

## **The Butcher's Funeral**

Catherine Madigan

A garish yellow church with a finish like curdled cream sat at the top of Shanid hill, scrutinising everything below. The village consisted of one sloping road occupied by terraced houses adorned with tumbling window boxes and smoky chimneys. The O'Briens ran the poky corner shop at the top of Main Street. Otherwise, all the enterprises on the road, including an austere funeral home, a lively butcher's selling local meat, and a two-chair salon, were run and owned by the Molloyes.

In Shanid, the old men in the parish had encyclopaedic knowledge of who belonged to whom, and who had land and what they'd done with it. The older ladies kept track of who gained a few pounds or only went to mass at Christmas. Tom Molloy, the eldest brother, ran the butcher's shop and was also the principal funeral director on account of his tact and superior literacy. His wife, Mary, attended to long-standing clients at the salon and also regularly coiffed and powdered the remains of parishioners for burial. She was kept abreast of local news at the salon and would often give her husband tips on who to pay a special visit to at the nursing home that week. It was a symbiotic pairing.

Gerard Molloy usually helped out at the butcher's shop before school. His older brothers used to be around a lot, but they were all in college or Canada by now. That morning, he woke to a sharp rap on the door and gave a grunt to show he was up. A square of buttery light shone through his window and cattle bawled out the back to be milked. He gathered a crumpled pile of school uniform and hurried to the bathroom to splash water on his face.

He'd been run off his feet the previous evening escorting old ladies into the funeral parlour and hadn't finished his homework yet. He gave his jumper a sniff to check how spicy the lingering incense was. The usual smell and crackling sound of frying sausages wafted out of the kitchen as he threw his schoolbag together. His Mam gave him three sausages and two slices of brown toast, and he slapped together a breakfast sandwich.

'I've a few appointments in the salon this morning, Ger,' his Mam said. 'So you'd better not miss the bus.'

'I've loads of time, Mam. Stop fussing.'

'I won't be bringing you. And your father is up the walls.'

'I know.'

'I know you know, but don't forget. Milk?'

Gerard gave his Mam a swift peck on the cheek and left for the butcher's shop next door.

Moist, cling-wrapped mince and steaks were piled in the shop window, and Gerard wiped sweaty condensation from the glass with a greying tea towel. He bagged up dozens of chicken breasts and left yellow post-its on the plastic for the usual customers. On Wednesdays, there was a standing order of odd bits of offal for the Rottweilers at the bottom of the road. Gerard would make up a special bag with whatever livers, kidneys, or tongues were freshest. The Molloy's didn't charge for the offcuts, as the woman of the house was often in the butcher and kept a standing appointment in his Mam's hairdressers. Gerard hunted

all over the back of the shop for the off cuts, but there was nothing in the fridges, or the prep area or the freezers.

*Where's the fecking bag? Dad will be so pissed if I don't have the order ready. Mam will throttle me if I don't make the bus.*

He whipped off his apron and headed out the back door of the butcher's, through the side gate and into the back of the house. Just as he kicked off his wellies to collect his school bag, he noticed a big, clear bucket bursting with sandwich bags on the back step. He peeled back the lid and weighed up the neat bags in his hands. The insides felt cool and dense when he squished them and they moved like lava in a lamp under the plastic. There were some shiny kidneys, a heart and a mass of liver.

*Thank Jesus.*

He grabbed his bag, dumped the cuts at the butcher's with a note for the lady with the dogs, and made it to the bus with two-and-a-half minutes to spare.

Mary Molloy had completed three perms and a blow dry by 11 o'clock, and her arms were aching. She had barely stepped a foot back in the house when her husband called down to her.

'Mary?' he shouted. 'Have you seen my black tie?'

*He saves every ounce of his composure for those masses. Otherwise, he flaps about, perpetually late and disorganised, expecting me to pick up the slack.*

'There's a pile of them under your socks in the drawer,' she called back.

She could understand why he was stressed on this particular occasion. John 'The Stick' Daly had been a tough man to get along with in life, and he wasn't proving to be much better in death. At his wake, Nell Daly had complained that the incense was too strong, the coffin lining wasn't glossy enough, and The Stick's hair had looked flat. Mary took umbrage at this, but reminded herself that Nell complained

about her blunt blonde bob every time she went into the salon. But she never ventured elsewhere. Anyway, it wasn't as if Nell and John Daly had been close. He openly declared, to anyone in the pub that would listen, that she didn't bring 'any land at all' into the marriage. Nell was a much-maligned daughter-in-law. And she behaved in a manner that was frugal and miserable, attempting to show the family that she wasn't a frivolous woman.

On top of the family drama, Father Donie had developed a touch of dementia and he'd forgotten the name of the departed at the wake. *I must remind Tom to meet the Father before the mass. I still can't believe he called The Stick a 'man of good faith'. He must be further along than we thought.*

'Mary?' Tom shouted. 'Did you take that container from the yard? I can't find it.'

'What container?' she asked. 'I've been at the salon all morning. I haven't touched a thing.'

'I left a plastic bucket out the back this morning. If you see it, call me,' Tom said as he blundered back out of the kitchen. Even in his agitated state, his black tie was knotted impeccably, and his polished shoes reflected light. 'Have to run. G'luck.'

Nell Daly had spent the morning slaving away, scrubbing the house and baking scones for whoever might drop by after the funeral mass. She wasn't going to cry for her bastard father-in-law, but she felt she should at least keep busy and offer that busyness up as grief. Her husband and sons had been up late drinking pints of black stout, reminiscing about what a shrewd man their father and granddad had been. She couldn't bear to listen to them and had gone to bed early with a migraine. They were in a disgraceful state this morning, and she knew they'd need something substantial to sober them up before mass. Nell never claimed to be a saint, but even so she often wondered

how she had raised such ungrateful, bratty young men. They sat and watched as she laboured around the house and chopped vegetables for their stew. They shoved the dogs off the couch and she saw Jimmy kick at one of the Rottweilers. They bickered about who would get land in the will.

‘I’ll sell it to the first man who comes asking,’ Jack said. ‘No way I’m going farming.’

‘Feck getting up at the crack of dawn to milk cows,’ replied Johnny.

‘I’ll get into property development.’ Jimmy stuck a hand down his shorts to scratch himself. ‘Buying and selling is easy money.’

‘I’ll never work again,’ said Johnny. ‘Why would I? I’ll be a house-husband and lie around all day watching telly and spending other people’s money. Isn’t that right, Mam?’

Nell fumed as the three boys laughed. ‘Go up and get changed. Iron your shirts, and don’t make a show of us.’

Nell stewed some beef in a battered pot. She unwrapped the kidneys she’d gotten for the dogs and added them too. The boys ate her out of house and home, so occasionally she bulked up their dinners with offal and they never even noticed. *It’s extra iron and anyway, they’ll devour it without so much as a thank you. At least the dogs would be grateful!* Her resentment bubbled with the stew and threatened to boil over. She threw the pot and a mound of boiled potatoes on the table for the boys and went upstairs to get changed for the funeral.

Later, once The Stick was in the ground, Nell conceded that the spray of white lilies Mary had arranged was tasteful, and the turnout was good. She thought the singing at the mass was awfully nasal however, and the priest clearly didn’t know who he was talking about. He had praised the deceased again for his ‘patient manner.’ Still, her boys made it through their prayers with just one untucked shirt between them. *It’s a nicer send off than the man deserved.*

Other than the mix up that morning, Tom Molloy thought the mass and burial went smoothly. Father Donie said the correct name after some coaching, and even offered a sweet eulogy. It had been a struggle to shoulder the overly ornate, solid oak casket, but they had managed. It had rained overnight, so the ground at the graveyard was soft, and he noticed a few ladies' stilettos sinking into the soil. So, he offered a discreet elbow where he could.

Tom listened when Gerard eagerly recounted the points he'd scored in his football match when he arrived home, mucky after training, and excused him from the tidy up to go do his homework. Tom wiped the table and made small talk with his wife about the slurred speeches after the funeral. Eventually, he broached the topic.

'They wanted Daly autopsied, Mary,' he said.

'Right.'

'And there was no room in the fridge above.'

Mary ignored him and leaned out the kitchen window to light another cigarette.

'So, after the postmortem, I left a few bits at the house overnight.'

Mary held up a hand like a stern guard. 'Tom, don't tell me.'

'I'd them packed up all ready to go first thing this morning.' He hadn't seen her smoke like this since she thought she'd blinded Gerard's teacher in a dye job gone wrong.

'Holy Mother of God. You didn't leave remains in the fridge again, Tom. How many times have I told you to get a bigger fridge at the parlour?'

'Not the remains, Mary. Just a few organs. That's why I was looking for that bucket this morning.'

She paused. 'And did you find it?'

'No.'

'I feel sick, Tom. Are that man's insides missing?'

‘Don’t fret, we’ll find them,’ Tom said quietly. ‘They were just sitting on the back step.’

Mary anxiously flicked the ash build up from the bottom of her third cigarette. ‘We should tell the family, Tom. What if bits of him were stolen by a fox and are rotting, half chewed in a bush somewhere?’

‘We can’t tell them.’

‘What will we do if they’ve already packed the grave by the time we’ve found them?’

Tom heard a creak at the top of the stairs.

Gerard peered out between the bannisters and listened to his parents’ muted argument. *I know that plastic bucket.* He could smell bitter smoke rising with the heat in his face, and he broke out into a cold sweat. *Why are they talking about a grave?*

Horried, he considered going straight to bed. *What did I do?*

His hand slid wetly across the banister and he descended the stairs.