

Inspired by James Joyce's "The Dead" 1914 approximately

THE DEPARTED

Shona, her great-niece, was stepping past the toddler sitting in the doorway – Agnes's own great-grandson? Or a neighbour's child? – when Shona's new husband, Tyler, came up behind her, catching her by the waist and nuzzling her neck so that giggling, half-turning toward him, she lost her balance and, trying to avoid the child who was absorbed in the screeching light-flashing toy robot he was holding, banged her shoulder and hip against the doorframe. She linked her arms around Tyler's neck and kissed him. As if they were all alone in the room. Behind them, in the dining room, women's high-pitched chatter went on, accompanied by the tinkling of cutlery and clink of china as they set the extra-long Thanksgiving table.

Had anyone ever loved her like that? Agnes considered, riffling through her memories of husbands, lovers, and boyfriends from sixty or more years ago. Oh, probably, and couldn't stop herself from snorting out of a distant, instantly dismissive amusement. *And yet, here I am.* Small children trotted or crawled past in waves, the older ones stepping over her legs the same way they did over the dog. For safety, the dog had crawled behind the armchair. She eyed the children without saying anything. They weren't looking at her, anyway. Her overly-large son had given her the chair of honour again, his deep leather recliner which, even though she was a big woman, was too big for her. He was passing drinks around to the ten or so people seated on the two sofas and the other chairs: a wingback tapestry armchair, several leather-covered – what did they call them? – Danish modern chairs, maybe? Or not. Arthur had done well, but, she thought, watching him as he reached her, he is just now figuring out that it might not have been worth quite that

much effort. Or possibly what she saw as his evident unease was about something else. Geordie and Sheila Stewart in the same room with his beloved, Emma. Why did the Stewarts come, then?

“Have a little wine, mother?” She believed she had nodded. He poured an inch of white into a glass on the table beside her, and moved on with his bottles, one red, one white, asking, bending, pouring. People kept arriving, laughing in the foyer, in the living room, banging things – bottles of wine onto the sideboard, elsewhere bathroom doors, even letting open drawers run merrily to noisy stops – someone was clinking unmusically at the piano. A woman called from the kitchen, “Devon, stop that!” Another crash as the piano lid came down. Roland Somebodyor-other. *Such a cliché*, she sighed out loud, *the first boy I kissed*. Emma, Arthur’s still-chic chestnut-haired wife of nearly thirty years, came out of the kitchen, her apron smeared with flour and a worried look on her face that vanished the instant a guest called to her from across the room.

“Take a minute, and have a little wine with us.” It was Geordie, otherwise known as *the idiot*. Sheila must be in the dining room. Good thing. Sheila hated it when Geordie and Emma had one of their little tête-à-têtes, evidence, everyone knew except Arthur, of the affair they had certainly had a few years earlier. Agnes hadn’t herself worried about it; Arthur was not the leaving-your-wife type even if he found out; her own son, but a bit of a stick-in-the-mud. *Got it from me*, she supposed. *I never could move on*. Although she wouldn’t have minded being a fly on the wall in the Stewart bedroom when the inevitable discussion took place. Sheila, five foot two and still a giggly blonde – some people never grow up – but her style was effective; and, even through Geordie’s affair with willowy Emma, she had hung onto him and his money. Arthur, oblivious as always, must have invited them. No, *determinedly* oblivious. Poor Arthur. She could hardly reconcile the dark-haired, suavely-bearded man with the two-year-old, the four-

year-old she had loved with a tender fire for which there was no accounting in the world, as though that love had come before the world existed, and not after.

Roland Frank it was, and they were both twelve or so, after dark, on the small patch of leaf-littered grass in the shadows under the elms, while inside the church hall Father Desmond let the children's choir take a quick break for cookies and lemonade. She couldn't remember much about the kiss; only that it had been hard, not gentle, as if Roland thought that firmness would show the seriousness of his intent, or his capability of going further – his sophistication, that was it. Another dismissive snort. *Did I forget again and do that out loud?* But no one was looking at her. She had a quick glimpse of herself as the black hole in the otherwise overly-bright, busy room. Or, the insensate, inexplicable lump. That's what she was to all these people, who probably weren't even certain whose parent she was. Or was she some large, lonely, old lady taken in by the ever-kind, volunteering Emma?

Emma was chatting distractedly in the doorway, clearly anxious to get back into the kitchen. *I am wry*, Agnes thought; *I am gazing wryly at her*. Once she had been Emma, centre of this moving crowd of Thanksgiving celebrators. How they enjoy telling her *you can't do a single thing; you should rest*. Really saying, *would you please die and get out of our hair*. *I am now queen of the kitchen; I am now first in your son's heart*. As indeed, Agnes admitted, Emma definitely was, despite everything, whatever "everything" meant.

She mused on: Hallowe'en. Candied apples. Smoke. Oh, yes. They were in school together, grade eight, or perhaps seven. That falling-down, old school in the worst part of town, some of the children the progeny of prostitutes and petty criminals, the rest of them just the children of the Catholic poor. How oblivious one's parents could be. How nakedly stupid. Of course, she didn't exclude herself from this pronouncement, hated to think of all the mistakes she

and Alistair had made as parents, even while loving their children and trying their best. Yet she and her siblings had wound up in that dilapidated old school, the radiators knocking out steam all winter long, the windows cracked, and that disgusting old pedophile, the principal. *But she was wearing a skirt!* the girls all said, whispering to each other, their eyes round – they must have been – when they gathered together after he had made Colleen lie on the floor for a first-aid demonstration. What they really meant, though, was that he had made her lie on her stomach while he demonstrated CPR the old way, that slow rhythmic pressing on her back at her shoulder blades. She had the biggest breasts of any of them, and every single one of them, innocents in those days (nothing like the kids today), knew in a queasy, non-explicit way that this was wrong and worse, that it happened intentionally.

She watched the revelers around her, none of them looking back at her, bursts of laughter, the children shrieking at each other. *You didn't tell your parents that kind of thing; you couldn't, you weren't sure what it was that had happened.* Afterwards, Colleen had kept her head bent, her dark hair falling past her cheeks hiding her face, but the back of her neck, even her arms below her short-sleeved blouse flushed red, and she brushed repeatedly at her skirt, not wanting to talk to us. *That old bastard.* He probably wasn't even Arthur's current age though. Fifty or so? She hadn't a clear idea. Older than her parents were then, though.

Two teenagers who she suspected were relatives of hers – she now saw so little of the grand and great-grandchildren she didn't quite recognize the girls – were helping set the table and were taking the pickles out of their jars and arranging them neatly in cut-glass pickle dishes that, empty, could be made to ring like fairy bells and which had been Emma's long-dead grandmother's. What were fairy bells? The loveliest small sound that a crystal dinner bell someone had given her used to make when you rang it gently. What a crash when the cat

knocked it off the shelf and broke it. Not so musical then! Jennifer, Emma's sister Angela's daughter, was passing a lacquered tray of canapés, which the men, faces reddening now from drink, took without glancing at her, popping them in their mouths whole, seeming to chew without noticing they were. Jennifer passed her by as if she hadn't seen Agnes. *A steady diet of that treatment when you're old.*

She found herself now thinking of Stanley Raddysh, whose real name was Stanislaus. He had shown her his birth certificate one day when they were walking home from school. Stan. In the days when you could safely carry your plasticized, wallet-sized, birth certificate with you. He had freckles across his nose and cheeks, which, even though she was only a child, touched her by their delicate vulnerability against the fine-grained, pale skin below his eyes. He was a tall boy with light brown hair cut too short. In grade nine his locker had been next to hers and she had said – was it to say something original to get his attention, or was it inadvertent? – “Someone in your house sure knows how to iron,” and the other girls had clustered around to admire the perfect way his mother had managed the tiny gathers below the seam of the yoke of his, even then, unfashionable shirt. Imagine remembering that after seventy years. *It is just possible I loved him.* This thought startled her, caused a flood of tenderness in her abdomen, followed by a soft regret in her head. Or in her gut? Although they were often together outside of school hours, she had never kissed him: they almost always met with a pack of other kids. He had had a kind of restraint, a maturity none of the rest of them had. *He might have loved me, if I had....* She could feel – could it really be – tears prickling at the bottom of her eyes.

Now a couple who had just arrived was coming from the foyer into the living room where the chatter was getting louder as the guests drank more wine or scotch. She supposed the air was full of the roasting turkey smell. Year after year, more of her sense of smell had

diminished until now she smelled very little although, if she concentrated, she could remember the smell of roasting-turkey. Arthur had disappeared, and Geordie was introducing the couple around the room in a casual, jokey way, missing her entirely, at which the woman, who Agnes didn't think she'd ever in her life seen before, for half a second looked faintly disconcerted at this rudeness, but was instantly distracted by the introduction to the next adult, a neighbour, Agnes guessed, no, one of Arthur's employees, judging by how uncomfortable he looked, jiggling his tie as if to loosen it, and still wearing the only jacket in the room. Most food interested her little now; textures, on the other hand, hadn't deteriorated much. She could still feel a caramel candy melt across her tongue, and ooze down the trenches of her mouth. No wonder she was so fat. On the other hand, who cared? Even her doctor didn't.

She turned to the middle-aged woman sitting closest to her, somebody's mother visiting from Alaska. Slender and stylish, this one, with a smooth cap of pale-blonde hair. Maybe seventy.

"I'll soon be dead," she said comfortably to her.

"Won't we all," the woman said. "I'm Vera, by the way."

"Is your husband here?" Agnes asked, glancing around the room.

"Oh, Bennie," Vera said. "Bennie departed some time ago." Agnes took this to mean he was dead.

"Did you love him?" This was what she loved about being really old. Everybody thought you were just batty, **so** you could ask whatever question you wanted.

"Does anybody really love anybody?" Vera asked, but she wouldn't look at Agnes.

“I would say yes,” Agnes offered after consideration. She spread one hand flat against her sizeable belly. On the other side of the room, three little girls were trying to get the adults to move their feet so they could spread out a paper game on the floor.

“Take it downstairs,” Shona said. None of them were her children. “Right now.”

Obediently, the children carefully folded the large, marked paper, as if they knew better than to argue, although they probably had no idea who Shona was. Without speaking, they collected the cardboard parts and tucked them under their arms or in front of them, pressed to their flat little chests and rounded tummies. As they walked away, they put their feet down carefully, as if the floor might give way.

“Shona! They don’t have to go downstairs!” said blocky Auntie Violet, Emma’s older sister, dismayed. She always sided with the kids unless they were punching each other. Violet had no children and Uncle Ross often left for long periods of time. That can’t go on much longer, Agnes thought. Ross was ill, anyone with half an eye could see that as he stood, legs crossed, one elbow planted on the fireplace mantle, glass in hand, although apparently no one had. Maybe he was finally getting the long predicted liver cirrhosis. A nasty one, that. Her own first husband, James, had died of it, although not until they had been divorced for quite a few years. The little girls kept moving, getting away from Shona.

“Yes,” she repeated to Vera. “It’s just that it never seems to last. Don’t you think?”

“My point exactly,” Vera said.

James had been tall and blonde with a killer smile – that was what all the girls said, that he had a killer smile. Agnes’s face felt hot, her cheeks especially. What now? She considered: No, the room wasn’t overheated; no, she wasn’t running a fever; no, she wasn’t angry at

anything and she sure wasn't embarrassed. So what? *I was thinking about James's killer smile and then my face felt hot.*

"After James, Alastair," she muttered. "It's Alastair I've lost." She looked around, as if he were merely standing in the other room or out on the deck having a smoke. Loud laughter came suddenly from the kitchen, and a crash as if a chair had been knocked over. Luckily, Vera hadn't heard her.

"I hope that wasn't the turkey," Vera said.

"Whose parent are you?" Agnes inquired.

"Over there." She pointed with an upward jerk of her chin toward a handsome boy of about thirty, who had taken off his suit jacket and rolled up his shirtsleeves. Agnes noticed that ties were coming off, or maybe nobody had worn one. Some new fashion. "He is Emma's cousin Nick." She shifted gears: "Once married – I was, I mean – to Emma's younger brother, Malcolm."

"Oh, my god," Agnes said. After a pause, she added "Really, who cares?"

"You said it," Vera replied, glancing up at Agnes's face, and then quickly away again. "I have three daughters. I usually spend all holidays with one of them, but Nick seemed to feel he needed to have his mother for Thanksgiving at least once before she kicks the bucket, so I got on a plane, and here I am. Imagine, all that way and the dinner isn't even at his house." She had crossed one slim leg over the other and was clasping her knee with both hands, fingers laced together. Once when she was a child, Agnes had done that at the kitchen table, but she'd pushed her knee as far from her chest as she could, her hands had slipped, she had fallen forward, and banged her face against the table edge so hard her teeth had cut right through her lip. What could anybody do about that? Nothing. She remembered the blood and how frightened she had been.

Her memory took her now, swiftly, to the time *the old bastard* had stood reading to the class in his deep voice, the book open on his palms held chest-high and, as he read, he had moved his hips ever so slowly against the edge of her desk – she sat in the front row – back and forth, back and forth, and she knew that the bulge in his trousers – she could say it now – was his lumpy penis pressed against her desk, and her face and chest not a foot away from it. He rocked back a couple of inches, then forward to press the wood again, and she knew that what he was doing wasn't right. Though she had tried not to, she had stared at the front of his pants, her elbows bent and resting on her desk, chin and mouth covered by her hands. Such a stupid thing, yet for seventy-five or more years she had remembered it; she was still troubled by it. *I am still troubled by it.*

Emma was calling Arthur to come and start carving.

“Turkey’s ready.”

“Food’s going on the table,” another woman called, her face lost behind a steaming bowl of something-or-other. Much commotion, mothers organizing children, adults beginning to move, still chatting with each other, finishing conversations, lagging, nobody wanting to appear too eager, Geordie and his son Dan at the sideboard opening wine from identical bottles. “Should have been opened a half-hour ago,” Dan was grumbling, while behind his back his father rolled his eyes to the room. Once she and two of her best girlfriends from school had looked up *the old bastard’s* address in the phone book and on a Sunday after mass had strolled nervously past his house. It was snowing, and the whole town settled deeply into its Sunday quiet, with the snow falling so thickly, big soft flakes that spread on their hair and the shoulders of their coats, that, subdued as they were by the sight of the cottage where their principal lived, they could hear the falling snow whispering around them as it fell. As if to comfort **them**. *What*

hard little girls we were. But, no, we were not hard at all: We were weakness itself. She was afraid she would weep.

And the cloakroom – this time her turn in it when the principal was out of the room, as he so often was. A boy kissing her, fumbling at her sweater, the other kids calling, “He’s coming, he’s coming,” and the rush of their footsteps as they tried to get into their seats before the door opened and *the old bastard* caught them. Who was that boy? She knew she shouldn’t allow that touch on her sweater, was terrified of getting caught, but – but what? Joey Plamondon, that’s who it was. All the girls had crushes on him. *I must have been a sex maniac*, and then, laughing out loud, *at thirteen we were all sex maniacs. Even those of us who didn’t know what sex was.* Even as she tried, she could not now make out what to think about that realization. How puzzling it all was. Still.

Arthur was bending over her again.

“Take my arm, mother.”

“I can get up myself,” she said, suddenly angry, although not at him. As he bent toward her, his eyes fixed on her shoulder rather than her face, she caught a glimpse of something there – her little boy, gone so long ago from her. She touched his face. He moved his gaze to her eyes then, and she saw such (although momentarily only and a shock to both of them) undisguised tenderness in his. For that instant, her breath stopped, she couldn’t catch it, getting out of the chair was harder than she thought.

“All these people,” she said into his ear, “I’m not sure who half of them are.”

“It is confusing,” he agreed. She was on her feet now, straightening her dress while he waited.

“Not confusing,” she said. “It’s just that who they are doesn’t matter anymore. Who they are is not relevant to whatever matters now.”

He was frowning, thinking, as she knew he often did, that she was batty, or getting there. Roland Frank came back into her mind and then *the old bastard* and the tricks he got up to. Yet hadn’t he also brought her forward into life? Hadn’t he also brought her here today? Such a mess life was, such a glorious, ridiculous mess.

They stood in the doorway now, he was leading her to the chair at the head of the table where they usually put her, although they then ignored her, passing food around her, filling other glasses while she would sit in silence amidst the noise, eating little, slowly, and thinking of the foolish, precious past.

