

1st Place Short Story

The Funeral – by Frank McKenna

Dr Michael Doorley lifted his legs out of his aging Mercedes and used the door to pull himself to standing. The stones crackled under his shoes. The long, beech-shadowed driveway would have been familiar to him in the eerie darkness, but now was lit to a luminous buzzing glow by two big halogen lights at the east end, and he could hear the whirring of a generator running in the darkness behind. He crunched his way to the porch. The front door was open and the light above it was on. Maeve had been asking for that bulb to be replaced for at least ten years.

His tie was uncomfortable and he was beginning to stick to his shirt. He could never judge layers in the winter. He felt a faint flash of gratitude that there was nobody in the hallway. The place seemed fuller. More full of them. There were more photographs lining the walls and filling the tables, life reaching from them – his friend’s face, smiling everywhere, blissful among his family. It was not a room that he really looked at before, having invariably been ushered along by Tom, or Maeve, or having had one of the boys skip along in front when they were young, then trudge along in front as teenagers, and more recently striding confidently and casually as they waxed jovially about the idiosyncrasies of their old man.

“Mom and Dad are inside,” they would say with their father’s smile, nodding into the living room before pottering into the back end of the house, where Dr Doorley had never been. There was a hum of half-whispered conversation coming from the living room. Its door was open and he stopped before it, before coming into view of anyone inside. He placed a steadying hand on the wall and allowed his breathing to settle. Mom and Dad are inside.

He immediately choked up when he stepped through and saw Maeve. He blinked as the room became waterlogged. His hands shook, but he was able to take a step, then another.

“Dr Doorley!” said Tom Jr, as he rose from the couch and put an adult hand on the older man’s arm. They shook hands. “My boy,” said the doctor. “I am sorry. Are you alright?”

The young man was standing tall. His shoulders were broad and full, and Dr Doorley felt hunched and frail in his shadow. Tom Jr nodded and smiled reassuringly, with an appearance of maturity that Dr Doorley thought he could not yet possess.

Unlike Tom Jr's strong grip, Seamus allowed Dr Doorley to take hold of a limp extremity, and though taller than his older brother, Seamus was far less imposing. Seamus barely met his eyes. Dr Doorley told the boy of his sorrow, but Seamus remained silent, offering a timid scowl.

"Seamus!" chastised his mother under her breath.

"It's alright," said Dr Doorley, stepping forward to the bereaved widow. "Maeve," he said, leaning to her side and kissing her on the cheek, as he had been doing intermittently most of his adult life. She was wearing the same sweet perfume she wore two weeks before, when they dined together in the next room as a three, and probably the same scent she had worn the previous month when the three of them dined at Dr Doorley's, and the month before that when they dined in town. It was as familiar to him now as the scent his wife used to wear. She looked as strong as ever, but she didn't smile as she always did when she saw him. Her face was colder, her spark absent, temporarily he hoped.

"He was stubborn to the end," he said, hoping to broach the subject somehow, feeling a need for her reassurance – that she acknowledge in some small way that he had done nothing wrong, but Maeve Blasket just nodded, and smiled politely. There was a jolt to his gut, of sorrow heaped upon sorrow. He turned to the coffin and recognised his friend, and put his hand on his friend's arm, the contact rigid and unfamiliar, then he forced himself to make eye contact with each relative in turn, and tell them too of his sorrow, and somehow felt like the person in the room who had lost the most.

In the kitchen one of the neighbours offered him a tea or coffee or something else. He looked around for the bottle of Glenfiddich he and Tom had taken a glass each from that last night, but it wasn't among the spirits on the table. He asked for a brandy, and eventually poured one himself after the neighbour had been detoured a number of times with decisions to make about sandwiches and cars being blocked in and coats that could not be found.

"Pneumonia," said a worried looking man who shuffled in beside him with a cup of tea and a saucer in his hand. "Awful, isn't it?" he said. Dr Doorley nodded. "He was a young man, really. Seventy odd, I know, but a young man. Fit. I saw him a few weeks ago, out walking the dog! He stopped for a chat, asking about the kids."

"It's never expected," said Dr Doorley, taking a sip. The man nodded sternly.

“At least he died at home, I suppose. I saw the ambulances passing by my place and turning in and I thought someone had had a fall, or a stroke. Off to A-and-E – to Beirut – to lie on a trolley. They couldn’t drag me there no matter how bad I was. Better he died at home.”

“I hope so,” said the doctor.

“Three people I know in the last three weeks. All pneumonia.”

Dr Doorley smiled politely. It could be said that he should have sent Tom in. It wasn’t what Tom would have wanted, but Tom didn’t think he was going to die either. And Dr Doorley hadn’t thought Tom was going to die. Only now could he see how weak Tom was with it. For God’s sake, the man hadn’t taken to the bed in the sixty years he’d known him. Treating Tom was almost like treating himself, and therefore ill advised, but Tom wouldn’t see anyone else. And Dr Doorley had always treated Tom as he would have liked to have been treated himself. Also probably ill advised.

A week of anti-biotics, extended to two. He had rallied, but had slipped again in the last couple of days. It had reached down and grabbed some deeper tissue. Maeve had called Dr Doorley and told him she was worried. One more day, he said. Then we’ll have to send him in.

He finished his drink and set it on the table. He wondered if it would be the last time he would see the old kitchen, and realised it would probably have to be. He would hardly be calling on Maeve without her giddy husband for balance, even if she wanted him to. They had been his family since Carol died. Twenty years. He had seen their kids grow up. Uncle Doc. Now it was no longer appropriate, which was hardly fair.

He walked out through the hall, slowly, part in sorrow and partly because he wanted to remember it. He wanted to take it with him – the photos of his friend and the family he would now lose. Memories – in which he filled some peripheral role, or saw fully from his own peripheral place – filled the house so that it was almost bursting, and there was this hollow in the next room that would suck a certain amount away when it left the house tomorrow.

He placed a hand on the door handle as he stepped outside and his feet crunched again on the stones. He felt the chill on the breeze and pulled his coat across, and slowly walked to his car.

Frank McKenna