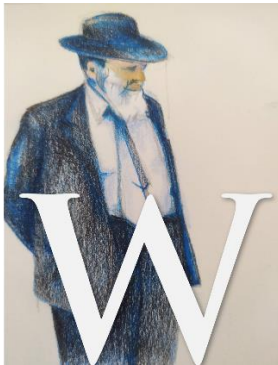


# THREE FUNERALS

by Susan Turbié

## THE SUPERFLUOUS MINYAN

*Willesden, London*



*Which yarmulke should he wear?*

Val's initial reaction to this question, posed over the breakfast table, was surprise that Jolyon possessed more than one of them. She had certainly never seen him in one, although of course she assumed he must own one.

She put down her coffee cup and devoted her attention to the two skullcaps proffered: one was of plain ivory silk: safe, conventional, dull. The other one, on the other hand, brought forth from her a little cry of amusement and delight: it was divided into four parts, with each one depicting a Jewish holiday – she recognized the menorah for Hanukkah and – what was the one with the huts again? It was bright and colourful, with turquoise and lime green and the odd splash of vermillion. It put her in mind of a patchwork quilt or a comic strip.

‘No contest. It *has* to be this one.’

He frowned at it. ‘Really? I don’t know... Isn’t it a bit... I don’t know, frivolous for a funeral? Besides, my granddad gave me the other one.’

‘Well, it’s certainly...’ she searched for the word... ‘*whimsical*. But presumably it’s an actual yarmulke made by a specialist manufacturer of religious apparel or whatever, made by Jews for Jews. I mean, it’s not as if you got it from a fancy-dress shop or anything.’

‘Hmm...’ he was frowning and turning the controversial headpiece over in his hands. ‘Did I ever tell you about that mate of Mark’s in Israel who started up a business making disposable ones?’

Taking up her coffee cup again, she peered over it at him, one eyebrow raised.

*'Disposable kippahs?'*

He nodded. 'Started selling them by the Wailing Wall. Made a fortune.'

She told him to go with the plain skullcap: quite apart from its sentimental value as a family heirloom, she argued, it also had the notable advantage of not potentially offending the more elderly and conservative members of his family.

This sartorial dilemma thus resolved, she sought his counsel regarding her own: she had already decided on the black silk blouse but should she wear it with the black cigarette pants or the black pencil skirt? The only other black skirt she had was leather, and leather was far too sexy for a funeral.

'It's going to be 32 degrees. You'll be too hot in a tight skirt or trousers. Why not wear the wide-legged linen trousers. They're black, elegant, and comfy to boot. Result.'

'Fine, if you want to me to go to your great-aunt's funeral looking like a lesbian in an ashram,' she mumbled.

'Well, it doesn't really matter what you wear, my sweet: everyone'll expect you to look attention-seeking and inappropriate because... well, your people simply don't know any better. We're not judged by the same standards, you and I, see? Frankly, you could turn up in a bondage suit and purple feather boa and it still wouldn't cause anything like the fuss they'd make if *I* wore the wrong yarmulke.'

'Thanks a lot. Cheeky bastard. Plus, it's unfair: I can't possibly make any sort of riposte to that without laying myself open to charges of antisemitism.'

He laughed.

'But seriously,' continued Val, 'going back to the skullcap: surely you're not really worried about what people think? You hardly ever see most of the people who'll be at the funeral, except Beatrix, who's a sweetie, and your mother who –' she paused before continuing tactfully: 'well, she doesn't give a toss about religion and ritual.'

'True,' he said, with a sudden slight edge to his voice, 'but that won't stop her finding fault with me and I'd rather not give her any ammunition.' Putting the approved kippah down on the worktop, he looked up at his wife and his face softened. 'As for *you*,' he said, leaning across the table and kissing her on the mouth, 'you are my gorgeous, glamorous *shiksa* goddess. Please wear whatever you like today.'

Valentina Appelbaum, née Kingsley, was tall and willowy with shoulder-length ash-blond hair and startling grey eyes like a she-wolf's. Although her girlish figure was the envy of most women her age – and indeed, a fair few much younger than she – like most extremely thin people, her face was prematurely wrinkled.

In the car on the way to Willesden cemetery, Val – wearing the cigarette pants – asked him to tell her about Aunt Mina. What had she been like as a young woman? What of the infamous Tobias, her husband, who had died years ago and whom Val herself had only met once?

Tobias Gottfried. Born in Salzburg in 1909. Distinguished scholar and athlete, renowned for his equestrian prowess and numerous sexual conquests. Thrown out of military school because of his origins, though not before he had been subjected to – and passed – some antiquated initiation ritual involving a duel with swords, which had left him with an impressive scar on his right cheek. (There was apparently some doubt as to the veracity of the duel episode: Val herself suspected it was yet another of those family apocryphal tales that seemed to abound in the Appelbaum-Gottfried clan, such as the one about Estella – Jolyon’s great aunt, the younger sister of his grandfather Max and Aunt Mina – being conceived as the result of their mother’s refusal to use her husband’s primitive, home-made contraception methods when performing her conjugal duties. Great-grandfather Appelbaum, the story went, had at that time only just started what was later to become a famous, thriving millinery, and with two children already, feared he did not have the wherewithal to support a further addition to the family – hence his idea to use a sheath he had fashioned from a piece of gauze from the workshop.)

At any rate, Tobias had fled to Switzerland from Austria with his family in the early Thirties and remained there throughout the war. A fervent Anglophile, he decided to emigrate to the UK in the late Forties, where he made various family and business contacts in the Jewish community and went on to build a flourishing packaging empire. It was thus in London in 1949 that Tobias, by then a wealthy, 40-year-old bachelor, met and fell in love with the 29-year-old socialite and hat heiress Wilhelmina Appelbaum at a reception thrown by his business partner.

Jolyon often joked ruefully that had Tobias not been a Jew he would have made a first-rate Nazi. Val had to agree that with his Austrian accent, military bearing, rigid deportment, aquiline nose and brusque authoritarian manner, he would have been thoroughly convincing in the role of the antagonist in a WWII film of the made-for-television variety. Jolyon had heard various anecdotes about Tobias’s extreme gentleness and infinite patience with his children Samuel and Lydia during their infancy. But these seemed somewhat at odds with the tyranny with which he and his wife reportedly reigned over their household in subsequent years, and with their offspring’s cowering deference towards them, which he himself had witnessed on several occasions. He, at any rate, would always remember Tobias as the chilly, disdainful tartar who, when he, Jolyon, had announced his plans to marry Val all those years ago, had coolly remarked in his clipped, Teutonic tones, that it was mixed marriages, not the Holocaust, that was responsible for the decimation of the Jews. When relating the incident to her later that day, Jolyon, profoundly shocked by his great-uncle’s sectarianism, had declared that the Gottfrieds would not be welcome at the wedding. Val herself, though touched by Jolyon’s chivalrous outrage, had laughed off the slight good-naturedly, merely remarking that this was rich coming from a man who had not set foot in the *shul* for decades and was known to have a penchant for *pata negra*. Jolyon had laughed with relief and love and admiration for his future bride, for her warmth and magnanimity and humour. He had taken her in her arms and kissed her, his indignation at Tobias forgotten he had even joked that Tobias was probably disingenuous enough to tell himself and possibly others that those pampered swine’s exclusively acorn-based diet technically made them kosher.

If Tobias had been formidable, Aunt Mina had been more than a match for him: fearless, fiercely intelligent and opinionated, unvaryingly blunt, she was also something of a pioneering feminist in her way, causing quite a scandal when, as a young woman in the interwar period, she went on a cycling tour around Sweden, alone and unchaperoned. However, Jolyon's mother had often said she suspected that this apparent act of feminist defiance had stemmed more from Mina's natural wilfulness and desire for independence than from a conscious desire to improve the lot of her sex as a whole. Certainly, she had never seemed to show any particular sense of solidarity or sisterhood towards her female peers. Both husband and wife were profound and unapologetic snobs and saw absolutely no inherent contradiction in their being both sectarian and secular.

They parked the car and, spotting a small gathering of members of Jolyon's extended family, walked up to them and exchanged such appropriately subdued greeting as befit the occasion. Presently Jolyon's mother Regina, a cigarette clamped between her fingers as always and accompanied by Aunt Beatrix, joined them. Jolyon and his mother were just performing their usual stilted, lukewarm salutatory ritual when a group of weary-looking young men in a battered Renault Clio drew up alongside them and inquired listlessly through the wound-down window if they were the party that had requested "back-up for a Kaddish?" As someone in their party said no, thank you, and the car drove off, she shot a quizzical look at Jolyon, who explained briefly the need for ten men for the minyan to recite the prayer. She then wondered facetiously if minyan were another of those bizarre collective nouns: a glaring of cats, a rhumba of rattlesnakes, a murder of crows, and a minyan of... worshippers?

She had sufficient presence of mind and clarity to recognize this frivolity for what it was: a funeral defence mechanism, a way of dealing with the ambient gloom, of distancing herself from the grim spectre of mortality.

Yet as they made their way up the path to join the other mourners and the rabbi to begin the ceremony, she began to wonder at this need for detachment: was she not sufficiently distanced from the proceedings as it was? After all, these were her *in-laws*, Jolyon's people, and even he had not been particularly close to that branch of the family, least of all Mina and Tobias themselves, divided as they had been by class, money, family feuds – not to mention five decades.

Even during the event itself – the ceremony and the conversations that followed it – she was aware she was already projecting into the future, imagining the scene in the form of an anecdote to tell, a short story to write. She was like those American and Japanese tourists of whom she was so derisive, who went around the Louvre or the National Gallery with an iPad constantly between them and the works of art – or worse still, perilously brandishing a selfie-stick – filming and photographing them rather than just looking at them. (The *selfie-stick*, for the love of Christ! What had civilization come to? Medora, of course, would roll her eyes at this and call her a Luddite. It was one of her favourite pejorative epithets, along with crypto-Fascist, "unwoke" and other terms Millennials used to describe Val's generation).

But like those camera phone-toting museum visitors, Val too was witnessing events through a filter, through a different spatio-temporal prism, rather than living the present moment.

She was however occasionally jerked out of this detachment: she felt a stab of genuine raw compassion at the sight of Lucas, Jolyon's second cousin once removed and Mina's only great-grandchild – a well-turned out, impeccably mannered young man of around twenty whom Val had last seen as a rather unpromising prepubescent boy – weeping copiously in his girlfriend's arms. His grief was all the more poignant as it was conspicuous amid a largely indifferent-looking congregation.

But Val's surge of sympathy was soon to give way to facetiousness once again. And the most unlikely source of her mirth was the rabbi's choice of reading:

*'In Ecclesiastes, it says there is a time for everything...'*

No! Not the *Footloose* quote! The very same reading Ren uses to convince the reactionary old farts on the town council – in vain, as it turned out – to allow the poor, amusement-starved youths to hold a school dance! The sheer incongruity of it all made her want to laugh out loud.

*"To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven..."*

She couldn't believe it! Suppressing a guffaw of nervous laughter, she glanced around at the small crowd of mourners, scanning the grim faces for a spark of recognition, an accomplice with whom she could share her guilty amusement.

*"A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted..."*

Nothing. Not a flicker of realization or remembrance anywhere.

To be fair, there were only three other people of her generation present – not including Jolyon – and they were apparently too absorbed in the solemnity of the proceedings to indulge in nostalgic eighties' popular culture flashbacks. Jolyon himself merely responded to her imploring look with an expression of genuine cluelessness. The reference was clearly lost on him.

And with that, her brief immersion in the present was brought to an end. But this time she was thinking not of the post-mortem of the day's events she would have with Jolyon that night in bed, nor of the anecdotes she would regale her colleagues with over coffee the next day. She was travelling back in time, thirty years ago, to when she and her best friend Amy had attended Bryony Vaughan's sixteenth birthday party. During this fairly typical evening of teenaged Bacchanalian debauchery, she had met and fallen instantly in lust with a wiry, hungry-looking Etonian in a biker jacket (Lord knows Val had been a sucker for thin posh boys in her youth). This particular specimen had razor-sharp cheekbones, a slightly truculent hazel-eyed gaze and that overall male physique that Val found particularly alluring, and which her mother had once drily referred to as "the consumptive look." In the early hours of the morning, whilst others passed out on sofas or paired off and retired to bedrooms (these gatherings were after all, she now reflected, essentially parentally supervised orgies: she shuddered at the thought of Medora spending her Saturday evenings thus), a small group of revellers had settled into Bryony's parents' living room to watch the video of *Footloose*. Amy, in a leather miniskirt, Primitives T-shirt

and Stan Smiths, was lying on the sofa with one bare leg wrapped around the waist of another of the Etonians, whilst Val sat on the floor with a Malibu and pineapple in one hand while her other hand clasped the back of Jake Lambton's neck as he thrust his tongue down her throat and cupped her breast. Weak with lust, the cloying liqueur coursing through her system, she was utterly subjugated. She remembered the taste of Southern Comfort on his tongue, the scent of battered leather and Kouros: ah Kouros! A couple of months ago she had had a meeting with the new plant manager at Stadellendorf and he was wearing that cologne: it had given her a brief and intense hormonal flashback, momentarily defibrillating her libido out of its menopausal torpor: it really was her olfactory equivalent of the *madeleine de Proust*.

And then, as her mind was pleasantly occupied with memories of long-forgotten heady adolescent passion on the living room floor of a Thirties Tudor semi somewhere in the Home Counties, the rabbi said:

*"A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up. A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn."*

Oh God! Here it came...

*"And a time to dance..."*

She held her breath, bit her lip, summoned every ounce of physical and mental force she possessed to try and suppress the laughter that welled up in her... To no avail, but, thankfully, she just managed to stifle it with one of the silk handkerchiefs she kept in her funeral clutch bag, turning away in a half-plausible display of half-contained grief.

Jolyon looked surprised – as well he might be – at his wife's apparent chagrin. She raised a hand to allay his concern whilst still clutching the handkerchief to her nose with the other.

Her inappropriate hilarity soon subsided however and, as the rabbi concluded his homily, gravely intoning: "*Al mekomah tavo veshalom*, may Wilhelmina go to her place in peace," and the mourners threw earth onto the grave, wished each other long life and began to disperse, it gave way to a profound sense of dejection as she thought again of the departed: a century on earth and this was her legacy? A bunch of half-bored descendants and just one (apparently) genuine mourner. The rest of them were probably just waiting for the reading of the will, Val thought bitterly.

For wills were another essential part of Appelbaum folklore: deaths in that family were inevitably followed by protracted and acrimonious Jarndyce & Jarndyce-style legal battles over inheritances. After Great-grandfather Appelbaum's death in the late fifties, he had posthumously incurred the wrath of his first-born Mina by leaving the entirety of his small but impressive and extremely valuable art collection to his youngest and favourite child, Estella. Whilst the middle child, Jolyon's grandfather Max, a good-natured man with little interest in art, had accepted his father's testamentary dispositions with equanimity, Mina had doggedly but ultimately unsuccessfully contested the provision for years. It was reputedly this unpleasant event that had been one of the causes of the infamous feud between the sisters that had raged for decades and which now accounted for the conspicuous absence of the 91-year-old

Estella from her sister's obsequies. After all that, Estella had reportedly eventually been forced to sell off most of the much-coveted artworks after a hefty, ill-advised investment in a Ponzi scheme left her nearly ruined in the Eighties.

The youngest sibling was something of a family legend in her own right: a notable beauty and inveterate party girl, Estella (whom her parents had called Esther, a name she had eschewed at the age of thirteen in favour of the more glamorous, romantic alternative), had modelled for Jacob Epstein, reportedly bewitching him and consequently arousing simultaneously the jealousy of both Mrs Epstein and the sculptor's then mistress and the future Lady Epstein, the fascinating Kathleen Garman.

As it turned out, Val need not have been worried or ashamed about sniggering during the rabbi's reading. For this minor breach of decorum would soon be entirely eclipsed by an event of Grand-guignolesque proportions – even by Jolyon's family's standards: just as the funeral gathering was drawing to a close, the mourners heard shouts of protest in guttural, Estuary tones:

*'Oi! Rabbi! Wait!'*

Spinning around, Val saw a burly, dark-haired, middle-aged man in a rather well-cut black three-piece suit and handcuffs, flanked by two older men in prison warden uniform, ambling along the path towards the funeral party as fast as his captors would allow him.

Leo.

Mina and Tobias's grandson, Leo Gottfried: bachelor, entrepreneur, high-flyer. Crook. Val had met him once and had found him indescribably crass and vulgar, a ghastly Philistine doubled with a misogynist. He was currently serving a three-year sentence at Wormwood Scrubs for some contemptible financial crime: embezzlement or insider trading or something.

A few gasps and mumbles arose from the mourners as Leo proceeded to bestow kisses on the cheeks of each of his three closest living relatives – namely, his mother Diana, his sister Clara and his spinster aunt Lydia, Mina's younger child. Lucas, meanwhile, red-eyed, visibly ashamed of his jailbird uncle, yet unfailingly well-bred, nodded and uttered a subdued, 'Leo.'

Ignoring his nephew, Leo turned indignantly back to the rabbi:

*'You could've waited!'*

As the rabbi, undaunted, calmly said something about having other sacerdotal duties to attend to afterwards, Leo took a few steps closer to him and, snatching the trowel from him with his shackled hands, headed towards the grave, the guards stumbling along each side him. There then followed a rather awkward and undignified spectacle as he proceeded to take a trowelful of earth from the pile with his handcuffed hands and scatter it onto Mina's grave. The guards, however, seemed as unfazed as the rabbi: Val concluded they must be used to accompanying inmates on sympathy leave.

The awkward silence that had prevailed during this bizarre ritual was soon broken as the rabbi finally left and the group resumed its mixture of small-talk, consolatory platitudes and gossip.

*'Where are those lovely children of yours?'* Jolyon's Aunt Bea wanted to know.

‘Josh is practising with his band and Medora’s studying,’ replied Jolyon. ‘GCSEs coming up, you know how it is.’

Val beamed dutifully beside her husband, the epitome of maternal pride – whilst privately suspecting that Medora was currently less virtuously occupied, most likely in a pub with that boy she had recently met on JSwipe.

*JSwipe.* Val was truly baffled by her daughter’s latest manifestation of teenage rebellion and defiance: her inexplicable newfound Jewish identity. For what else but sheer perversity and provocation could have led her, the product of an atheist Jewish father and a retired (somehow ‘lapsed’ only seemed apt for Catholics) C-of-E mother, suddenly to embrace her origins?

As Jolyon continued chatting to his aunt, Val’s attention wandered to the small group that had gathered around Leo as he held forth about prison life. Appalled yet fascinated, she found herself approaching the group and listening: the dreadful man was boasting how he had a 70-inch, flat-screen television and had contrived to have salt beef sandwiches delivered to him on a regular basis – thereby confirming the worst tabloid stereotypes about white-collar criminals and the luxurious lifestyle they allegedly led during their incarceration. Val longed to say something withering and witty, but realized it was unseemly to make sarcastic put-downs at a funeral, particularly at the expense of one of the bereaved – however egregious he might be. As it turned out, no such intervention from her part was necessary, as the wardens abruptly put an end to their charge’s crowing by saying it was time to get back to the prison.

As the Wormwood Scrubs delegation departed, the remaining mourners returned to their cars. Aunt Lydia was having people back to her flat in Bloomsbury for sherry and sandwiches – an invitation Jolyon and Val had politely declined.

Just as they were pulling away in the car, Val spotted the old Clio again – the one with the group of young men who had offered their services to complete the minyan earlier. They were still apparently driving about aimlessly, searching in vain for their party.

\*

## THE DEATH OF THE BISHOP OF CORK

*Prosperous, Co. Kildare*

Dave had driven straight from work to pick up his sister Marie and her husband, and thence on to Auntie Tish’s house in Prosperous. During the drive from Dublin, his brother-in-law interjected at regular



intervals with his usual barbed little comments that passed for attempts at conversation: ('I see ye're still keeping the X5 going, so?') How the fuck was he supposed to respond to that? Then, as Dave parked the offending vehicle in front of Auntie Tish's house:

'Clare not joining us?'

Marie, in the passenger seat, seeing her brother's fingers tightening on the steering wheel, lay a placating hand on his arm and shot a warning glance back at her husband, who merely shrugged and gazed morosely out of the window.

'Who's waked from home these days, anyway?' said Dave moodily as they walked up the garden path. 'Jesus Christ, it's 2022.'

'More's the pity,' said Paul sententiously. 'Yet another beautiful Irish tradition that's being obliterated.'

'For fuck's sake,' muttered Dave under his breath.

Marie chuckled but was silenced by her husband's stony, disapproving glare.

'I didn't even know they were that devout,' Dave went on. 'I tell you, if they start fuckin' *keenin*', I'm out of there.' Marie dissolved into giggles, grabbing her brother's arm for support.

Paul stopped dead and turned his censorious, glowering glare upon them.

'For Christ's sake, will ye show some respect!' he hissed.

'Sorry,' said Marie, 'nervous laughter. The emotion, you know.'

'Well, get it out of yer system before we go in.'

With their heads hanging in a show of mock penitence, they followed him up to the house like scolded children.

Auntie Tish greeted them at the door dressed in a dark grey wool dress under a moth-eaten black cardigan. Her watery blue eyes were puffy and grief stained. She kissed her niece and nephew without a word and ushered them into the house. A few feet behind her in the dark, over-heated hall hovered her sister Aiofe – Dave's mother – and Tish's daughter, Méabh.

Méabh's was the first vulva Dave had ever seen. It was in the summer of 1991 and they were spending their holidays in the Aran islands, as they did every year for about ten years. She had caught him and her brother Fionn having a pissing contest in a cave on the beach and later that day, Dave – already bold at the age of eight – cornered her as she was going into the bathroom and declared that it was only fair that he get to see *her* thing now after everything she had witnessed. She had stared at him defiantly, and, without a word, lifted up her cotton sundress and pulled down her pants.

She was now, at forty-one, a successful speech therapist with her own thriving practice, married to a hedge fund manager and living in a huge, gated property in Sandycove next door to the bassist from a famous Irish rock band. There was an Aston Martin Vanquish and a Jaguar E-type in the garage and a Bacon triptych in the study. She was tall and handsome in an angular, slightly androgynous way, with high cheekbones, a long nose and dark brown hair cut in a sleek pageboy. This evening she was wearing a well-cut black trouser suit that looked like a name and high-heeled black patent court shoes. She

looked out of place in this poky terraced house, with her impeccable designer suit and that stiff, imperious way she held herself, her back ramrod straight. Her grief was more contained than her mother's.

'Hello Dave,' she said, 'thank you for coming.' Dave hovered awkwardly in front of her and then kissed her swiftly on the cheek. 'I'm sorry about your dad.'

'Thank you. He's in the front room if you want to go and see him. Then you should go through to the kitchen and help yourself to a drink. The others have congregated in there.'

She motioned behind her. Dave nodded and proceeded dutifully into the front room. The room had remained the same for as long as he could remember: there was the same threadbare maroon carpet, the hulking Welsh dresser that seemed to take up half the room, the pair of hideous china Pekinese dogs that sat on each side of the clock on the mantelpiece, the ducks on the wall.

Except that this time, instead of sitting in his favourite armchair by the fireplace reading the racing results in the paper and chain-smoking, Uncle Oscar was lying in a coffin. As he beheld the dead man's waxy white face, Dave was briefly reminded of his own father's wake five years ago, at the funeral parlour. He and Clare were still happy at the time. Declan was a baby and had recently been baptized – an occurrence that had been the subject of prolonged debate and controversy. Both Dave and Clare were agnostic but had decided to capitulate in the face of family pressure for the sake of Dave's then dying father.

'He can always get de-baptized when he's older,' Dave had observed. In response to Clare's quizzical and rather sceptical glance, he had continued:

'No, really. It's a thing. You can download a form off the Internet. It basically says you wish to give up a religion you don't believe in and had thrust upon you before you were old enough to decide for yourself.'

'Does it include a clause about embracing Satan again?' a bemused Clare had asked.

She had been dressed in a simple black shift dress that was perfectly chaste with its turtleneck and knee-length hem but showed off her firm round rump to perfection. Clare had a lovely arse. Dave remembered feeling guilty about feeling horny at his father's wake. Oscar, naturally, had been at his brother-in-law's wake.

'He was a fine man, Dave,' he had said, clasping Dave's shoulder.

Dave had always had the rather uneasy impression that Oscar preferred him, his nephew, to his own son, Fionn; he had practically admitted as much once after a few Jamesons too many. Fionn had always been sensitive and rather bookish: not what Oscar deemed a 'man's man.' As a child he had been sickly and wheezing, always preferring his train sets or model aeroplanes to rugby or hurling. Dave, on the other hand, had always been a natural athlete and had grown up to drink like a fish, pursue women relentlessly and become captain of his rugby team.

As for Fionn, after graduating from Trinity he had successfully co-run a management consultancy firm for a number of years until his partner did a moonlight flit. The business had gone into receivership,

Fionn had had a breakdown and briefly moved back in with his parents. He now bought and sold tin soldiers on the Internet.

‘Loada bollocks,’ his father had said at the time. ‘If you can make a living doing that, then I’m the fuckin’ bishop o’ Cork.’

There Fionn was, in the kitchen doorway; tall and lanky, he had the sort of colouring that gave the impression of being watered down: pale green eyes, almost translucent milky complexion, insipid yellow-orange hair. He looked up and nodded to his cousin.

‘Dave,’ he said simply. Dave expressed condolences, shook his hand, then after a few minutes’ small talk offered to fetch them both drinks. Fionn declined, slightly raising the bottle of lager he had dangling from the end of his fingers. In the kitchen, having helped himself to a can of Guinness, Dave leaned awkwardly with his back to the kitchen sink and began to sip.

‘Do you fancy a real drink?’ said a deep, husky voice.

He looked up to see Méabh.

‘I’m driving.’

‘Yes, well, I’m not going anywhere tonight,’ she muttered, and brushed past him on her way to the larder.

The scent she exuded was one of luxury and affluence: Chanel *Coco* (*eau de parfum*, not *toilette*), expensive wrinkle cream – the kind that is made from exotic, barbaric, toxic-sounding ingredients such as snake venom and iguana foetuses – and the leather upholstery of her Jaguar E-Type. She returned with a bottle of Redbreast 15 Year.

‘Where are you staying tonight?’

‘With Marie and Paul.’

‘In Newbridge?’

‘That’s right.’

She turned around to take a tumbler from the draining board and poured whiskey into it. While her back was turned, she asked: ‘So, how have you been?’

Dave laughed humourlessly. ‘I’m sure you’ve heard about my... circumstances.’

Méabh turned slowly round and nodded. ‘Mammy told me. I’m sorry. I always liked Clare.’

‘Really?’

She took a sip of whiskey. ‘Yes. You seemed to suit one another. When’s the baby due?’

‘March.’

‘Do you know what it is?’

*A fucking mistake is what it is*, Dave thought. ‘The sex, you mean? No. Clare wants it to be a surprise and... well, I’m not really bothered either way.’

‘Long as it’s healthy, eh?’

Dave nodded. He found the platitude curiously comforting; it certainly made a change from the torrent of censure and sermonising he was surely to expect from certain other members of his family.

As if on cue, he heard Ciaran out in the hallway. His elder brother appeared in the kitchen door and greeted Méabh. He was wearing stone-coloured chinos with perfect creases and a white shirt buttoned up to the top. At forty-four, Ciaran was to most observers – as harsh as it sounded – a second-rate version of Dave: he had the same ice-blue eyes and jet-black hair – albeit in rapidly diminishing quantities – and was just as tall but flabby where Dave was taut and muscular. His chin was a little weak and he had broken his nose one too many times from his rugby days, whereas Dave's features had remained flawless and intact.

The brothers shook hands stiffly and exchanged pleasantries about their respective business affairs. As by far the most pious of the Mullan children, Ciaran had seemed destined for the priesthood. Yet instead of entering the seminary, he had trained as a Licenced Conveyancer. He was a bachelor and, as far as Dave knew, had never been in a relationship with a woman. Before long conversation inevitably turned to what Ciaran saw as Dave's callous desertion of his expectant wife.

'You're not reconsidering your position, so?' he ventured.

Dave sighed. 'It's not as simple as that, is it? Even if I wanted to go back – which I don't – Clare wouldn't have me.'

'Then you should beg for her forgiveness.'

He resented his brother's obvious assumption that he, Dave, was the guilty party. Admittedly, he had bedded another woman, but Ciaran didn't know that.

'Yeah, right. Listen, if I ever need to sell my flat, I'll come to you for advice but I'm sure you won't take offence if I don't seek your counsel where marriage or relationships are concerned.'

His brother was about to respond when Clodagh, the eldest and Dave's favourite sibling, intervened.

'Jesus, are you two at it already? Ciaran, you're not giving him the third degree again, are you?' Before he could respond she kissed both brothers on the cheek. Dave hugged her warmly back. She was wearing an ankle-length black belted cardigan over a creased grey linen shirt dress. A dozen bangles jingled on her fleshy forearms and a silver pendant lay against her ample bosom. She wore her shoulder-length dark hair, already liberally streaked with grey, pinned back in an untidy bun and her face was unadorned by make-up.

'Mam's looking for you,' she said to Ciaran. After he sloped off, muttering something under his breath, Clodagh turned back to Dave and rolled her eyes.

'God love him, but I thought you could do with a break!'

'What's his fuckin' problem?' Dave muttered. 'I didn't ask for his opinion.'

Clodagh shrugged. 'He's just unhappy. Poor man hasn't had a shag since the Divorce Referendum.'

She linked her arm through his and said, 'I'm going out the back for a ciggie; keep me company?'

Outside on the tiny patio, they sat on plastic garden chairs, Dave sipping his ale and Clodagh lighting a cigarette. After briefly reminiscing about childhood holidays spent with Oscar and Patricia and Méabh and Fionn, and discussing the latest on Clare's pregnancy and birthing plan (as a fellow

nurse, Clodagh had a professional interest in such matters), they fell into a comfortable, companionable silence for a few minutes before re-joining the others inside.

People were standing around with cups of tea, glasses of whiskey and plates laden with ham sandwiches, frozen sausage rolls and mini-quiches, pickled onions and crisps. New additions to the gathering included Oscar's sister and her children and Tish and Oscar's next-door neighbour, John. John was something called a horticultural therapist, which, as far as Dave could make out, involved teaching recovering smackheads how to plant azaleas. Walking out of the kitchen into the hallway, Dave saw Tish sobbing quietly in her sister's arms in the dining room. For a moment Dave's eyes met those of his mother's over Tish's heaving, crumpled form and his mother smiled sadly at him. Fionn was sitting at the bottom of the stairs talking to Michael, one of his cousins from Oscar's side of the family. Michael was inquiring about the profitability of selling toy soldiers on the Internet and Fionn was explaining that his business model consisted in buying up whole regiments for a bargain price and selling them off individually – and at considerable profit – to various collectors.

Dave suddenly experienced an acute need for a strong drink. Finding Marie in the front room talking to an elderly woman with a blue rinse, he asked her how many drinks she had had.

'Just a sherry. Why?'

Pushing the keys to the X5 into her hands, Dave said, 'Best switch to orange juice.'

Before she could protest – which, given her saint-like disposition, was highly unlikely – he kissed her on the cheek and threaded through the throng of mourners to the kitchen where Méabh's bottle of Redbreast was standing on the worktop. After pouring a few fingers into the only clean receptacle he could find – a chipped mug with the face of John Paul II on it – he downed it in one and poured another measure. He then made his way to the downstairs lavatory, and, finding it occupied, decided to use the upstairs bathroom.

As he reached the top of the stairs, he saw Méabh swaying on the landing, a tumbler of whiskey between the manicured fingers of one hand whilst the other gripped the banister in an attempt to steady herself. She had removed the jacket of her trouser suit, revealing a sleeveless cream silk blouse. She sat down on the top stair and patted the carpet beside her. Dave obliged and joined her.

'How are you doing?' he asked gently.

She stared straight ahead of her and raised the glass to her lips.

'Is that a general inquiry into my physical and metaphysical wellbeing, or a particular question about how I am coping with my father's death?' she deadpanned.

'Both.'

'Well, as for Daddy, I'm as well as can be expected. As for the rest...' she made a vague sweeping gesture with her hand, causing the amber liquid to slosh perilously close to the brim of the glass, 'well, my husband doesn't fuck me anymore, but apart from that, I'm grand.' She brought the glass to her lips slowly and drank.

Dave almost flinched at the combination of intimate revelation and uncharacteristic profanity from this usually cool, reserved woman. He said nothing.

‘And I really need to be *fucked* right now,’ she went on in a dull, toneless voice, ‘not for the ...gratification or tenderness or intimacy – although God knows I could do with all of that – but just so I can *feel* something...feel something else, something other than this bottomless pit of ...’ And then she began sobbing, drawing up her knees and burying her face in them, her bony, milk-white shoulders heaving.

Still reeling from her unsolicited disclosure and further mortified by this equally unexpected effusion of emotion, Dave tentatively drew his arm around her. She stiffened and resisted but gradually yielded and leaned into his embrace. After a few moments, her shoulders became still and he felt her relax. She then took a deep breath and drew away from him, wiping her eyes with a paper napkin.

‘Right,’ she said, clearing her throat and composing herself, ‘I’d better get downstairs and relieve Mammy. She’s been sitting with Daddy for hours.’

‘I can stay if you like,’ he offered as she stood up. ‘You know, all night. So you and your mam can get some rest.’

Altruism was a novel experience for Dave. It was rather like trying on a three-piece tweed suit in a shop: a momentary whim, a glimpse of what he could be. But ultimately it was not his style and he had no intention of buying it.

She shook her head. She was once again the old Méabh – cool, self-possessed, impeccably mannered. ‘Fionn and Michael are helping, and John from next door, but thank you.’

He followed her downstairs, and as she went into the front room, he looked at the clock on the wall in the hallway: it showed a quarter past four. The clocks had been stopped, as a traditional mark of respect. Taking his dad’s old fob watch out of his trouser pocket, he saw that it was nearly midnight.

A few minutes later, when the final respects had been paid and he was slumped in the back of the X5 while Marie started up the engine, he thought of poor Méabh: grieving, forsaken and untouched by her husband, childless, whose life was a bleak, loveless void. Suddenly he ached for the warm physical presence of another human being: he longed to hold his son in his arms, thought wistfully of burying his face in a woman’s full, soft breasts and drifting to sleep, lulled by the gentle throb of her heartbeat beneath him. God, he couldn’t remember the last time he had fallen asleep in a woman’s arms, as opposed to withdrawing and then either jumping up and pulling his trousers back on or retreating to the other side of the bed with his back turned, waiting for her to leave. He suddenly yearned for that sense of peace and completeness and wondered if he would ever experience it again.

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## ANY WAY THE WIND BLOWS

### *Monza, Italy*

Amedeo arose early on the day of the funeral and ate his customary solitary breakfast. But on this day, more than ever, he was thankful for these moments of silence and seclusion before he faced a crowd of colleagues and total strangers.

As he carefully loaded the dishwasher with his breakfast things and went into to the bathroom to brush his teeth, he recalled the last time he had seen Gabriele, on the day of his death. They had passed each other in the stairwell: Amedeo sometimes thought they must have been the only two of DigInnova Italia S.p.A's 357 employees to eschew the lift consistently. They had exchanged their usual greeting before Amedeo had continued his downward trajectory to a meeting he was due to chair on the third floor, whilst Gabriele had proceeded to the rooftop terrace from which, just a few minutes later, he was to throw himself.

He walked down to the garage (for he never used the lift at home either), and began to back out the brand-new Toyota Corolla Hybrid. At least now Marnie could no longer accuse him of being a half-hearted ecologist: for before he had exchanged the BMW for this more environmentally friendly vehicle, she had often pointed out to him the inconsistency of his insistence on maintaining the temperature in his flat at a punishing 17°, even in the depths of winter, whilst polluting the planet with his daily commute.

As he greeted Siri and commanded it to navigate to the funeral venue, it occurred to him that his first and last conversation of almost every day was with a virtual companion. Yet it was utterly without self-pity that he made this observation: on the contrary, it reminded him of that old joke about talking to oneself not being a sign of madness but simply the only way of guaranteeing intelligent conversation.

Marnie, who seemed to have an opinion on most aspects of his life, often told him she didn't believe in his hermit act: she thought his misanthropy was a mere pose, like those self-styled 'Nihilists' she had known at school.

As he drove through the still semi-slumbering town centre and turned off the roundabout for the motorway, he reflected how, just weeks ago, the dead man's hands had touched the very steering wheel he now held, when he took delivery of the new car. For as Facilities Manager, part of Gabriele's job had been looking after the company car fleet. That, and managing the office leases, overseeing building security and maintenance and supervising the cleaning staff and other external service providers – which had once prompted Santevecchi to joke scornfully that Gabriele's job title should have been 'Head of Air-Conditioning and Toilet Rolls.'

Not that Santevecchi could talk, Amedeo thought: for even back in the days when he was merely Sales Director, before he had embarked on a campaign of betrayal and vengeance of Aeschylean proportions that had finally culminated in his appointment as CEO, he had pompously insisted on being referred to as ‘Chief Commercial Officer.’ Marnie often derided the Italians’ fondness for titles: *Ingegnere, Dottore*. How desperately insecure and vain they must be, she remarked, to insist on such labels of status.

Santevecchi. How he loathed him! He was nothing but a playground bully, a street hoodlum with an expense account. He had the sartorial taste of a pimp and the business ethics of a white slaver. For years Amedeo had also privately suspected his involvement in some very shady dealings – money-laundering, possibly through shell companies – but he had never, alas, been able to gather enough proof.

Marnie had laughed at him when he had referred to Santevecchi and his henchmen as his archenemies. No one had enemies in the corporate world, she had teased. Rivals, yes, detractors, certainly. But not enemies. He was exaggerating, melodramatic, paranoid. It was so Italian of him, she would say. She didn’t understand; she had no idea what it was like.

Traffic was light and within less than half an hour he had reached the outskirts of Milan. When Siri announced that he had reached his destination, however, he thought there must have been a mistake: the putative funeral venue looked more like an elementary school or a gym than a place of worship. But, sure enough, a sign said: *Chiesa di Gesù Cristo dei Santi degli Ultimi Giorni*.

Of course! He remembered now someone mentioning that it was a Mormon church. Gabriele was a Mormon? Did that mean he had a string of wives and didn’t celebrate birthdays? Or was that the Jehovah’s Witnesses? And which were the ones that refused medical treatment? His ignorance of cults aside, Amedeo realized, not for the first time since Gabriele’s death, how little he had known of the man’s life in general, despite their working for the same company for seven years.

Then as he parked the Corolla, it suddenly occurred to him that perhaps Gabriele had not been a practising member of the Church of the Latter-Day Saints after all: as he had ended his own life, the Catholic Church would have refused to bury him and thus his relatives had been forced to resort to a more forgiving creed. The Mormons were their back-up faith, not their first choice.

*God*. That somehow struck Amedeo as the most depressing thing of all: it wasn’t just that a middle-aged man had been driven to leaping to his death from the roof of his place of work, but that he had been posthumously snubbed by his religion and forced to make do with some half-baked sect. Also, although Amedeo had long since turned his back on his Catholic upbringing, it struck him, inexplicably, that there was something fundamentally – he searched for the word – *un-Italian* about Mormonism.

Still, who was he to knock a colleague’s choice of obsequies? Locking the car, he buttoned the jacket of his suit and walked towards a group of people bearing a flower-festooned casket into the church. For a moment, he wondered for the second time that morning if he had come to the right place, for he did not recognize a single face amid the mourners. But as he had never socialized with Gabriele nor met any of his family or friends, this was perhaps not so surprising.



But it was indeed Gabriele's funeral, for there, ostensibly offering condolences to a woman who could have been Gabriele's widow or sister, whilst looking down the front of her blouse, was Amedeo's Nemesis.

He was as impeccably and gaudily turned out as ever, a preening peacock in a black bespoke three-piece suit and pink silk shirt, with his customary silk handkerchief – also pink today – in the breast pocket, his raven hair artfully sculpted and lavishly gelled. But before Amedeo could avoid him, Santevecchi had spotted him and was now striding over, beaming, a manicured hand outstretched, enveloping him in a cloud of *Eau Sauvage* and self-importance.

‘Ciao, Amedeo!’

He nodded and reluctantly clasped the other man's hand. ‘Matteo.’

‘This is a bit weird, isn't it? Can you believe I had to cancel a meeting with –’ (he mentioned the name of Italy's leading energy provider – one of DigInnova's biggest clients) ‘to come to this? Still, it wouldn't look good to the troops if I didn't turn up. Besides, Lele's family would expect it.’

Amedeo privately doubted that either the departed's family or his former colleagues cared whether his boss turned up, but said nothing and merely nodded.

But what struck him more than this example of Santevecchi's pathological self-absorption – this, alas, had ceased to shock him after years working for him – was the CEO's use of the diminutive form of the dead man's name. He had not supposed him to be on such familiar terms with Gabriele, or even to acknowledge his lowly existence, as to call him ‘Lele.’

Together they followed the other mourners into the church. Just inside the entrance stood a roll-up banner – the sort typically used at trade fairs, seminars and other customer and corporate events – with a blown-up photo of Gabriele. It was odd, inappropriate. Amedeo actually found himself wondering if whoever had had the banner made had thought to use DigInnova's usual suppliers: they could surely have done it for free, under the circumstances.

Strange as the banner was, the rest of the proceedings were even kitschier and more bizarre: after the (priest? Pastor? Chief Executive Brainwasher?) welcomed the congregation, there was a eulogy from a portly, grey-haired man who turned out to be Gabriele's older brother, in which he spoke fondly of their idyllic childhood in Sardinia, their weekly poker games, the deceased's passion for cosplay, and then the church began to fill with the familiar strains of *Bohemian Rhapsody*. For, as his brother explained, in addition to gambling and dressing up, ‘Lele’ had also been an avid Queen fan, even forming his own tribute band with three friends (oh God in heaven, please, don't let them play now!)

Mercifully, they were to be spared this particular ordeal: the congregation was already filing out of the church to Freddie Mercury's rich, haunting vocal accompaniment.

Amedeo sighed: he had done his duty, paid his respects, said goodbye to that poor man, a man whom he had barely known in life and would therefore forever associate with that one, final, desperate, violent act.

For violent it was: after all, had not Dante condemned suicides to the Seventh Circle of Hell, that of Violence? A few verses of Canto XIII of *Inferno* suddenly came to him:

*Quivi le brutte Arpie lor nidi fanno,  
che cacciar de le Strofade i Troiani  
con tristo annunzio di futuro danno.*

All of a sudden, he felt hot and slightly dizzy. He pulled off his jacket, undid the top buttons of his shirt. As he walked back to the car, a blur of pink and black in his peripheral vision told him that Santevecchi was still lurking, circling the few remaining mourners like a vulture. Gritting his teeth, he got into the Corolla, and drove home fast with the air-conditioning on full blast and at 18°.

Immediately he got home he kicked off his shoes, stumbled upstairs and fell face-forward onto the bed and into a deep, troubled sleep.

He dreamt he was walking barefoot through a dark forest with trees from whose trunks black blood oozed: it was the Wood of the Suicides. He heard a sickening cry as one of the souls imprisoned in a tree was tormented by the Harpies (one of whom, incidentally, looked uncannily like Marina Del Prà, the HR Director). Somehow, he knew the soul was Gabriele. And yet, as he approached the tree, the Harpies voraciously and mercilessly devouring the leaves, he saw that it was not Gabriele's face peering out of the gnarled bark, but his own. He ran screaming from his tree-self and the Harpies and presently came to a bright clearing, where a group of black-clad mourners gathered.

It was Santevecchi's funeral.

Suddenly, he was in a frenzy of jubilation. He danced on Santevecchi's grave, raped his widow, ripping open her black silk blouse, pouring champagne over her naked breasts and licking it off greedily – and all before the horrified gaze of her brood of semi-orphans...

When he awoke it was dark. He was panting, drenched in sweat – and fully erect. Ashamed and horrified by the lurid fancies of his subconscious – and even more so by his arousal – he stripped off his shirt, trousers and underpants and padded into the bathroom where he threw his soiled clothes into the laundry basket and stepped into the shower.

He remained under the icy jets of water until his fever had abated and his erection subsided. Afterwards, he went downstairs with a towel around his waist, drank a glass of tap water and sat on the sofa. He switched on the TV. It was a wildlife documentary; he liked them, they soothed him (except the ones showing footage of predators stalking and devouring their prey).

Perhaps he would call his *notaio* in the morning: it was time he made plans for his own send-off. For when he thought of the people in his life now, he shuddered to think what his funeral would be like if things were left to them. At least, he reflected grimly, he had no widow for some other man to defile, no offspring to be scandalized.

After helping himself to more water, he picked up his iPhone and plugged it into the charger. Then, picking it up again, he said:

‘Siri: plan my funeral.’

Within seconds, the jovial, disembodied voice rang out:

‘Would you like me to find a funeral parlour?’

‘No, Siri. I just... *God*, I don’t really want to die, but I know we all have to, but when I do go, I don’t want a bunch of people who didn’t even give a shit about me turning up at my funeral and taking the piss out of my taste in music and speculating about my private life, and my *mother* – oh, she’ll be there, trust me: she’ll bury us all – saying it was all my own fault for going vegan and how could I do this to her? But most of all, I don’t want that bastard Santevecchi there, sententiously saying what a dedicated, valued member of his team I was, when he’s essentially spent the past ten years pillaging my brain, stealing my ideas, exploiting me and taking the credit for my work. But I don’t actually even care about that! He can have the glory and the limelight: I don’t mind being his ghost writer, I have no ego. I just want to *work*, to build something, see my vision through. What I can’t bear is the way he’s running the company into the ground, and in the process, he and Sartori and his other cronies are gang-raping my ideals and values and beliefs, shitting on everything I stand for: integrity, equality, hard work...’

‘I’m not sure I understand.’

He sighed. ‘No, I don’t suppose you do. *I* don’t understand it myself. I mean, is there even any point in *being* here at all, when there’s just... nothingness. We come from nothing, and we go to *nothing*.’

Silence, then:

‘Would you like me to order *Being and Nothingness* by Jean-Paul Sartre?’

He laughed. ‘Goodnight, Siri.’

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If you would like to find out more about Dave and Amedeo, read my novel, *Relative Error*, available in digital format on Amazon.

*Illustration by Christine Deleidi*