

Soliloquy

There was something in the air that day, a kind of softness in the wind. I was hanging out the washing in the garden, hoping to take advantage of the July warmth, when I saw Joe coming up the road from town. He was walking slow, pushing the bike along beside him.

His head was down and then...he looked up and saw me. He stopped. He didn't give me his usual wave. Instead, he reached up and took off his cap. That's when I knew. Before he said the words, before the dreaded telegram. I knew. You were gone.

I don't know how long we stood like that. All the blood in my body drained away, I became light as air. Somewhere a thrush was singing in the hedgerow, its song an affront to what sorrow was to come.

It's been two weeks now, and I cannot comprehend that I will never see you again. You were such a child! A real boy, your father said of you just before he died. Always into mischief and always getting away with it, even at school. I used to fear that, without a father in the house, you would run wild. But, you had a gentle kind of wildness that hurt no one. When you got a notion in your head nothing would stop you. I'll always remember opening the door at six in the morning to find you there, having walked the thirty miles back home from Rathfarnham, just because you wanted to be back home.

You will never come home now, Frank. Home has become a field somewhere over there. Father Devas wrote to me that you were buried immediately. I try to imagine it. No Wake, no Mass, nothing but the cold, wet earth falling on you. They say Flanders is a flat place, no hills, not like our Hill of Slane. That was the last time I saw you. At Ellie's funeral, it was.

You brought her home from Manchester to bury her here, amongst her own. Not many men would do that for the girl who jilted them. But that was the man you were, Frank. Your way of loving her I suppose. If only I could take you home Frank. If only I could go up the hill of a morning, sit at your grave, talk to you. It would help make it real.

Father Devas wrote that you'd been on a tea break when a 'random' shell fell on you. In some strange way I find that comforting. It would be harder to imagine you in the horror of battle, and some other man pointing his gun at you, singling you out for death. Random, they say. Random.

The Master came by to sympathise and he showed me your book. He called you a poet. Imagine, a poet! If only your father could have lived to see that. Now I read your words and they are like a balm to my heart. Once you wrote of me, 'my wonderful mother.' You will never know how those words are treasured. I always felt that I neglected you after Patrick died. I was grief stricken, sick with worry about how we would survive without him. How could I keep us all together? The baby still at my breast, you, a little four-year-old, were left to yourself when I went out to work on the farms. And yet, a wonderful

mother. Oh Frank, why didn't I tell you how proud I was of you? I hope that wherever you are now you will somehow know.

It's your birthday today, Frank. Thirty years ago I brought you into the world. Thirty. So short a life. I had imagined your children growing up around me. Instead you left us the poems. They're your children and we'll treasure them, Frank. They're all of you that is left to us; we will hold them dear.

Christina Campbell