

AMERICAN WAKE

It was countdown time now. Where had the weeks gone? Those first warm, amniotic nights sittin' at home with the Mother, the gray in her hair caught in the light of the coal fire and always the softness in her eyes for the stray who had finally come home. And what could compare with those first delirious reunions in the pub with your old mates, or the slow grinds with a new generation of young ones at the discos?

In the second week, the euphoria waned and you remembered your mission. Jesus Christ, you'd think, in a town this size, you'd run into her somewhere. And every night it got worse. No more discos now. Just long, solitary walks and every footstep a memory. Was there a street we hadn't walked down hand in hand, or a doorway we hadn't courted in? Of all people, I never thought she'd marry him—dependable as the day is long, with about as much spark as a wet Monday. I had to see her.

Then the Mother casually mentioned that he still attended 11 o'clock Mass on Sundays. And there I was on my knees with the rest of them, missin' the incense, the Latin and the boy who once utterly believed in all the mumbo jumbo.

On the way out, I caught a glimpse of her back. I'd recognize it anywhere, though her hair was much shorter. He had filled out, his neck now thick and bullish. I tried to sneak past but the priest called out: "Is that you, Seán?". The crowd parted and there she was, holding firmly onto two children.

I'd always imagined that the girl would look like her. But no, she was flat and uninteresting like her father. The boy, though, had his mother's violet eyes and the perfect shape of her face. Her husband dropped her elbow and thrust out his hand, "I'd heard you were home, Seán, you never called." I muttered some banality and turned to her. "I'm sure he's too busy for us now," she stated calmly.

She hadn't changed much, just a little older but it suited her. She stared at me unflinchingly. Then the boy dropped his coloring book. As she rose from picking it up, our eyes met and, for a moment, she was herself again. Then she was gone, in a flurry of embarrassed good-byes, off home to cook the Sunday dinner.

"I suppose you'll be havin' the wake tonight, Seán?" The priest diplomatically broke the silence, as I counted the hours 'til the flight from Shannon.