

The Wake

By Donn Byrne

At times the muffled conversation in the kitchen resembled the resonant humming of bees, and again, when it became animated, it sounded like the distant cackling of geese. Then there would come a pause; and it would begin again with sibilant whispers, and end in a chorus of dry laughter that somehow suggested the crackling of burning logs.

Occasionally a figure would open the bedroom door, pass the old man as he sat huddled in his chair, never throwing a glance at him, and go and kneel by the side of the bed where the body was. They usually prayed for two or three minutes, then rose and walked on tiptoe to the kitchen, where they joined the company. Sometimes they came in twos, less often in threes, but they did precisely the same thing--prayed for precisely the same time, and left the room on tiptoe with the same creak of shoe and rustle of clothes that sounded so intensely loud throughout the room. They might have been following instructions laid down in a ritual.

The old man wished to heaven they would stay away. He had been sitting in his chair for hours, thinking, until his head was in a whirl. He wanted to concentrate his thoughts, but somehow he felt that the mourners were preventing him.

The five candles at the head of the bed distracted him. He was glad when the figure of one of the mourners shut off the glare for a few minutes. He was also distracted by the five chairs standing around the room like sentries on post and the little table by the window with its crucifix and holy-water font. He wanted to keep thinking of "herself," as he called her, lost in the immensity of the oaken bed. He had been looking at the pinched face with its faint suspicion of blue since early that morning. He was very much awed by the nun's hood that

concealed the back of the head, and the stiffly posed arms and the small hands in their white-cotton gloves moved him to a deep pity.

Somebody touched him on the shoulder. "Michael James."

It was big Dan Murray, a gaunt red farmer, who had been best man at his wedding.

"Michael James."

"What is it?"

"I hear young Kennedy's in the village."

"What of that?"

"I thought it was best for you to know."

Murray waited a moment, then he went out, on tiptoe, as everybody did, his movements resembling the stilted gestures of a mechanical toy.

Down the drive Michael heard steps coming. Then a struggle and a shrill giggle. Some young people were coming to the wake, and he knew a boy had tried to kiss a girl in the dark. He felt a dull surge of resentment.

She was nineteen when he married her; he was sixty-three. Because he had over two hundred acres of land and many head of milch and grazing cattle and a huge house that rambled like a barrack, her father had given her to him; and young Kennedy, who had been her father's steward for years, and had been saving to buy a house for her, was thrown over like a bale of mildewed hay.

Kennedy had made several violent scenes. Michael James remembered the morning of the wedding. Kennedy waylaid the bridal-party coming out of the church. He was drunk. "Mark me," he had said, very quietly for a drunken man--"mark me. If anything ever happens to that girl at your side, Michael James, I'll murder you. I'll murder you in cold blood. Do you understand?"

Michael James could be forgiving that morning. "Run away and sober up, lad," he had said, "and come up to the house and dance."

Kennedy had gone around the countryside for weeks, drunk every night, making threats against the old farmer. And then a wily sergeant of the Connaught Rangers had trapped him and taken him off to Aldershot.

Now he was home on furlough, and something had happened to her, and he was coming up to make good his threat.

What had happened to her? Michael James didn't understand. He had given her everything he could. She had taken it all with a demure thanks, but he had never had anything of her but apathy. She had gone around the house apathetically, growing a little thinner every day, and then a few days ago she had lain down, and last night she had died, apathetically.

And young Kennedy was coming up for an accounting to-night. "Well," thought Michael James, "let him come!"

Silence suddenly fell over the company in the kitchen. Then a loud scraping as they stood up, and a harsher grating as chairs were pushed back. The door of the bedroom opened and the red flare from the fire and lamps of the kitchen blended into the sickly yellow candle-light of the bedroom.

The parish priest walked in. His closely cropped white hair, strong, ruddy face, and erect back gave him more the appearance of a soldier than a clergyman. He looked at the bed a moment, and then at Michael James.

"Oh, you mustn't take it like that, man," he said. "You mustn't take it like that. You must bear up." He was the only one who spoke in his natural voice.

He turned to a lumbering farmer's wife who had followed him in, and asked about the hour of the funeral. She answered in a hoarse whisper, dropping a courtesy.

"You ought to go out and take a walk," he told Michael James. "You oughtn't to stay in here all the time." And he left the room.

Michael James paid no attention. His mind was wandering to strange fantasies he could not keep out of his head. Pictures crept in and out of his brain, joined as by some thin filament. He thought somehow of her soul, and then wondered what a soul was like. And then he thought of a dove, and then of a bat fluttering through the dark, and then of a bird lost at twilight. He thought of it as some lonely flying thing with a long journey before it and no place to rest. He could imagine it uttering the vibrant, plaintive cry of a peewit. And then it struck him with a great sense of pity that the night was cold.

In the kitchen they were having tea. The rattle of the crockery sounded very distinctly. He could distinguish the sharp, staccato ring when a cup was laid in a saucer, and the nervous rattle when cup and saucer were passed from one hand to the other. Spoons struck china with a faint metallic tinkle. He felt as if all the sounds were made at the back of his neck, and the crash seemed to burst in his head.

Dan Murray creaked into the room. "Michael James," he whispered, "you ought to take something. Have a bite to eat. Take a cup of tea. I'll bring it in to you."

"Oh, let me alone, Daniel," he answered. He felt he would like to kick him and curse him while doing so.

"You must take something." Murray's voice rose from a whisper to a low, argumentative sing-song. "You know it's not natural. You've got to eat."

"No, thank you, Daniel," he answered. It was as if he were talking to a boy who was good-natured but tiresome. "I don't feel like eating. Maybe afterward I will."

"Michael James," Murray continued.

"Well, what is it, Daniel?"

"Don't you think I'd better go down and see young Kennedy and tell him how foolish it would be of him to come up here and start fighting? You know it isn't right. Hadn't I better go down? He's at home now."

"Let that alone, Daniel, I tell you." The thought of Murray breaking into the matter that was between himself and the young man filled him with a sense of injured delicacy.

"I know he's going to make trouble."

"Let me handle that, like a good fellow, and leave me by myself, Daniel, if you don't mind."

"Ah well, sure. You know best." And Murray crept out of the room.

As the door opened Michael could hear some one singing in a subdued voice and many feet tapping like drums in time with the music. They had to pass the night outside, and it was the custom, but the singing irritated him. He could fancy heads nodding and bodies swaying from side to side with the rhythm. He recognized the tune, and it began to run through his head, and he could not put it out of it. The lilt of it captured him, and suddenly he began thinking of the wonderful brain that musicians must have to compose music. And then his thoughts switched to a picture he had seen of a man in a garret with a fiddle beneath his chin.

He straightened himself up a little, for sitting crouched forward as he was put a strain on his back, and he unconsciously sat upright to ease himself. And as he sat up he caught a glimpse of the cotton gloves on the bed, and it burst in on him that the first time he had seen her she was walking along the road with young Kennedy one Sunday afternoon, and they were holding hands. When they saw him they let go suddenly, and grew very red, giggling in a half-hearted way to hide their embarrassment. And he remembered that he had passed them by without saying anything, but with a good-humored, sly smile on his face, and a mellow feeling within him, and a sage reflection to himself that young folks will be young folks, and what harm was there in courting a little on a Sunday afternoon when the week's work had been done?

And he remembered other days on which he had met her and Kennedy; and then how the conviction had come into his mind that here was a girl for him to marry; and then how, quietly and equably, he had gone about getting her and marrying her, as he would go about buying a team of horses or make arrangements for cutting the hay.

Until the day he married her he felt as a driver feels who has his team under perfect control, and who knows every bend and curve of the road he is taking. But since that day he had been thinking about her and worrying and wondering exactly where he stood, until everything

in the day was just the puzzle of her, and he was like a driver with a restive pair of horses who knows his way no farther than the next bend. And then he knew she was the biggest thing in his life.

The situation as it appeared to him he had worked out with difficulty, for he was not a thinking man. What thinking he did dealt with the price of harvest machinery and the best time of the year for buying and selling. He worked it out this way: here was this girl dead, whom he had married, and who should have married another man, who was coming to-night to kill him. To-night sometime the world would stop for him. He felt no longer a personal entity--he was merely part of a situation. It was as if he were a piece in a chess problem--any moment the player might move and solve the play by taking a pawn.

Realities had taken on a dim, unearthly quality. Occasionally a sound from the kitchen would strike him like an unexpected note in a harmony; the whiteness of the bed would flash out like a piece of color in a subdued painting.

There was a shuffling in the kitchen and the sound of feet going toward the door. The latch lifted with a rasp. He could hear the hoarse, deep tones of a few boys, and the high-pitched sing-song intonations of girls. He knew they were going for a few miles' walk along the roads. He went over and raised the blind on the window. Overhead the moon showed like a spot of bright saffron. A sort of misty haze seemed to cling around the bushes and trees. The out-houses stood out white, like buildings in a mysterious city. Somewhere there was the metallic whir of a grasshopper, and in the distance a loon boomed again and again.

The little company passed down the yard. There was the sound of a smothered titter, then a playful resounding slap, and a gurgling laugh from one of the boys.

As he stood by the window he heard some one open the door and stand on the threshold.

"Are you coming, Alice?" some one asked.

Michael James listened for the answer. He was taking in eagerly all outside things. He wanted something to pass the time of waiting, as a traveler in a railway station reads trivial notices carefully while waiting for a train that may take him to the ends of the earth.

"Alice, are you coming?" was asked again.

There was no answer.

"Well, you needn't if you don't want to," he heard in an irritated tone, and the speaker tramped down toward the road in a dudgeon. He recognized the figure of Flanagan, the football-player, who was always having little spats with the girl he was going to marry. He discovered with a sort of shock that he was slightly amused at this incident.

From the road there came the shrill scream of one of the girls who had gone out, and then a chorus of laughter. And against the background of the figure behind him and of young Kennedy he began wondering at the relationship of man and woman. He had no word for it, for "love" was a term he thought should be confined to story-books, a word to be suspicious of as sounding affected, a word to be scoffed at. But of this relationship he had a vague understanding. He thought of it as a criss-cross of threads binding one person to the other, or as a web which might be light and easily broken, or which might have the strength of steel cables and which might work into knots here and there and become a tangle that could crush those caught in it.

It puzzled him how a thing of indefinable grace, of soft words on June nights, of vague stirrings under moonlight, of embarrassing hand-

clasps and fearful glances, might become, as it had become in the case of himself, Kennedy, and what was behind him, a thing of blind, malevolent force, a thing of sinister silence, a shadow that crushed.

And then it struck him with a sense of guilt that his mind was wandering from her, and he turned away from the window. He thought how much more peaceful it would be for a body to lie out in the moonlight than on a somber oak bedstead in a shadowy room with yellow, guttering candle-light and five solemn-looking chairs. And he thought again how strange it was that on a night like this Kennedy should come as an avenger seeking to kill rather than as a lover with high hope in his breast.

Murray slipped into the room again. There was a frown on his face and his tone was aggressive.

"I tell you, Michael James, we'll have to do something about it." There was a truculent note in his whisper.

The farmer did not answer.

"Will you let me go down for the police? A few words to the sergeant will keep him quiet."

Michael James felt a pity for Murray. The idea of pitting a sergeant of police against the tragedy that was coming seemed ludicrous to him. It was like pitting a school-boy against a hurricane.

"Listen to me, Dan," he replied. "How do you know Kennedy is coming up at all?"

"Flanagan, the football-player, met him and talked to him. He said that Kennedy was clean mad."

"Do they know about it in the kitchen?"

"Not a word." There was a pause.

"Well, listen here, now. Go right back there and don't say a word about it. Wouldn't it be foolish if you went down to the police and he didn't come at all? And if he does come I can manage him. And if I can't I'll call you. Does that satisfy you?" And he sent Murray out, grumbling.

As the door closed he felt that the last refuge had been abandoned. He was to wrestle with destiny alone. He had no doubt that Kennedy would make good his vow, and he felt a sort of curiosity as to how it would be done. Would it be with hands, or with a gun, or some other weapon? He hoped it would be the gun. The idea of coming to hand-grips with the boy filled him with a strange terror.

The thought that within ten minutes or a half-hour or an hour he would be dead did not come home to him. It was the physical act that frightened him. He felt as if he were terribly alone and a cold wind were blowing about him and penetrating every pore of his body. There was a contraction around his breast-bone and a shiver in his shoulders.

His idea of death was that he would pitch headlong, as from a high tower, into a bottomless dark space.

He went over to the window again and looked out toward the barn. From a chink in one of the shutters there was a thread of yellow candle-light. He knew there were men there playing cards to pass the time.

Then terror came on him. The noise in the kitchen was subdued. Most of the mourners had gone home, and those who were staying the night were drowsy and were dozing over the fire. He felt he wanted to rush among them and to cry to them to protect him, and to cower behind them and to close them around him in a solid circle. He felt that eyes

were upon him, looking at his back from the bed, and he was afraid to turn around because he might look into the eyes.

She had always respected him, he remembered, and he did not want to lose her respect now; and the fear that he would lose it set his shoulders back and steadied the grip of his feet on the floor.

And then there flashed before him the thought of people who kill, of lines of soldiery rushing on trenches, of a stealthy, cowering man who slips through a jail door at dawn, and of a figure he had read of in books--a sinister figure with an ax and a red cloak.

As he looked down the yard he saw a figure turn in the gate and come toward the house. It seemed to walk slowly and heavily, as if tired. He knew it was Kennedy. He opened the kitchen door and slipped outside.

The figure coming up the pathway seemed to swim toward him. Then it would blur and disappear and then appear again vaguely. The beating of his heart was like the regular sound of a ticking clock. Space narrowed until he felt he could not breathe. He went forward a few paces. The light from the bedroom window streamed forward in a broad, yellow beam. He stepped into it as into a river.

"She's dead," he heard himself saying. "She's dead." And then he knew that Kennedy was standing in front of him.

The flap of the boy's hat threw a heavy shadow over his face, his shoulders were braced, and his right hand, the farmer could see, was thrust deeply into his coat pocket.

"Aye, she's dead," Michael James repeated. "You knew that, didn't you?" It was all he could think of saying. "You'll come in and see her, won't you?" He had forgotten what Kennedy had come for. He was dazed. He didn't know what to say.

Kennedy moved a little. The light from the window struck him full in the face, and Michael James realized with a shock that it was as grim and thin-lipped as he had pictured it. A prayer rose in his throat, and then fear seemed to leave him all at once. He raised his head. The right hand had left the pocket now. And then suddenly he saw that Kennedy was looking into the room, and he knew he could see, through the little panes of glass, the huge bedstead and the body on it. And he felt a desire to throw himself between Kennedy and it, as he might jump between a child and a threatening danger.

He turned away his head, instinctively--why, he could not understand, but he felt that he should not look at Kennedy's face.

Over in the barn voices rose suddenly. They were disputing over the cards. There was some one complaining feverishly and some one arguing truculently, and another voice striving to make peace. They died away in a dull hum, and Michael James heard the boy sobbing.

"You mustn't do that," he said. "You mustn't do that." And he patted him on the shoulders. He felt as if something unspeakably tense had relaxed and as if life were swinging back into balance. His voice shook and he continued patting. "You'll come in now, and I'll leave you alone there." He took him under the arm.

He felt the pity he had for the body on the bed envelop Kennedy, too, and a sense of peace came over him. It was as though a son of his had been hurt and had come to him for comfort, and he was going to comfort him. In some vague way he thought of Easter-time.

He stopped at the door for a moment.

"It's all right, laddie," he said. "It's all right," and he lifted the latch.

As they went in he felt somehow as if high walls had crumbled and the three of them had stepped into the light of day.