. He quickly suppresses it as he takes his stole and a small, black pouch containing the anointing oil, from his briefcase. He knows it's too late. That what he is about to do is pointless when the person is already dead. But he wants to honour his brother in the only way left to him.

“I need to do this,” he says to Luke.

“Tom was never into that sort of thing,” says Luke.

Michael wants to shove Luke out of the way. To tell him that Tom went to mass every Sunday and never missed his monthly confessions and Holy Communion.

“But I'm sure he wouldn't mind though,” continues Luke. “He was a live and let live kind of guy.”

Michael places the purple stole around his neck and makes the Sign of the Cross. He notices that at least Luke has the grace to stand aside as he anoints Tom's body with the oil and intones the prayers for the dying.

He is not unaware of the irony in his final words.

“Through the holy mysteries of our redemption may almighty God release you from all punishments in this life and in the life to come. May he open to you the gates of paradise and welcome you to everlasting joy.”

Michael Mullan Cancer Fund Writing Competition

It is only when he feels the touch of Luke's hand on his stooping shoulder that he realises he is crying.

Teresa Godfrey