

The Woman from County Meath

The warmth of the Dublin day caught everyone by surprise. Through the window I could see children playing in the garden. We had walked into the visitors' room. The family was waiting. They were from County Meath. He was a farmer only fifty-four years old, she a teacher. They had seven children. It was clear that he was dying. He had battled seemingly intractable pain, but now over the past few days was much more settled.

I spoke about these days and what to expect from this point onwards. I then concentrated on the family themselves and recommended, as we do, the usual things – that they each take turns in being with him, that they try to eat and sleep, that they talk to each other; in short, that they try to look after themselves through this vigil. I turned to the patient's wife and said: "I know you've been here all the time. It might be good to go and have a rest, even just for a little while."

There was a long silence. She looked at me as though down a passage. She turned her head to one side, looked out the window, then towards me again and said: "No, I will not be leaving him."

She spoke tenderly of their first meeting at age seventeen, of their courting and their wedding day, of their marriage and the birth of their children. She spoke in soft beautiful phrases, then sentences that began plainly, but became brilliant, each seemingly more evocative than the last. And with every memory of their life together, each reflection, she would end by saying: "No, I will not be leaving him" until that phrase repeated became the tolling of a distant bell. And then she said something that I have never heard expressed in the same way before. She said that from their wedding day they were united; that they were, as the prayer states, one body and that as he had fallen ill so had she, that as he was buffeted by the storms of pain, so was she, that as he was suffering, so was she, and that as he lay dying so was she. No James Joyce, no Oscar Wilde, no Samuel Beckett could have put it so powerfully. As Angela Murphy, the palliative care nurse with me in the room that day, said later: "She was saying what *he* was feeling."

In many ways, of course, she wasn't talking to us. She was speaking across the vast sea of their lives. I had spoken at a practical level about rest. The response I received was from a person adrift on that sea, not wanting to leave or soften the fate. Too often, as doctors, we speak practically and are heard emotionally. And perhaps that is our role.

Angela and I left the room and walked back on to the ward. We were both too moved to say much. Later that day Angela rang me and said: "Frank, we may never hear the like of that again." When I returned to Australia, I was asked to present some memories from

Ireland. I contacted Angela. Without prompting, she said: “Of course, you’ll talk about the woman from Meath.”

And in distant years if I ever were to encounter Angela Murphy again walking down O’Connell Street in Dublin, or perhaps George Street in Sydney, we would stop and no doubt remember the woman from Meath who spoke to us of a love that was boundless, a union that was indissoluble and who gave us a momentary glimpse into the mystery at the heart of it all.

Reflection taken from ‘Standing on the Platform’ – Stories and Reflections from Palliative Care

Frank Brennan, Palliative Care Physician, Calvary Health Care Sydney

Book can be purchased from Calvary Health Care Sydney - \$20