

Hope and Comfort (Short story)

By A. J. McKenna

A J McKenna is a pseudonym of David Donovan who has had stories published in UK and Irish magazines. Married and living in Surrey he also writes novels and screenplays.

Setting : Mater Misericordia Hospital

Characters:

Charley Foley: Central character of the story, visits his wife in hospital

Dolly: wife

Linda : their eldest, teaches in a university in Galway.

Colm: Their son, and his children live in Australia. Colm hasn't been told that his mother is unwell.

Katherine: Charley's new girl friend

Plot:

Charley Foley, the central character of the story, visits his wife Dolly in hospital. She has been hospitalized for several days. No relatives, except Charley's brief visits, go to the hospital to see her. Her son and daughter have not been informed of her illness. Dolly is more worried about her husband and children than about herself. Charley's appearance in hospital does not show he really loves his wife. He appears to be in a hurry as he was busy with some other more urgent business. At the end of the story it is revealed that Charley is engaged with a woman called Katherine.

The following events and conversations in the story show Charley's relationship with his sick and weak wife who needs a lot of sharing and caring. Instead of offering nourishing food as well as hope and comfort to Dolly, Charley is having romantic affair with Katherine.

Charley gazes dreamily across the chattering hospital ward, bright with pale afternoon sunlight. Other visitors are doing their duties, gathering around the sick, bringing flowers and fruit, offering words of hope and comfort.

'Have you seen the doctor again?' Charley asks his wife.

'Tomorrow maybe.'

'Any idea how long they'll keep you in?'

Dolly turns away and coughs into a tissue, then settles back. She takes Charley's hand again.

'They'll let me know on Monday. They have to do lots more tests. They won't let me home until they know. I'm sorry to be such a bother.'

Sweet Dolores Delarosa he used to call her long ago when they were courting. Dolly opens her eyes, smiles like a child. It's been a long time since Dolly was a child.

'You look tired, darling,' she says. 'Aren't you sleeping?'

'I was a bit restless last night.'

'Try to take things easy.'

Dolly squeezes her husband's hand, presses her ringed finger against his gold wedding ring. Her fingers are light as feathers.

'Off you go, darling,' she says. 'Try to not worry.'

Charley bends and kisses Dolly's hot forehead.

'I'll see you tomorrow,' he says.

Dolly's eyes close. Her fingers slip from his.

Tic-tic-tic-tic-tic.

Charley walks along a polished corridor and finds the exit. Outside in the bright car park he locates his car and sits inside. He glances around at the visitors coming

and going. Nurses walk past, reminding him of butterflies. Charley reaches for his mobile phone and taps in a number. The call is answered almost immediately.

'Katherine?' he says.

'Where are you? I've been waiting ages for you to call.'

'I'm outside the hospital. I've just been in to see her.'

'How is she?'

'All right. As well as can be expected, I suppose. Who really knows?'

Charley pulls down the sunshade to protect his eyes from the blinding brightness, then returns his attention to his new friend, Katherine.

'She'll be in for a while longer.'

'Will I see you later?' Katherine asks.

'I expect so.'

'Stay tonight,' she offers. 'If you like.'

Charley thinks of his own empty house, the quietness without Dolly and the dreadful silences she left behind.

'I'd like that, darling,' he says.

'Come now,' Katherine whispers with a smile in her lovely voice. 'I'll cheer you up.'

Charley says goodbye and puts the phone away. He smiles properly for the first time that day. He starts the engine and as he drives away Charley glances through the rear view mirror and sees the grey hospital building receding like a prison.

God help me, he thinks. *God help us all.*

