

The VISIT

I.

We were two men and two women from the parish
Asked by the pastor to visit
The homes of our people most affected
By the horror.
We decided that the Dunne family
Would be our first call, and so
We headed to the little house on the side street
To assist (we hoped) in the grieving process.

There was much uncertainty:
None of us had done this before.
But, like so many of our countrymen,
We wanted to help; we were just not too sure
Of ourselves, of what we could possibly do
To make sense of any of it
To ourselves or to others.

An hour or so with Father in the rectory basement
And prayers for the guidance of the Holy Spirit
Seemed (with all due respect) hardly enough
To prepare us for our roles as comforters.
Finally we decided to leave everything
In God's hands, and we set off
To visit the Dunnes.

Jerry had been a fireman; he and Marie
Had been married in the parish eighteen years before.
Most of us knew them:
Jerry, big, strong, confident,
Quarterback for Saint Francis Prep,
Always pleasant, always willing to help,
Son and grandson of firemen;
Marie a pretty dark-haired girl from Long Island,
Quiet but determined,
Who had been teaching first grade when she met him.

When she answered the door that morning
The pain in her eyes hit us like a solid thing;
Unconsciously we backed away a few steps.

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We explained why we had come
And she let us in.
There were three children home that Saturday morning
Two smaller ones clung to their mother's skirt
And one - a teenaged daughter - ran upstairs
And slammed a door as we entered.

We said things suggested by the pastor
And things we had remembered saying before
In similar circumstances. We doubted to ourselves
That she heard any of them.

Over the mantel was a sort of shrine to Jerry
A picture of him in his new lieutenant's uniform,
Smiling and proud of his promotion.
Candles stood before the picture, and on either side
Statues of the Blessed Mother and Saint Francis.
There were flowers too, and cards Some
had fallen to the floor at some point
And remained there.

We offered to pray with her
But she declined
And we didn't press the point.
We talked about what might happen next.

No, she didn't need anything; her two brothers
One a lawyer, one a fireman upstate,
Were a big help in taking care of the details.
Jerry's sister was enroute
To take the kids for the weekend.

Her oldest daughter (she glanced upstairs)
Had been her father's favorite; the loss
Was very hard on her ...

Would anyone like coffee?
No trouble; she had a fresh pot on.
Maybe some cookies too?
Chocolate chip - Jerry's favorite.

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II.

**On the mantelpiece, almost hidden
By the flowers and cards and candles
Dan Moore noticed a concertina.**

- Is that Jerry's concertina?

He asked to fill a silence.

I didn't know he played. I play a bit myself.

- He didn't, said Mrs. Dunne. That was his grandfather's

That Jerry found in the attic of his parents' house

After his mom passed away a few years back.

His mother's dad came from Ireland

And Jerry remembered - after all these years -

That Granda had been a musician

Who loved to play for all the children.

Anyway I guess it's still playable

And Jerry talked about taking lessons

And learning to play it himself ...

I believe he brought it down to the firehouse

One Saint Patrick's day a year or so ago

More or less as a joke;

He could make a few noises on it

But couldn't really play anything.

But one of the other men in the house

Was from Ireland, near where Granda had come from,

He managed to get a few tunes out of it

And Jerry was very impressed.

"I've got to learn how to play that thing!"

He told me more than once;

And - funny now that I think about it -

He really seemed to be making a big deal out of it

In recent weeks, before ...

She closed her eyes and lowered her head;

There were seconds of silence

That might have been hours.

... It was if he knew or suspected, she whispered.

He was still young, only thirty-six

In perfect health ... why would he worry

About not having enough time?

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She spoke in a voice that told us
She had never asked that question before.

She rose slowly, attended by the two young ones
(Who had never left her side
Or spoken or smiled, only stared at us
All the time we were there)
And went to the mantelpiece
To look more closely at the concertina
Perhaps to question it:
How much did it know
About what had happened?
Why did God decide
That Jerry would never learn to play it?
Why did God decide
That she was better off
As the widow of a hero
With three orphaned children?

... As well to ask a box of wood and metal
As to ask the four uncertain visitors
Sent by God's own priest
Who had no answers himself.

She made a curious threatening gesture
In the direction of the mute concertina
I thought for a moment
That she would knock it crashing to the floor,
To destroy it, a vessel too full
Of memories and doubts and questions
About her late husband.

Then one of the little ones spoke.

*- Mama, I want to play that.
One time I told Daddy I wanted to
And Daddy said he would teach me
After he had a few lessons.
Can I play it, Mama?
We smiled at the child's enthusiasm.*

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- *May I?* Dan Moore asked, and Mrs. Dunne nodded.

**He reached for the concertina
And made some preliminary sounds;
It seemed to be in good working order,
Just a bit wheezy from not having been played.
The child looked from Dan to the concertina
With wide wondering eyes
As he managed to squeeze out
A few notes of a tune.**

**One or two of the buttons were stuck
So it wasn't perfect, but to our surprise
The other silent youngster clapped.**

**- *That was great, she said. I loved it.*
*Can you teach Deedee how to do that?***

**Dan, grandfather of eight himself, started to reply
But recalled, as he said later,
How careful he had to be
In this house at this time.**

**Mrs. Dunne was looking at him
Softness in her eyes:
This was what Jerry would have wanted
If he wasn't allowed
The time to learn himself.**

**- *If it's okay with your Mom,* Dan said,
Knowing somehow that it would be.
He waited for Mrs. Dunne to say something;
When she didn't, he asked:**

**- *Can she start after school next Tuesday?*
Deedee's face shone like a candle. - *Can I, Mama? Please?***

**Mrs. Dunne said that would be fine.
The other sister, delighted,
Jumped up and ran across the room
To hug each of us.**

**- *Daddy said Deedee could take lessons someday,* she reminded us,
And now she can,
*So Daddy will be happy.***

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Mrs. Dunne smiled through tears
And asked if anyone wanted more coffee.

III.

... And when we left shortly thereafter
We were still unsure
What purpose we had served,
What if anything we had achieved,
What we could report to Father:
Coffee and cookies and words
Well-meant but without effect ...
... but then the hug of the silent sister:
We would ask:

*Is there a balance here, Father?
Is any kind of balance possible?*

We were ashamed. We admitted to one another:
We have shared little of ourselves
With this grieving family
But a nervous offer of music
And our clumsy transparent efforts
To hide our discomfort, as if
What we were doing this day
Was all about us.

It was raining now. In silence
We got back into the car
And drove to the next house on the list.

- *September 2001*