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Maureen nearly fainted dead away, as Grammy would have said, when she saw her own mother lean over Grammy's casket and kiss the corpse on the lips. With two bright rounds of rouge on her waxy cheeks, even Grammy looked startled.

"Sure she's every bit of herself," Fiona Monaghan had said when the man at Ohlmeyer's Funeral Home showed them his work, but that was not exactly true. Grammy had worn rouge only on Sundays, with her hair always pulled straight back in a dull, off-white bun. Although she never permitted herself the frivolity of waving it, the mortician had curled her hair over her forehead, dolling her up for eternity. Maureen O'Dell, who, as an obituary writer, might be expected to have some professional sense of these things, nodded her approval to her mother.

Fiona pressed her elbow into her daughter's arm. Maureen knew what her mother wanted, but she was terrified to give it. The only time she had ever touched a dead body, she had been five years old. A robin had ricocheted off their living room picture window, and Maureen ran outside. She picked it up to take to her daddy, who she knew could fix anything, but Grammy yelled at her and made her throw it in the garbage can and scrub her hands in a mixture of bleach, Palmolive and scalding water. Grammy said it was very bad luck, both the bird dying in their yard and Maureen's touching the dirty thing.

Standing so close to the body, Maureen was afraid to inhale. She tightened her stomach muscles and bowed her head. The old woman's hands had been made up, as

smooth and ageless as a mannequin's, and a crystal-beaded rosary had been laced between her fingers. Two large sprays of golden mums were set on easels on either end of the coffin, one from the "Loving Daughter Fiona" at Grammy's foot and one from the "Loving Granddaughters Maureen and Nell" at her head. Against her will, Maureen's ribcage rose and her lungs filled. It took her a moment to identify the deep perfume of stargazer lilies. She spotted a triangular arrangement of pink stargazers among six bouquets sprinkled about the room, and guessed that they were from her best friend, J.B., who often bought one of the fragrant stems for her desk across the newsroom from Maureen. Fiona had said to her friends, "no flowers," but they'd ignored her. Maureen knew her mother was pleased with the modest but acceptable showing.

Still, Maureen felt no obligation or grief towards Grammy, only a gentle swell of relief. The woman had been ninety-five and bitterly unhappy. Whatever purpose she may once have had in living, she had long abandoned. The important thing was that she had not suffered. She had merely slept away, without pain, but also without a word of gratitude.

Maureen stole another furtive glance at Grammy, as if it would be rude to stare. For the burial, Fiona had chosen the rose-colored knit dress that Maureen and Nell had given the old woman last year for Christmas. Grammy had said that it was too good for anyplace she was going except heaven. Vaguely, Maureen hoped Grammy was going there; indeed, she was glad her grandmother was on her way.

For the thirty-seven years since Maureen's mother had taken her own parents in--supposedly to help with the newly-born Maureen--Fiona had catered to the old people

hand and foot. "I didn't have a choice but to take care of Grammy," Fiona would say to her two daughters, "even though she never loved me or understood me. Not like I love you girls. But I will never be a burden to you. Never. I can take care of myself."

Fiona pressed her daughter's elbow harder, and stared over her nose at the body. "Go on," she whispered. Maureen knew that if she refused to kiss Grammy, her mother would worry that she would not kiss her when--God forbid--it was her time in the casket, and Maureen's turn to cry. As surely she would. Because, Fiona had said in the car to the wake, normally one cries when one's mother dies.

Maureen looked at her mother's gentle profile and her eyes stung. She leaned over so that her auburn curls hid her lips, counted "one and two," and made a sucking sound that might pass for a kiss. She did it only because her mother wanted her to, and, unlike Grammy, her mother did not ask her--in so many words, anyway--for much.

Her gesture complete, Maureen stood back. Raising her eyebrows, she mouthed the question, "okay?" Her mother nodded her approval, and turned to greet her guests, dry-eyed.

Maureen, feeling appropriate in a long-sleeved, black angora dress and cultured pearls, skimmed the sparse gathering. The room was too large for Grammy's wake. At its full size, with its four elaborate crystal chandeliers hanging from the high ceilings, it would have made a lovely ballroom, but now it rendered conversation awkward and drew attention to even the slightest sound. Six rows of straight-backed, slightly padded maroon chairs were conspicuously empty, as were the two groupings of more comfortable, Queen Anne reproductions on the sides of the room.

Fiona was Grammy's only child--unusual, everyone said, for an Irish family--and, as far as Maureen knew, neither Grammy nor Grampy claimed any living siblings. Grammy had outlived almost everyone she had ever known, so the mourners were all Fiona's friends. She recognized half-a-dozen women and guessed that the few others were acquaintances from Church. Only two had brought their husbands.

Maureen took her mother's hand. "I think I'm the youngest one here."

"And the prettiest," Fiona said.

"Oh, you're good," Maureen said. "What will you tell Nell when she gets here?"

"That she's the youngest!" Fiona said, smiling. She had dodged the who's-your-favorite trap.

"Where is she?" Maureen said, her smile fading.

"Settling the children, I imagine."

Maureen rolled her eyes.

"Don't," Fiona said.

"I wish I had kids, the perfect excuse for everything," Maureen said, but more kindly than she felt. It was not her intention to upset her mother. These days, however, Nell was always late, and "family" was always the excuse. Maureen would have liked for her sister to be there now, to share the daughterly duties.

Maureen looked at her watch. It was already after eight. How long could it possibly take to "settle" the children? If Nell worked it right, there wouldn't be time for her to have to kiss the corpse.

Maureen would feel more comfortable when her husband got there. Jack had a twice-monthly commitment to an eleven-year-old boy from a public school his law firm had "adopted," and he kept his mentoring appointments with the boy with a near-religious fervor. Tonight was mentoring night, but he should be there soon.

Two of Fiona's closest friends, who must have offered their condolences to her earlier, came to the front of the room to greet Maureen.

"Is this one the journalist?" one said.

As if she and her mother were not there, the other replied, "I think so. Hasn't she grown!"

Fiona tugged at Maureen's hand, the way one would pull a string on a wind-up doll. Maureen laughed. "Just a little, Mrs. Nolan." She heard a rustle at the back of the room. As if from a bullhorn, Father Costello's voice arrived before him, riveting her attention. Near the door, the parish pastor greeted a small cluster of mourners in the same deep bass he used in the pulpit, and his words bounced off the dark wood paneling. Father Costello, round and boyishly good-looking in spite of his sixty-odd years, shattered the silence of the awkward room with his rich baritone and the equal force of his personality.

Fiona smiled broadly. She had nearly perfect teeth and a lovely smile. She walked to the priest with outstretched arms, almost radiant in her royal blue mohair suit. They met halfway and hugged. A couple of men drifted closer towards the door while the priest guided Fiona by the arm back to the kneeler at the casket. He made the sign

of the cross on the old woman's forehead and then turned to the eight or so women who remained.

He reached in his pocket. "Will you join me now in the rosary?" he bellowed. Without waiting for a reply, he intoned, "*In the name of the Father….* " Maureen quickly checked the back of the room for Jack, and, disappointed, quietly took a seat in the front row. Her mother was fond of the rosary, and called frequently on the *Mother of God* to *pray for us sinners*. The prayer, with its references to maternity, made Maureen uncomfortable, reminding her that she was incomplete. She was not a mother and she never could be. She had been born without a uterus, an omission which hadn't been discovered until she was past sixteen, when even Fiona, nervous around all issues sexual in nature, had to admit that Maureen's failure to menstruate was out of the ordinary and worthy of investigation by a medical doctor. The poor man had called Mrs. Monaghan into the office, and with Maureen still in stirrups, shivering under the paper sheet, blurted out his findings. He said the girl's condition was one in a million. Fiona had said nothing, her chin making a circular motion upwards as if she'd been bracing herself for the full impact of the news. Neither she nor Maureen said a word, and the ruddy-faced, white-haired doctor said, with the slightest hint of a brogue, "Sure she can always adopt a needy child," and put his hand on Fiona's arm to comfort her.

Fiona pulled away. "Never," she said, almost to herself. The doctor nodded as if to agree it was a matter of personal choice--whatever the patient wanted to do--and excused himself. Fiona's eyes watered. She picked up Maureen's blouse and started to fit her daughter's arm through the armhole.

"Mother!" She shook her away. "I can dress myself!"

"I know, dear," Fiona said. She folded her hands at her stomach, as if in prayer, and bit her lip. Maureen buttoned her blouse. She didn't know what to think at all. Her condition was not life-threatening; it just wouldn't be life-giving. Her father had always insisted that she should get good grades, start a career, see the world a bit, and enjoy her independence before she "settled down." Maureen looked at the tears in her mother's eyes, and thought that part of her was supposed to feel as badly as Fiona, but she didn't. For Maureen, it had all been very theoretical: meeting the right boy, getting married, doing the deed, getting oh-my-god! pregnant, wearing maternity clothes, being old enough to be called "mother."

Fiona took Maureen by the shoulders. "There will be times," she said, "when you will feel like crying. Remember this. You will just need to shake it off. When you feel it coming on, shake it off."

Maureen shook her head like a wet puppy to show she understood, and then hugged her mother, because she didn't know what to say. Fiona, usually so stoic and unflappable, had seemed to need that. At home, when they had reported the news to Grammy, she had said that Maureen should forget about boys and “make something of herself.” She said that it was just as well, that children could ruin a person's life. Fiona shushed the old woman before Maureen could ask her what she meant.

*"Hail Mary!"* Father Costello bellowed. From his mouth, the words sounded like a greeting meant to be personal, as if he were working a cocktail party of potential givers. *So nice to see you again.* A ceiling spotlight beamed on Grammy's jaw, sharp

as a cliff at Maher. Maureen tried to picture what Fiona's soft face would look like on the coffin's silky pillow without her lovely, toothy smile. She could hardly hold back her tears. Her mind skipped forward another generation, and she saw her own head on the pillow, the funeral parlor empty. Jack gone before her, the nieces and her nephew scattered across the country, no child in mourning.

*"Blessed is the fruit of thy womb."* No womb. No fruit. If no kids, then what? But why not kids? Jack loved children. She could see him now, in the firm's dining room where the kids came for tutoring, his shirtsleeves pushed up, his tie loosened. At thirty-nine, he was the oldest of the firm's volunteers. At his age, most of the attorneys had kids of their own, with homework to check and science fair projects to glue and Little League teams to coach.

*"And at the hour of our death…."* How would she feel at that hour? What would she think about her own life? What would others say about her? "Although Maureen Monaghan O'Dell had no children, she…." She took a tissue from under her cuff and blew her nose. How could she complete that sentence? She didn't want to cry, so she focused on the priest's words and moved her lips in the familiar rhythm of the rosary.

*"Amen."* An abrupt silence grabbed Maureen's attention. The prayers were over. She heard the people behind her stand up. She headed for the back of the room. Jack was just walking in, solemnly buttoning his suit jacket and smoothing his tie. She spun him around and led him outside.

"Thank goodness you're here!"

"Of course I'm here." He gave her a peck on the cheek. "No place else to go! I pretty much exhausted my knowledge of the Revolutionary War!" Mentoring always seemed to put Jack in good spirits. Outside, his startlingly full head of curly brown hair bobbed in the night breeze. He was a good-looking guy, with a high forehead and a patrician nose. When they met, she had noticed it immediately, because few people have pretty noses. Jack's could have been chiseled in Italian marble. He wore roundish horn-rimmed glasses, always the same style, although he got new lenses every three years. He was clean-shaven and without even a hint of an evening shadow.

On the circular white portico of the oversized brick Colonial funeral home, a half-dozen men--from different parlors containing different bodies--were smoking and laughing uproariously. A balding man her own age caught Maureen's eye.

"Not a close relative," he apologized sheepishly, as he lit his Marlboro. "A second cousin." She nodded and followed Jack to the bottom of the stairs.

"How are you holding up?" Jack asked her.

"I'm okay, but it's tedious. She didn't have three hours worth of friends."

Jack shrugged. “She always hated confusion. Was always on Nell about the kids. You might say she’s got peace at last.” He struck a match for Maureen's cigarette. Just then, Nell strode up. She scowled at both of them the way Maureen had seen her silently scold her children in church.

"Where is she?" she demanded.

"Hasn't moved," Jack said.

Nell lowered her voice just enough to let him know she would not tolerate criticism. "I got here as soon as I could. I had to take care of the children first."

"Inside, to the right," Maureen said. It was nice of Jack to want to stand up for her, but tonight was not the night to pick a fight with Nell. That would only upset Fiona, who took such pride in how well her girls got along.

"You shouldn't smoke," Nell said and brushed past her sister.

"Mind your own business," she said when the door closed. Her sister wasn't wrong, just high and mighty.

"It's okay, honey," Jack said, and took a final drag off her cigarette.

"Nell's here!" Fiona caught Maureen as soon as she stepped back into the parlor. "She's in the john. It's a quarter to nine. We could leave, don't you think? Maybe Nell could take me home, and you and Jack come along as soon as they've closed up here."

"Sure, mom," Maureen said. No one else would be coming. Nell could play the solicitous confidante on the way to Fiona's house, and next week Fiona would say something about how Nell was a "born mother," as if Maureen hadn't done the real work of the evening, charming Fiona's friends, watching out for Fiona, kissing a corpse.

Nell returned from the ladies' room, her dusty-rose lipstick freshly applied, and took Fiona's elbow. At five-eleven, Nell towered over both her mother and her sister, but she was neither beanpole nor Amazon. She was an elegant, well-proportioned size 12. Maureen, whose own size 12 felt dumpier on her five-five frame, resented every inch of Nell's undeserved authority.

Maureen was Fiona's first-born and had been the first to go to kindergarten, have a date, graduate from college, get a job. By all rights, she should have been the first to get married, get pregnant, have a family. It had not turned out like that, and Maureen could not help but feel that by becoming a mother, Nell finally had shoved Maureen out of the way.

With maternal efficiency, Nell put her arm around Fiona, blocked her from turning back for one last look at Grammy, and guided her towards the parlor door. Nell had been there all of ten minutes.

"Aren't you going to see her?" Maureen asked.

Nell shook her head, as if a mention of "her" would upset Fiona.

"See you at the house, Mum," Jack said, and Nell and Fiona were off.

Maureen plopped into the chocolate-brown velour couch at the side of the room. "We've been left with a dead body," she said to Jack.

"Not just *any* body," Jack said. "Your grandmother."

"I know," Maureen said, her eyes filling. "The worst of it is, I really don't have a clue what she was about."

"Death always raises those questions," Jack said.

"Hmm," she said, although she might have been expected to have something profound to say. As a staff obituary writer for *The Chicago Tribune*, for the past year and a half she had specialized in turning ordinary lives into extraordinary tributes. She had pioneered the concept at the *Tribune*--although others had done it elsewhere around the country--giving the same attention to quiet accomplishments that the paper gave to

historic ones. Usually she wrote each of her featured obituaries, about six hundred words in length, with a single theme in mind: In what way was the world a better place for the deceased having passed through it? Her written answers comforted the survivors. What she often wondered, though, was from the deceased's perspective: Were they happy to have lived? Did they believe they had mattered?

Maureen bounced Grammy's life off her usual theme, and came up dry. Had Grammy bettered the world? For anyone? Had she felt a sense of purpose, before she got so very old?

Maureen remembered the old woman's despair. "Take me, Jesus," she would moan, pounding her fist slowly, steadily into the kitchen table. This would mean that she'd lost some argument with Fiona. "Sure, how did it come to this?" And then, to Maureen's dismay, Grammy would hurl the ultimate insult, "No child of mine would treat me so." How miserable did you have to feel to disclaim your own daughter? Why didn't Fiona and Grammy get along?

Grammy had come from County Cork, Ireland, and hadn't married until she was considerably past what would have been considered her prime. Then, gratefully, although not lovingly, she had wed the forty-five year old bachelor, Padraig Flynn. They had immigrated to America. Through a cousin, Padraig found work as head-gardener on an estate in Lake Forest, a Chicago suburb that was home to the likes of the Armours and Swifts and other moneyed families. Grammy worked as a maid.

In those days, most of the domestics of the North Shore were left without a pension, and hardly any Social Security. Grammy and Padraig moved in with Fiona the

year after she married, and had stayed there, in the middle-class suburbs northwest of Chicago. Fiona sometimes said that Padraig had wanted, in his old age, to go back, to die in Ireland, but Grammy wouldn't let him. The old man had died in America in 1975, when Maureen was just a child, but she remembered that the gladiolas he tended in their yard had bloomed larger, longer and brighter than any in the neighborhood. Grammy wouldn't look at them.

"I don't know what she really cared about," she said again. Jack nodded and put his arm around her shoulder.

Motherhood was always a challenging subject for Maureen's obituaries. Except in the cases of women who had fostered fifty-seven children or adopted fourteen, Maureen had trouble concocting a publishable identity for a woman who herself had been happy being known simply as the mother of two, three, or maybe four children. She tried to resist the temptation to let the deceased be identified and judged by their children, as in "mother of Tom, of Tom's Used Chevrolets, and Robert, the First Assistant U.S. Attorney for the Northern District of Illinois." If she wrote that, wouldn't she have to say as well that Nick was serving eight to twelve in Joliet for armed robbery?

They sat quietly on the velour couch until precisely nine o'clock, when they drove to Fiona's house, even though it was within walking distance. In a suburb of nothing but one-story and split-level homes, the Monaghan's yellow brick ranch sprawled luxuriously, but not conspicuously, on a quiet street six blocks long, with two tall elm trees per lot, three lots per block. When Fiona and John Monaghan had moved

to the Chicago suburb in the nineteen-fifties, the trees were not yet wide enough to hide a four-year-old in a game of hide-and-seek. Now, some of their branches almost met over the middle of the street.

Maureen heard the tea kettle whistling as she walked in the side door to Fiona's kitchen. Nell got up from the table to take the kettle off.

"Tea?" she said.

"No, thanks," Maureen said lightly and walked by her to the cabinet where she knew Fiona kept the "liquor supply." She retrieved a bottle and two stubby amber-colored glasses, filled them with ice, opened the scotch and poured two drinks.

"I'd like to sing tomorrow," Nell said to Fiona as Maureen joined them at the kitchen table. Jack took his drink and headed towards the adjacent family room, half-open to the kitchen, and settled himself in a tan leather recliner in front of the television. He turned on the news, the sound low.

"I didn't know you still…." Fiona looked quizzically at Nell.

"You don't lose it, mother," Nell said.

"I didn't mean that," Fiona said, although it was clear to Maureen that that was exactly what she meant. When was the last time Nell had performed in public? Why now? Nell and Grammy hadn't gotten along at all while the old woman was alive. If Nell sang at her funeral, Grammy would turn over in the grave she wasn't quite in yet.

"In *your* honor," Nell said, in a soft, melodramatic voice.

Maureen retreated into her scotch. Nell's singing in Fiona's honor would turn Grammy's funeral into an event about the survivors. She had resisted doing this in her

written obituaries, and here her own family was about to build a funeral around it!

Nell went on, "And then Maureen should give a eulogy." She turned to Maureen. "Maybe just read your obit--I know you're not good at public speaking--and let the priest finish up. You didn't make today's *Trib*, which actually turns out okay, because then it will be new to whoever's there. You got a copy? Can I see it?"

Maureen searched Fiona's face for support. "Mom didn't want one."

Nell looked at Fiona. "Of course she did," she said. "Like she didn't want the flowers, either. She just didn't want to pressure you, that's all."

"She said she didn't want one." Maureen knew "no" meant "yes" on the flowers, but she had taken her mother at her word about the obituary. Now, there wasn't a peep out of Fiona.

"You know better than that! Wouldn't you want a nice story for her? When it's her time?" Nell really knew how to emotionally charge an argument.

Maureen tried to bring the focus back to Grammy. "It's hard to find the right things to say."

Nell jumped to her feet. Maureen stiffened. Her sister was using her full height--almost six feet of it—to give her a substantial advantage. Nell slapped the table in front of Maureen. "Why? Because she was only a mother? Is that it? Not good enough for you? Not interesting enough for you and your precious career?"

Nell's tirade had come out of nowhere, and Maureen looked at Fiona for help.

"Not now. Maureen is very busy, and she can't be expected to drop everything and write a story about my family, for god sakes."

"*Our* family," Nell said, and locked eyes with Fiona.

"You said." Maureen glared at her mother.

Nell sat down, triumphant. "We can do it right now," she said. "You write, and I'll keep you company. Maybe I'll make some Irish soda bread. How would that be?"

She got up and found Fiona's wooden file box near the stove. It was crammed with three-by-five cards and newspaper clippings for recipes people had given her over the years. Grammy had made Irish soda bread every Sunday--in this very kitchen--for as long as Maureen could remember. Grammy had never used a recipe, but Fiona had followed her closely one day and sketched out an approximation of Grammy's formula.

"Really, Nell, it's not necessary."

"It's not about necessary, Mom, it's something I'd like to do. Flour?"

Maureen tapped her fingers against her glass and watched her sister. With the efficiency of someone who more than once had been reminded, at the start of the ten o'clock news, that "twenty-four cupcakes, frosted" were needed for school the next day, Nell collected two bowls, two nine-inch round pans, two measuring cups. She dumped roughly six cups of flour and two cups of raisins into the largest bowl.

Nell opened the refrigerator, removed the milk, poured three cups in a bowl with two tablespoons of lemon juice, then stared at Maureen. "You're not writing!"

"When was she born?" Maureen asked. She had written a first sentence.

"Around the turn of the century," Fiona said. "I gave it to the funeral man this afternoon."

"You don't know your own mother's birthday?" Nell said.

"She wasn't much for celebrations. You know that," Fiona said.

"Where was she born?" Maureen asked.

"Yourawisha." Fiona muttered the word like a curse. It was Grammy's all-purpose expression covering everything from disgust to a required "thank-you." Maureen had never made linguistic sense of it, but she knew that Fiona used it only in the most desperate or uncomfortable of situations. From her cadence, Maureen thought this time her mother meant "for god sakes!" Fiona pushed herself away from the table and hurried out of the kitchen.

Jack came in from the TV room, gave Maureen a peck on the top of her head, then whispered in her ear, "Take a deep breath." Then he snatched her almost empty glass, added ice and refilled both of their drinks.

Fiona returned with a scrap of paper. "Here it is. Clonakilty, County Cork, Ireland. March the seventh, 1908. But really, Maureen, don't mind Nell. It's not necessary."

Maureen looked at Jack. Fiona had said "it's not necessary" just enough times to make it an imperative.

Maureen wrote a line and read out loud. "Margaret Flynn (nee Nagle) died peacefully at her daughter's Arlington Heights home on October 4. She was 95."

Nell stopped mixing the dry ingredients and made a face. "Annie could do that much," she said. "And she's only in seventh grade."

"Probably," Maureen said.

"What I remember is that when we were really little, she made frothy eyelet nightgowns and matching robes for our dolls," Nell said. "Remember? They were pink, with teeny-tiny lace and ribbons. It took me years to understand that she had really made them. That takes a lot of patience!"

Fiona cleared her throat, which usually signaled to Maureen that she was about to deliver something of import. "Jack, I could use a drink, now, please. These girls are going to test me, with their selective memories."

"I thought you wanted us to have fond memories of our childhood," Nell said.

Fiona took a whiskey and soda from Jack. She was studying what might have been the beginnings of a cobweb in the corner on her right.

"Mother?" Nell rushed over when it was clear Fiona had fallen silent. "Are you okay?"

"All she did was sew the lace on," Fiona murmured. "Like a lady."

Maureen gasped and covered her mouth. "*You* made them? But you always hated to sew!"

"I do," Fiona said and took a sip of her drink. She pantomimed an exaggerated threading of a needle.

“So that explains why Grammy started giving us lousy presents once we were in school,” Maureen said.

Fiona started to object, but Nell broke in. “Remember the manicure sets when we were in second grade? Dangerous, sharp implements! I’d never let my girls…Oh, and then the year we got undershirts with Minnie Mouse on them!”

“Show some respect for the dead,” Fiona tittered. “She always said that once a child went to school, you had responsibilities. She didn’t want to spoil you.”

“Are you talking about yourself or us?” Nell asked, but Fiona didn’t answer. Nell turned her attention to her bread. She spread some flour on the counter and dumped her soggy dough on top. She shaped it into two balls and put each one in a dark round cake pan.

"Put a cross on top," Maureen said.

Nell looked up. "What?" she demanded.

"Grammy always cut the top in quarters," Maureen said.

"I don't know what you mean," Nell said. Maureen got up from the table, took an ordinary knife from a drawer, and drew it across the top of each round of raw bread, marking it into four hunks.

"I hate to say this," Nell said. "I always thought that the bread did that naturally when it baked."

"And great first lines come naturally in the seventh grade," Maureen said victoriously, even though she knew she should have let that warm moment settle comfortably between them.

Nell threw her a cold stare. "What about the hats?" She slid her rounds of bread into the oven and then sat next to Fiona. Maureen followed and sat on Fiona's other side. Grammy had given them straw hats with fruits and flowers, and matching ones for their dolls. Maureen remembered a tiny cluster of green grapes, a bright banana and a

little red apple bunched together on the right side of her doll's hat, a yellow ribbon tied in a bow in back.

Fiona scratched the back of her neck. "Oh, girls," she said.

Maureen softened. "Nell, I can take the bread out, if you've got to go. It's after ten!"

"Thanks. It's okay. The kids are asleep." She looked reluctant to leave.

Fiona cleared her throat. "The hats were your father's idea, " she said. "He glued the fruit and let her tie the ribbons."

Nell got up and refilled the kettle. It had been ten years since John Monaghan had died, instantly, in a car accident. Fiona always, even now, took an extra, shallow breath at the sound of his name, raised her chin, crossed herself, and let her eyes fill. Maureen looked away. Her mother's ritual always seemed so false. Either you cried or you didn't. If by almost crying her mother wanted praise for the depth of her loyalty or sympathy for her loss--so many years ago now--Maureen was not the one to get it from. Fiona had told Maureen to "shake it off." If Fiona wasn't going to cry, then she should take her own advice.

Maureen missed her dad, of course, but in many ways she hadn't known him that well. In the sixties and early seventies, what fathers knew best was providing financially for their families, and John Monaghan, Irish and prideful, had worked as hard as any. Perhaps she would have known him better if she'd been a boy. Fiona often said he'd wanted to have boys, had even come home the day after Fiona had told him he was going to be a father with an assortment of child-sized baseball gloves and

basketballs. They must have given them to the Salvation Army after their second daughter was born.

Fiona had been in her early fifties when she was widowed. She refused to remove her wedding ring or to accept any of the fix-ups her friends had, after an appropriate time, gingerly suggested. Grammy was afraid to be in the dark house alone at night, and Fiona hated to ask a neighbor to sit with the old woman while she went out. Fiona didn't like to be indebted to anyone, and in her experience, she'd confided to her daughter, most people kept track of favors done and favors received with the precision of a CPA. So Fiona rarely went out, Grammy had her way, and the neighbors got off easy. Fiona's friends marveled at the selfless daughter and told her she would be rewarded.

With such an example set before her, how could Maureen, without children to steal her away, not do the same duty by Fiona? At least once a week, alone, or sometimes with Jack, she would bring a casserole or a cake and spend an evening or a Sunday afternoon with the two women. In the winter, if he were along, Jack could sit in the tan recliner, a stack of documents in his lap, and watch football games while the old woman dozed in her armchair. Fiona would tell Maureen the gossip from the neighborhood and what she'd heard about Maureen's high school classmates, many of whom she herself had forgotten. Often Fiona would also have a brown envelope of clippings from the *Tribune*, as if Maureen didn't read her own paper. Usually there had been at least one story in the past week about a woman of approximately Maureen's age who had been the first to do or be named or be promoted to something important. Fiona

seemed to assume that Maureen would be interested, if not inspired. Although she didn't want to believe it was intended, Maureen sometimes got the feeling, after reading about a woman who had excelled in a man's world, that Fiona was the slightest bit disappointed not to have given John Monaghan a son.

Nell's finger sizzled when she tested one of the round pans of Irish Soda Bread. She spilled the breads out onto waiting wire racks and tapped the bottom for a hollow sound. "Perfect," she said.

The sweet smell of warm raisins and the caramel aroma of the one or two blackened ones sticking out of the top of the brown loaves flooded Maureen's eyes with unexpected tears. Now, she herself was doing it--making Grammy's death not about the end of the old woman's life, but about the death of her own childhood. She saw Grammy stooped at the counter, her hands gooey, beating--too hard--the soft dough, and shaping it into two equal balls, now and then sneaking Maureen and Nell five or six raisins, dusted white, when no one was looking. *Yourawisha.*

She touched the tears away and told her mother she would write something simple for the paper. "My deadline is at 3, so there'll be plenty of time. And maybe tomorrow, can't we just let the priest give the eulogy? I don't know if I…"

"That's fine, Maureen. And you, too, Nell, you shouldn't have to…."

"I want to. I have just the song."