

THE INTERRUPTED WAKE OF AILEEN MAHONEY

by Mimi Leabhey Nangle

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It was Aileen's turn to die, and she was looking forward to it.

She stretched out her eleven-year-old body on the slipcovered couch, threaded a silver rosary through her fingers and closed her eyes. As she assumed a beatific expression, the other children bustled about, finishing the "necessary arrangements."

Aileen's older brother, Frankie, carried the silver candlesticks from the dining room and placed them on the piano. His best friend, Richard, lit the tapers, and sulfur mixed with the scent of peonies and roses. Aileen and eight-year-old Maureen had draped the flowers along the sofa's back in an attempt to make it resemble an open casket lid. Kathy and Danny, aged six and five, were lining up chairs to offer a direct view of the deceased.

Richard and Frankie, both seasoned altar boys, had assembled the communion offering under a linen napkin. Necco candy wafers were stand-ins for the host, while apple juice and water waited in cruets ready to become consecrated wine. Only a boy could act as the priest, so Frankie handled the official rites unless he was taking his turn as the body.

"I've got the mantillas," Maureen announced, holding up the black lace veils. She draped one over her long red braid and then another over Kathy's halo of golden curls. They didn't fuss about costumes. Aileen didn't feel her messy blonde ponytail, green shorts, watermelon print blouse, or red sneakers detracted from the solemnity of the occasion.

"No noise," Frankie whispered as he pointed to baby Colleen, who had just fallen asleep in her walker.

Lying still, pretending to be a corpse, Aileen wasn't concerned about eternity; she was curious about what would happen immediately after her last breath. She imagined floating through the house, a spiritual spy,

able to read minds and uncover secrets...like who was stealing quarters from her bank.

Why were they taking so long?

Colleen's nap would be over soon and Aileen would have to fix a bottle and do a diaper change. Then Danny would want a snack, and by the time that was handled, they would have to put everything away. But for now, only an occasional barking dog, the buzz of a lawnmower and the whirr of an electric fan punctuated the stillness.

Aileen hoped her departure would inspire a deathbed scene like the one in *Little Women*. Her father and her grandmothers would certainly cry, but what about her mother? Aileen couldn't remember ever seeing her mother in tears, not even when her little brother Teddy died. Every once in a while, Aileen would see her mother staring into space, her whole body shivering, but Mary claimed she had done that since she was a little girl. The quivering was simply a habit, like biting nails. It wasn't "death related."

Aileen wasn't sure why, but she felt almost everything *was* death related; in the Mahoney house, death days were just as important as birthdays.

"We should set aside some time to think about the people we miss," Mary explained when Aileen grumbled about attending mass on her Great Aunt Rose's anniversary. It fell on a Saturday, so they would have to go to church all over again the next day. But, as her mother said, if Aunt Rose's own people didn't offer their communion for her, who would? It was what families did, though some of the relatives Aileen was supposed to remember were people she had never met, like her grandfather who died when her mother was eight.

But dead relatives provided unexpected perks. If your loved ones were especially good, or especially young when they died (like her brother Ted), they could pull you right into heaven. Even Catholics who practiced their faith and did good works had to endure a stopover in purgatory before they got to heaven. Unless a soul went straight to hell, or belonged to a true saint, it had to linger for thousands of years until it got enough prayers to be promoted. Nuns and priests could hurry the process, so having "the religious" in your clan was essential. Luckily, the Mahoneys had Jesuits and Carmelites and Sisters of the Sacred Heart on all sides of the family, and they could ask Jesus for favors.

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The Mahoneys lived in a rambling Victorian that sat on the western shore of the Hudson where boats or ice floes passed en route to Manhattan. On clear winter nights, the skyline could outshine the stars. Frankie and Richard planned to sail to the city at the end of the summer, but Mary had found the beginnings of their homemade raft, so now the kids were confined to the house.

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Aileen's leg itched, but she remained motionless. If she twitched, she'd forfeit her turn. Although her mother didn't mind when they put on plays or acted out Bible stories, Mary hadn't witnessed their version of an Irish wake, and Frankie thought it should stay that way. It had been three weeks since they had played funeral, and it might be months before she got another chance to be the body.

At thirteen, Frankie had already managed to escape death more than once and had developed a perspective about the fragility of life. Two tall green oxygen tanks lived next to his bed, and the mask that hung from them was often strapped around his nose and mouth as he wheezed and struggled for breath. Not only was he a keen observer and a delightful mimic, his photographic memory retained whatever he read or saw in detail -- including the stats of all the baseball players in all the leagues since their inception. Frankie belonged in a university, but attended St. Monica's Parochial School and educated himself by devouring books.

"Put Papa's crucifix on the piano," Frankie told Danny.

"And pull down the shades," Richard added.

Many of the details of the game had been added thanks to Richard's expertise. The son of the town's compassionate funeral director, Richard took pride in his own intimate knowledge of the dead, even as flirtatious girls chased after him and called him "dreamy." It was much more satisfying to regale the Mahoneys with stories about his father moving bodies from the hearse to the downstairs mortuary where they were embalmed.

All the Mahoneys respected Richard's know-how. When their beloved Mama Cat passed away, he found a discarded wooden fruit crate to serve as her casket. After Aileen lined it with towels and a silk scarf, Richard tenderly placed the cat inside, and showed the box to Mary who thanked him for his efforts.

"It's a lovely resting place," he assured Mrs. Mahoney as he ran his hands along the wooden slates. "Notice the grain."

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Aileen and Frank Jr. had been accompanying their mother to wakes for years. Dressed in their Sunday clothes, they would endure the drive to Long Island or Connecticut and enter the hushed, carpeted world of a funeral parlor where a dead relative was on display. The children were expected to kneel alongside the open casket and say a prayer, and they became familiar with details like makeup and floral arrangements. They learned to sit quietly during the procession of cars to the church, through the mass with incense, and through another ride to the cemetery. Once the coffin was lowered, they went to a different relative's house for lemonade, cake, and stories about the deceased. Aileen and Frankie Jr. heard the same phrases over and over, memorized them, and taught the younger children the language of mourning.

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"Would you like to see your loved one?"

"Please," Maureen answered quickly. Since she was next in line to play dead, she was on the lookout for any movement that might end Aileen's turn.

"I hope she didn't suffer," Kathy sniffed.

"If she did, it's over," Frankie said, making the sign of the cross over the body. "*In nómine Patris et Fílii et Spíritus Sancti.*"

"Amen," Kathy, Danny and Maureen answered.

"Was there any warning?" Richard continued.

"None. No one expected this," Frankie added solemnly. Then he nudged Danny.

"She looks good." Danny patted Aileen's hand.

"Not her hair," Kathleen said. She was a year older and felt entitled to correct him.

"It's hard when the mortician has to work from a photograph..." Aileen was tempted to smile. She checked that impulse.

Maureen took a tissue and dabbed her nose. "Poor Aileen," she whispered. "She had her whole life ahead of her."

"It's always hardest when God takes one of His little angels home," Frank murmured.

They stared at Aileen. Nothing. Not even a smile.

"When it's my turn, I want to wear my First Communion dress and the veil," Kathy decided.

"What are you talking about?" Maureen snapped. "You haven't even made your First Communion."

"But Mom said I'm getting your dress!" Kathleen understood hand-me-downs were her life.

"You can't use my dress until you receive," Maureen continued. "It would be a sin or something."

"What kind of sin?"

Unsure, they looked to Frankie. Maureen was just finishing third grade and they hadn't covered the deadly sins yet.

"Vanity," Frank said simply. "Come on. No bickering."

"It's good Aileen was wearing her miraculous medal when she died," Maureen observed. "It means she'll go right to heaven."

Missing her chance to float around uncovering secrets annoyed Aileen. She felt her lips tighten.

"She moved her mouth!" Maureen announced.

Aileen immediately froze.

"I didn't see anything," Richard countered.

"Neither did I," Frankie agreed.

"You always take her side," Maureen pouted. "If I smiled, you'd disqualify me!"

"It's not unusual for those left behind to imagine signs of life," Richard pointed out.

"I didn't imagine it! She lost!" Maureen was incensed. "It's not fair."

"No one ever said death is fair," Frank intoned, as he got things back on track. "We must learn to accept God's will. To find meaning in the things that test our faith."

"Ah-men," Richard added. "And wearing a miraculous medal doesn't guarantee salvation. It means when you're dying, a priest will be at your side."

"Even if you're in Africa or some place full of pagans?" Maureen was trying not to panic as she touched the medal that hung around her own neck.

“He’ll find you,” Richard promised. “But you would still have to confess and repent and all that.”

“But you’re safe, right? From hell, I mean.”

“Sure,” Frankie said. “As long as no savage kills and eats your priest before you get his blessing.”

“That’s a horrible thing to say,” Maureen pouted. “You’re so mean!”

“Aileen let me eat her Halloween candy,” Kathy reflected.

“And she made the best BLTs,” Danny added, starting to feel sad.

“Remember when Aileen was sick and we sat on her bed and she went over all the meals your mom cooks?” Richard asked.

“Boiled tongue, boiled potatoes, boiled cabbage, boiled beets and tapioca pudding,” Frankie gagged. “That was my favorite. Not the dinner, the description... all the different juices oozing together..”

Kathleen was holding her nose.

“Why does your mother cook that stuff?” Richard asked. His family ate normal American food like hamburgers and French fries.

“The old people like it,” Frankie reasoned.

If Aileen had been allowed to talk, she would have explained that cooking day after day for ten people was a chore that did not inspire Mary. Her technique was simple: boil or roast everything until it was mushy and stopped changing color, then add butter.

“The worst is fish,” Maureen said, wanting to be part of the discussion again. “I hate it. And we always have those shriveled baked potatoes. The ones Aileen said look like shrunken heads.”

“Hey!” Frankie admonished. “There are people who’d give their right arm for a meal like that.”

“And one of those savages would take it!” Richard said. Then they all laughed, all but Aileen. She was drifting again, trying to remember the faces of everyone she knew who had already gone to heaven.

Her mother insisted heaven was like a huge family reunion where everyone was young and healthy, which really made no sense. When Aileen asked how young was young, her mother said young was around twenty. Twenty?! That’s how old her mother was when she got married.

There were supposed to be no problems in heaven, but Aileen couldn’t see how that was possible. If everyone were twenty, how would Aileen recognize Aunt Rose who was seventy seven when she died, or her brother Ted who was only two? Or Poppa Ted, who lived with them

and died the same day as Young Ted. Poppa Ted was practically one hundred. What about Tommy Gallagher, who fell through the ice and drowned in the river on the way home from Boy Scouts? He was buried in Frankie's uniform because he didn't have one of his own. Aileen had to wonder if Tommy would still be wearing the uniform, and even if he was, if he'd be at a different reunion.

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"Are we going to say the rosary, or can we skip it?" Maureen asked.

"Colleen's got a load in her pants," Frankie announced, "We have to wrap this up."

Already? Aileen thought. They hadn't even gotten to the communion.

"Eternal rest grant unto them, O Lord," Frankie intoned as Aileen savored the final moments of her repose. "And let perpetual light shine upon them..."

"It's okay, Cols," Maureen whispered as she lifted the baby out of the walker and plopped her on Aileen's stomach.

"May her soul, and the souls of all the faithfully departed, rest in peace."

"Amen."

Aileen hugged Colleen and got up to change the soggy diaper, leaving her thoughts of death and immortality on hold. Without missing a beat, Maureen flopped onto the empty couch, twisted the rosary around her fist, and tried to look lifeless.

"I'm dead," Maureen murmured. "Talk about me."