

THE WAKE

BY James J Collins

It was a cold November Saturday in 1946 in New York City. The cold and the fog rolled off the Hudson river on West 10th street. WWII had recently ended and America was getting back to normal. Men had returned from the Pacific, North Africa and all parts of Europe and Timothy "Little Tim" Duffy, a former infantry sergeant with the First Division had just died of wounds and illness contracted in North Africa and Sicily. He had returned, last year, to the West side docks of New York where the Irish had worked as long shore laborers for generations.

Tim's wake was held in his family's apartment, just over the Galway pub which he frequented. In the Irish tradition the living room was used as the center with the coffin on a platform and chairs lined up in rows, filled with women in black who spoke in low conversations about everything imaginable. All the men were jammed in the kitchen that smelled like a bar as there was whiskey in abundance and a beer keg that was the center of attention of a dozen or more. The men had been in the military for up to five years, and for many this wake was a joyous reunion. Empty sleeves, crutches and canes highlighted the sacrifices many had made and the conversations brought up the names of many who gave their all in faraway lands.

"I really miss 'little Tim'," said Moose Murphy. "We went into the service the same day but he went to Europe with the army while I went to the Pacific with the marines. We got together at the Shea wedding a few months ago but we never had a last drink together. I really wish we had that last beer together," said Moose.

"It's never too late," said 'fast Joey' O'Connor. "There's the Galway downstairs and Tim's in the next room." Nobody objected; a number of smiles broke out; they all headed to the door and marched into the living room.

The women turned and became silent as they wondered what was going on. As the coffin was lifted by six big long shore men whose muscles bulged under the Sunday suits, the women gasped; rose in unison; raised their arms and started to object.

"What are you doing?" roared 'Big Maggie' McCue. "Leave the coffin alone."

“We’re taking ‘littleTim’ down stairs for a last drink with us all,” was firmly stated by Moose as he led the procession to the front door.

A right hand turn on the narrow stairway was a challenge to the semi inebriated pall bearers and they succeeded in jamming the coffin crosswise in the stairwell. Lots of shouts a few curses and all kinds of advice were heard, but the coffin was resolute. It would not budge.

“This is really dumb,” shouted ‘Dancer O’keefe’. Lift ‘little Tim ‘ out of the box and we’ll lug him into the Galway.” Five years of carrying wounded comrades and retrieving bodies in all kinds of conditions kicked in and without any opposition the crowd passed the corpse down the line.

Moose and Dancer each had one of ‘little Tim’s arms in both of their hands as they kicked in the door to the Galway followed by the mob. Paddy Mack, the owner, went through three reactions in less than a minute. Initially defensive from the noise of his door being kicked in; elated at the size of the mob – many customers and finally fear at the sight of the corpse of ‘little Tim who lived upstairs on the second floor.

“What in God’s name are you doing?” pleaded Paddy, “The wake’s upstairs and the body is against my bar. If the cops come I’ll lose my license. What are you doing?”

“Don’t worry about the cops, we have six of the finest in the bar as we speak and they will clear anything that comes up,” assured Moose. “We need you to put a beer on the bar for every man in our wake and don’t forget ‘little Tim’. We’re having a final drink with our friend as a farewell to remember.

Quickly the glasses were filled and they were raised on high in tribute to ‘little Tim’ A lot of beer dribbled down Tim’s chin as two of the revelers tried to feed the corpse a drink. ‘For he’s a jolly good fellow’ was sung by all as the group trooped out the door and up the stairs.

The coffin, now empty was easier to remove from the stairwell and they stopped to refill the coffin just before the entered the apartment. It took a full hour to calm the women down but all ended well and the next day the funeral went off in an uneventful manner.

On the West side docks, the tale of ‘little Tim’ Duffy’s last drink at his own wake would be repeated for generations. The Irish love their wakes and all his friends and family loved ‘little Tim’. The story

has become a legend that highlights the spontaneous spirit of the Irish, their attitude to life and death, and speaks to their unique race and its humor.