" 'There hadn't been a proper funeral, and he hadn't been at it': The Liminal Space of Covid19 Lockdown in Roddy Doyle's *Life Without Children*" (2021)

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Roddy Doyle's *Life Without Children* (2021) is a collection of short stories, all set during the Covid 19 lockdown. In an interview at Dublin Book Festival 2022, Doyle confirmed that the inspiration behind his collection of short stories was the idea of "using the feeling, using the anxiety, using the observations" that he experienced and witnessed during the lockdown period (Doyle, 2021). Each story features recurring themes of the trappings associated with Covid restrictions: the discarded face masks littering the streets of Dublin, the new daily rituals of walking within the recommended two, five and then ten kilometres from one's home, the adult children who have returned home to cocoon in the bubble of their parents' homes and the realities of hospital staff witnessing their first Covid death. Life, as we had known it, had changed and Doyle, rather than ignore the "new normal", based his stories on how these changes were affecting us.

Ireland has distinct cultural traditions and rituals that are ingrained in our history and none more so than the ones surrounding grief and funerals. Nina Witoszec claims that the Irish funeral tradition: "derives from a persistent, centuries-old preoccupation with death" and is a "hallmark of the Irish ness of Irish culture" (Witoszec, 1987, 207). The funerals of Ireland are a major social and cultural event which result in respite from normative behaviour, bringing mourners together in the confines of a family home, a funeral parlour or hospital. This results in a blending of past and present; an opportunity to gather memories of one person's life, in the presence of people who are there to show their respect for the deceased. The arrival of Covid19 had a massive impact on the funerary traditions of Ireland and the lack of a wake or a proper funeral added considerably to the distress of the bereaved. Government guidelines initially saw restrictions which forbade more than ten mourners at a funeral and so the wake was an impossible event (Power, 2021) Dr Vincent McDarby suggests that Irish culture has always placed a large emphasis on our funeral traditions:

> People will drive two or three hours across the country, even just to shake hands for two seconds and say "sorry for your loss" […] It's one thing we do well in Ireland, we support people in the times of bereavement...When that stopped it was a huge issue (McDarby in Power, 2021).

Irish funerals carry their own specific traditions and, despite a move toward a more secular society, funeral traditions remain largely the same: A wake, a removal, a mass, a burial, a post-funeral gathering and often the month's mind (remembrance mass). Each of these rituals brings its own traditions and each carries the mourners through phases of liminality. According to Clare: "One of the more attractive aspects of life in Ireland is how as a culture we accept and acknowledge death" (Clare in Keane, 1995, 15); while Kilroy suggests that: "[t]he funeral has always been a central social ritual in Irish society, outranking even marriage and baptism as a community rite" (Kilroy, 2000). Professor Anthony Clare believes that Ireland has a distinctive approach to death, one which has "resisted trends elsewhere" and still clings to the traditions and rituals of our past, forgoing the "bland, hygienic and speedy affairs" associated with funerals abroad (Clare in Keane, 1995, 15).

Undertaker Gus Nichols suggests that the Irish funeral "goes some small way towards illustrating the Irish psyche" and that while the "mechanics" of the funeral may be changing, the "essence of our rituals do remain" (Nichols, 2016, 212). There is still a communal desire to

rush to the wake, reunite with old acquaintances or long-lost family members, "show your face" to the chief mourners and participate in a ceremony of farewell. Nichols suggests that the Irish funeral is similar to a wedding, in its uniqueness: "you will never have the same collection of people gathered under one roof again" and is often a time of dispute, drama and reconciliation. (Nichols, 2016, 215).

Already, we see funerals during the Covid 19 lockdowns featuring in Irish Literature and in *Life Without Children* (2021) the story "The Funerals" introduces Bob, who has recently lost his mother. He lies awake and seems to be struggling with the fact that he was forbidden to attend her (restricted-attendance) funeral. The day is not yet over and he is stuck in a liminal space: "His mother was dead. It wasn't a new day yet. He was stuck in her death" (Doyle, 2021, 118). The change in the rituals surrounding the funeral had begun when Bob received a call from his brother:

- Mam died. Last night.
- Last night?
- Yeah.
- You're telling me now?
- I'm doing up a list of people who can attend the funeral. We're limited to ten.
- When's the funeral?
- I'll text you.
  He knew he wouldn't be going […] There'd be ten names ahead of him. His sisters, some grandkids, the surviving uncle (Doyle, 2021, 126).

Doyle has tapped into the overall sadness surrounding the loss of the traditional Irish funeral, in unprecedented circumstances. Bob ponders how the restrictions are against the cultural grain: "The Irish do funerals well, they say. Death doesn't frighten the Irish" (Doyle, 2021, 115).

Doyle has confirmed that the story "Nurse" was directly inspired by the 2020 RTÉ Investigates documentary "Inside Ireland's Covid Battle", where a nurse described the distinctive sound of a body bag being zipped up over the corpse of a patient who had died as a result of Covid19. He began the story by imagining: "how that's what she'd be hearing when she closed her eyes that night" (RTÉ Radio, 2021). The documentary was aired in June 2020 and highlighted the realities which faced frontline workers in St. James's Hospital, Dublin and offered a brief glimpse into the changes surrounding death and grief in Ireland during the pandemic. With no visitors permitted in the ICU department, many patients died alone and were not afforded the traditional wake or funeral. Instead their remains were placed in two body bags before being placed in a closed coffin, which could not be opened: "No wakes…no open coffins. Sisters and Brothers not being able to hug each other in their time of grief" (RTÉ, 2021, 16.00). Neuroscientist and psychologist, Mary-Francis O'Connor, believes these circumstances are similar to the "ambiguous loss" that one feels when a loved one has disappeared during a political campaign or is missing and presumed dead following a tragedy:

> [This] complicates the grieving process. One reason may be that part of our brain is wired to believe that our loved one is never really gone, and without the overwhelming evidence from our memories of their decline or death, rewiring our understanding may take longer or cause greater distress (O'Connor, 2022, 53).

An example of O'Connor's theory can be seen in the RTÉ documentary, when recently widowed Maura Byrne reveals her struggle to grieve her husband, Stephen. After contracting Covid in a nursing home, Stephen was removed to St James's hospital. During the enforced

separation of the couple, Stephen died. Maura was not permitted to attend his funeral, as she had also contracted Covid. This fact, more than any other, appears to have hurt the deepest:

> A very nice nurse sat beside me and showed me his funeral on her phone. Now, she couldn't have been nicer, but she wasn't mine. She wasn't one of my family. And that's where the heartbreak comes in. [After seventy years of marriage] and they're buried and you don't know anything about it…So to me, he vanished. It's a most peculiar feeling, that you're left, you've nothing. I hope when I get out, that talking to my children, and getting the feeling of the funeral, so I'm hoping if I get talking to them I'll feel more of an end. But at the moment he's out there somewhere. And that's an awful way (RTÉ, 2020, 30.30).

As we move toward a return to "normal", with unrestricted attendance at gatherings and ceremonies, we can once again practice the traditions and rituals of the wake and funeral. The opportunity to celebrate the lives of the ones who have passed has been reinstated and mourners may now share in the grief of the bereaved, while telling them they are sorry for their troubles. The liminal space is now re-instated as an area afforded to those who are grieving.

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