

The Happy Eulogy

Easter afternoon, Flynn gazed out the window of his grandfather's Rolls Royce 20, watching the farm country of his childhood flash in and out of view. Old memories resurrected in his mind. For the entire ride from the train station, the chauffeur said nothing as the car chugged down a country lane. The lane merged into a private driveway. Ahead of them the lane hardened into fine, white gravel, escorted on either side by a strict regiment of well-pruned sugar maples, which stretched in perfect parallel lines to a white mansion. The voluminous old structure might once have housed a small New York battalion of Union soldiers, or perhaps an Irish Catholic family. However, since 1952, when Flynn had refused to live under the same roof as his father, only he and his grandparents had lived there. Of course, Flynn was at university now. He tried not to think about how lonely his grandmother would be.

“Welcome to MacArthur Estates,” he said to his friend and protégé, seated beside him.

Dillon Tilton drooled as he considered the wealthy property. “You grew up here?”

“Grew up? Are you accusing me of adulthood?”

The chauffeur parked and let the two young men out. Flynn dismissed the chauffeur and he and Dillon marched up the walkway to the front door.

“Check the artillery, Dill.”

Flynn made a quick scan of his attire—stark black tux, silk cummerbund, polished cufflinks, shoes that shined like glass. Dill mimicked Flynn's process, though Dill's bowtie looked shabbier after he'd straightened it. Then Dill reached into the back pocket of his pants and pulled out a stack of pamphlets containing the railroad schedule.

“What are those for?” asked Flynn.

“For emergencies,” Dill winked. “I took the whole stash.”

Flynn snatched and pitched the pamphlets into a hedge.

“This is war, Dill! We need weapons, not means of retreat! Remember what I told you on the train. This woman’s a traditionalist and a militarist. More important, she despises bachelors.” Dill gasped. “Exactly. Give her the chance, she’ll divide and conquer us, then eat you for breakfast. Whatever you do, don’t leave my side, got it?”

“Flinston!”

They looked up. From a second-floor window, an elderly woman appeared in all her white wrinkled glory. “Edward, let him in!” She disappeared. The butler opened the door and welcomed the young men into the foyer.

“Flinston?” whispered Dill.

“A nickname,” Flynn replied, “after her favorite prime minister.”

Mrs. MacArthur was descending the stairs.

“She’s shorter than I expected.”

“Well, she’s not on the second floor anymore, Dill.”

Mrs. MacArthur crossed the foyer and embraced Flynn. “My dear little grandson! It’s been ages! Don’t just stand there gawking like you’re asking me to prom – come in!”

“We are in, Memmie,” said Flynn.

Dill perked up. “Mrs. MacArthur, you’ve been to prom?”

Mrs. MacArthur sized up the stranger from head to heels. “Another wise guy. Splendid.”

Flynn sighed. “Memmie, meet my roommate, Dillon Tilton, or Dill. He’s just curious. He’s never been to prom.”

The old lady cackled as she scooted down the hall toward a long table overflowing with food platters and returned with a platter of cheese. “Of course, he is! The two of you make a

curious couple. Here, sweetheart,” she pushed it at Dill. “Take the gorgonzola out to the picnic table, will you? You’re a peach.”

“Right away, my lady.” Dill gave an awkward bow, then bounded off, high knees nipping at the platter. He disappeared through the backdoor. Mrs. MacArthur snorted.

Flynn sighed as his ally left him behind. “A house divided...”

“Cross-country or track?”

Flynn gave a hollow laugh. “Neither. Dill’s part antelope.”

“I see. Part girlfriend, too?”

“Excuse me?”

“Flinston, you promised you’d bring a girl to Pup Pup’s special day. Instead, you bring ‘Dinky,’ your male lover.”

“I’m not sure I’d call this Pup Pup’s ‘special’ day. ‘Tragic’ works better.” Someone knocked on the front door. “His name’s Dilly, by the way, and he’s not—”

“—the guy you made out with at the pub? You’re saying there’s more than one?”

“I’m not saying—wait, you know about that?!”

“Everyone knows. I heard it from Gladys.”

“Kat’s mother? That little wispy—”

“Is it true?” she asked.

“Of course, not! Well, not entirely.”

The knock came again.

“Edward! The door!” She turned back to Flynn. “Explain, then. Entirely.”

“How about you explain all this? You’ve got a butler and a chauffeur now?”

“What’s to explain? I’m old and tired and my grandson won’t help with the business.

What’s your excuse?”

“Don’t look at me like that, Memmie! And just so you know, he kissed me!”

“Who? Dinky or the other guy?”

“The other guy! I was minding my own business and this total stranger just—”

“Uh huh. That’s what I used to tell my grandmother, too.”

“Ma’am.” Edward stood at her elbow, straight as a pillar and nearly as tall as one. “The guests are arriving. Where would you like the gifts?”

“Gifts?” Flynn asked. “For a eulogy? Memmie, what are you up to?”

“Flinston, why don’t you see what Dinky’s done with the gorgonzola?” She started toward the front door. “I trust that boyfriend of yours like I trust a toddler that ain’t potty-trained.”

Dismissed, Flynn stalked out the backdoor.

The backyard began with a brick patio, a coy pond, and gray statues of naked Greeks. Beyond the nudes he found Dilly playing with cubed cheese.

“The cat’s up to something, Dill,” said Flynn. “Where’s the rest of the family? They know better than to show up late. As far as I can see, she’s only invited...” He snapped his fingers. “Me.” He took the cheese; Dill finally looked at him. “It’s all about me, Dill.”

“But you’ve always said that, Flynn.”

“No, no, no, I mean this. The memorial picnic. This is a eulogy, isn’t it? Where’s Fr. Jameson? Where are Pup Pup’s colleagues and well-wishers? Dill, my parents aren’t even here! Looks more like a feast for a party not a funeral—I mean, look at it!”

Dill nodded. “The lemonade. The ice-cubes.”

“The soups, breads, fruits, cakes, caviar, flowers—the exquisite landscaping!”

“The tea. The sugar-cubes.”

“And us.”

Dill whistled. “Your Pup Pup has a lot of stuff.”

“Yes,” thought Flynn. “Yes, he does. Did.”

“And your Dad gets it now?”

Flynn swung around. “That’s it, Dill!”

“What’s it?”

“Dad’s divorced, and consequently, cut from the will. As Memmie always warned, an unmarried man is unfit for the family business.”

Dill scratched his head. “So, she’s going to give you the business?”

“If I give her a family, yes. The whole hog reverts to me.”

“What a gal!”

“No!” insisted Flynn. “That’s what I’m trying to tell you, Dill! Say yes to all of this and our days of belligerent bachelorhood are caput! No time for bacheloring when you’re businesssing, you see? It’s all bait, a Harpies’ feast! She’d give me the world, Dill, and damn my gallivanting soul. Unless...”

“Unless?”

Flynn’s eyes blazed. “Resistance.”

Dill applauded. “Aye, aye, captain!”

“Let’s drink to it!”

“Lemonade!”

Flynn frowned. “Well, if the wine’s not out yet, sure. Hand me that pitcher. Here be our glasses, and here be two hearts bolder than any – wait, what’s that?” Flynn squinted through the glass pitcher at the floating blob.

“Oh, yes. That’s a sock.”

“A sock?”

“My sock.”

“Your sock?”

Dill sighed. “Been trying to get it out.”

Flynn nodded. “Right. First on the docket for the Resistance: retrieve sock. Watch and learn, Dill.”

Mrs. MacArthur emerged from the house. Gliding behind her, a merry escort of two dozen women scanned the scene with seductive eyes. They looked beautiful, and they looked like they knew it.

“Here we are ladies!” announced Mrs. MacArthur. “How about the view?”

Gasps of awe escaped the well-dressed retinue.

“Mrs. MacArthur, it’s lovely! I can’t wait to see what you do with retirement!”

Mrs. MacArthur sighed. “Me neither.”

“Truly amazing!”

“You never said you were a queen, Mrs. MacArthur!”

“Heavens, what are the servants doing?”

All eyes stared at the two men. One had the lemonade pitcher in a chokehold while the arm of the other was submerged to the elbow.

“Got it!” Flynn shouted with triumph.

“Flynn, dear,” called Mrs. MacArthur through clenched teeth. “Why don’t you show our beautiful guests to their seats?”

Flynn wiped his wet hand on Dill’s back and introduced himself in turn to each lady and seated her at the table.

“Ashley, is it? An enchanting name. How about we sit you here?”

Ashley batted eyelashes. “So far from your seat, Flynn? Don’t forget about me.”

“Impossible. Now, Rosamund, I envisioned you here under the shade of the sugar maple—you seem sweet. Shall we?”

“Call me, ‘Rose,’ Mr. MacArthur.”

“And call me anytime.”

With the help of the servants, Flynn soon had all of them seated. Occasionally, complaints arose among the ladies seated farthest from Flynn, which he thought quite natural. Mrs. MacArthur settled such anxieties with a premonition.

“Now, now, ladies. You will all have your chance to shine for my grandson, as promised.” Flynn raised his hand to inquire, but she launched into the blessing of the food before he could speak. The rush of female tittering commenced immediately afterward. Flynn was still pondering his grandmother’s words with a troubled brow when a husky voice called from the patio.

“What a spread!”

Flynn recognized the voice and groaned before plunging a stubborn fork into the mashed potatoes. Strolling toward the picnic came a woman in a black dress far simpler than the flashy attire of the other women. Her hair, fiery red, coiled in tight circlets like a tiara above roving,

childlike green eyes. She was a beautiful woman among beautiful women, yet somehow, she didn't seem to fit in at all—that, or everything else didn't fit in with her.

“Kat!” cried Mrs. MacArthur. “You came, dear!” The two met with a warm hug. “My, you look well! But black, dear, in this heat?”

The green in her eyes sparkled. “I know the invitation suggested something more...expressive...but Pup Pup always liked this dress.”

None of the others had worn black—none of the others had personally known Pup Pup MacArthur, either. The other women smiled at the newcomer with their teeth. Kat smiled back. Evoking instant jealousy was something of a calling card for her.

“Flynn! Get your off buttocks and show Kat to a chair!”

Flynn took his time, but eventually reached Kat, looped her arm in his, and seated her.

“My, my,” she jibed. “You keep lovely company, Flynn.”

“Agreed,” he said. “So, why are you here, then?” He left before she could reply.

The meal commenced in earnest. Soon, good food and drink had soothed the nerves. The afternoon glowed with ease. Flynn had every distraction before him, and not just Dilly's antics with the cubed cheeses. He had rich cuisine, a terrific view, and attractive women eyeing him between bites of salad. It was Dilly who dealt this reverie a fatal blow.

“Goodness,” he said through a mouth full of crumb cake. “They sure don't like Kat.”

“Hm?”

Flynn watched. Most of the women merely picked at their food. Their gazes flitted from Mrs. MacArthur, to Flynn, to each other, then back to Flynn; but some did look in Kat's direction in a way that would have chilled the blood. Flynn was delighted.

“It is right and just. Isn't showing up late to a eulogy like a sin or something?”

“No, not that. They don’t like what your Memmie said about Kat being engaged.”

“Kat engaged? Now that is a mortal sin. Probably mortal.”

“No. I mean they hate her because she’s your fiancée.”

“My what?!”

Flynn stared in terror. At the other end of the table, Mrs. MacArthur spoke something into Kat’s ear. Kat’s bright red lips curled mischievously and she burst out in laughter.

“Dilly, I feel ill.”

But Dill, content as a beaver in the Black Forest, had buried his nose in a buttery cob of corn. Flynn contemplated the repercussions on their friendship if he were to take that cob and shove it somewhere else. But suddenly, Kat was at his side.

“Hello, dearest!” she gushed.

The flurry of glances flung their way sent Flynn in a panic. He wasn’t supposed to be engaged, and the women around him seemed to have the same thought. Their eyes found him. He was reminded of a painting depicting St. Sebastian’s martyrdom.

“Lower your voice!” he whispered to Kat.

“What was that, honey?” She pinched his cheek.

“They think we’re engaged, Kat! The poor ladies feel robbed. What do we do?”

Kat laughed a sound like wind chimes. In spite of himself, Flynn savored it.

“Poor, indeed. But you can change that.”

“Pardon me?”

“They’re not real women, Flynn. They’re bachelorettes, hired assassins, looking for your wallet. I told Memmie we’re engaged in order to protect you.”

“You what?!”

“Keep smiling. Memmie’s watching us. Act like your pouring me a drink.”

Flynn nodded to Dill who, reluctantly, began pouring what was left of the lemonade.

Kat continued, eyes shining with delight, while her words stabbed like knives. “At this moment, sweet Memmie’s having a merry old time, honoring your grandfather with tall tales and red wine” —she took the glass from Dill— “all to deceive you.”

Dill gulped. “To deceive me?”

“Not you. Flynn. She’s finally got you cornered, Flynn. Think about it. Before you came here today, what’s the one thing—the only thing—that could have driven you away from your own self-absorption?”

“My what?”

“What brought you here, Flynn?”

“A train!” Dill shouted.

Flynn replied. “Death brought me here.”

“Exactly,” said Kat. “I think Memmie’s been waiting years for this. Pup Pup died, so you came. She’s got you where she wants you: primed and stuffed to the chin, wallowing in food and a gaggle of cheerleaders armed with flattery and cheap lip gloss. But it’s all a decoy.”

Flynn groaned. “She’s right, Dill. Memmie won’t let me leave without a fiancée—the ol’ battleship!”

“But,” said Dill, “if Kat let slip that the two of you are engaged, won’t Mrs. MacArthur let us go?”

Flynn wagged his head. “The rest of the girls might be put off, but Kat’s only bought us a little time. Memmie’s on to us. She knows I can’t stand Kat—no offense, Kat.”

“None taken.”

“She’ll rat me out soon enough, and then it’s over. Unless I escape.”

The three of them stared across the table. Mrs. MacArthur was staring back.

“Kat, I can’t believe I’m saying this, but thank you. Dill, forsake the pickle. We’re leaving.”

Dill chucked the wet veggie and sprang to his feet, upturning several wine glasses and a basket of rolls in the process. The commotion drew everyone’s attention. All conversation ceased.

“Flynn,” he squeaked. “They’re watching us.”

“Courage, Dill—they won’t win a footrace in those heels. We’ll show Memmie what track looks like. Just let me have a word, first.” He faced the crowd. “Attention, everyone! I have an announcement.” He looked directly at his grandmother. “I think it’s high time we address the real reason we are gathered here this afternoon.”

“Hold that thought, Flinston!” Mrs. MacArthur interrupted as she bounced to her feet. “I don’t see an engagement ring. Before you choose your bride, I think you’ll want to see what the ladies have brought you.” Loud cheering broke out, with a few askance looks at Kat. “Ladies, if you please!”

Chairs clattered and spun on their legs as the bachelorettes raced to fetch their gifts. A moment of chaos ensued.

“Dill, I don’t care what it takes. You find us a way out of here!”

“Aye, aye, captain!” and he slipped away from the picnic, literally, on the spilled rolls.

Flynn soon found himself at the head of a line. Mrs. MacArthur was instructing the girls to play fair and give each lady a chance to impress, but another voice filled Flynn’s ear.

“Just go with it. You need to give every girl a shot at winning you with her gift. If they think they came here without ever having a chance to marry you, they’ll explode. This party’s a powder keg, and you’re the match.”

“Are you sure about this?” he whispered to Kat. “The way they look at me...I feel like a fat turkey on Thanksgiving morning.”

“Well, it’s Easter, not Thanksgiving. Just trust me—I promise I’ll get you out of this.”

“Hold up—where are you going?”

“To help Dill help us find a way out of here.”

She disappeared in the crowd. Strangely, Flynn felt fortified. He chugged his glass empty. “Ready when you are, ladies!”

Meanwhile, Dill had not found the garage with the Royce.

“Old house, though, isn’t it?” he said to himself. “The Underground Railroad type. Probably a network of secret passages and tunnels. Just a matter of reconnaissance.”

The closets on the lowest level were searched, each one danker than the last. It wasn’t long before Dill had lost himself in the bowels of the basement corridors.

“Can’t see my own hand,” he muttered as he searched yet another dead-end room. He felt for a light switch and instead found a candle-shaped thing with a long wick, which he pocketed.

“For emergencies.”

His feet reached the end of a shadowy hallway. Before him stood a steel-enforced door with a large bolt locking it from the outside. Dill unlocked the bolt, tugged the door wide, and descended into a cellar dark and damp. He should have propped the door open, because as soon as he took his hand off of it the door swung shut on its own. Try as he might, Dill couldn’t push it open.

The scrape of a match and the spurt of light told him he wasn't alone.

"S-someone there?"

"Hope you brought a flashlight, sonny," came a gravelly voice.

Back at the picnic, the gift-giving reached an apex. Ashley drove up to Flynn's chair in a shiny new golf cart, with a rear compartment full of new clubs, beer cases, and three pairs of plaid shorts. Tanya brought a basket of chocolate: milk, white, dark, fruited, and foreign varieties. She also brought a basket of chocolate Labrador puppies. The puppies tried to kiss Flynn's cheek. So did Tanya. Others brought him power tools, model car kits, and Legos. They brought him cigars, poker chips, a real top hat, and the collected works of Tom Clancy. Then, Rosamund brought her gift.

Down from the dark green pasture, she came. She approached like one of the Valkyrie, mounted high on a sleek white mare, dressed in tight leather, her blonde hair dancing in the passionate summer air with abandon as though she rode to Ragnarok.

Flynn gulped. "What a beautiful, beautiful animal."

Rosamund's body swooped from the saddle. "The rider comes with the horse," she cooed.

Flynn leapt to his feet. "I've made my choice!"

"Just a moment," said Mrs. MacArthur. Flynn paled. He'd nearly forgotten his grandmother. In fact, he had begun to forget Dilly, the doom of marriage, and the whole plan of escape. "Before you choose your bride, Flynn, you should see the last gift."

The women's ranks parted. Kat came forward.

"I couldn't get away from her," she apologized, handing Flynn her gift bag. "Memmie had me followed the moment we parted."

“Traitor,” said Flynn. In a daze, his hands began unwrapping the tissue paper. His eyes flitted feverishly about the yard. “Dilly?” Kat shook her head. Flynn felt Death’s hand on his shoulder. “Then I must choose a bride. Thanks anyway, Kat.”

Her mouth worked. Her eyes held a deep sincerity; but whatever Kat had thought to say, the thought sailed away, leaving only a fragile smile.

Then, Flynn saw the gift in his hands. It was a new frame of an old photo. He saw an old man and a boy, dressed in matching overalls, fishing in a pond not far from MacArthur Estates. He recognized it. They’d passed it on the road. It appeared they hadn’t caught any fish yet.

“I’m so sorry, Flynn,” she whispered.

He looked up into her green eyes.

“Judas,” he smiled. She smiled back through her tears.

The mound of presents blocked his view of the horizon, but Flynn could hear just fine. The swallows were still singing. Somewhere nearby, a donkey brayed. A sudden yearning to walk about the farmyard and visit with the dumb animals swept over him. He could do it. Maybe take Kat with him. Step outside of their present selves for an afternoon and revisit each memory together. They would laugh at how simple things had been, how absurd and complicated things were now. He could do it. Maybe he would.

A confident voice prodded him.

“What’ll it be, Flinston?” asked Mrs. MacArthur. A few still snickered at the nickname.

That’s when Flynn remembered: he was at war. The farm he had loved lived on inside him. He wasn’t on Memory Lane now. He was on the war path. Back to it, then.

Another woman crooned out. “Come on, Flinston—we ain’t getting’ any younger!”

“Well, madam, you certainly aren’t!” Flynn leapt upon his chair seat and raised his voice.

“I’ve made my choice!” he announced. “Your...contributions...,” he looked at Kat, “have helped make a very painful decision far less painful. The truth is, I don’t deserve any of you because I’m a selfish snob! And yet,” he looked right at Mrs. MacArthur, “and yet, you thought to buy me, body and soul, at my dear Pup Pup’s eulogy no less. And for what—money, power? Ladies, you’ve worn me out, and shallow folk like me don’t wear out well. I ask you, then: why in God’s name would I want to marry someone who wanted to marry me? No, thanks. I choose—myself!” No one cheered. Deep frowns commanded the table. “Besides,” he added, “some of you aren’t even pretty. I’m looking at you, Ms. Gollum—and you, too, Ms. What’s-its-face from Beatrix Potter—Squirrel Nutkin, that’s it. If there’s a horror genre in children’s literature, you two got a bright future.”

“So...that’s it?” asked Ashley.

Tanya threw down her napkin. “Apparently. At least I didn’t sell my dignity like Rosamund over there.”

Rosamund glared viciously before twisting in her saddle to face Mrs. MacArthur. “Is it really all over?”

Mrs. MacArthur raised her hands in placation.

“Now, girls, we’ve all been enjoying the hard lemonade...”

Ms. Gollum flew to her feet with a screech of disgust, grabbed her glass, and slung its contents in Flynn’s direction. Between Flynn and the airborne liquor, however, sat Rosamund. The sopped Valkyrie howled, retaliated with a drumstick. The chocolate labs raced after it across Ashley’s lap and overturned the bowl of papaya, giving Squirrel Nutkin ammunition to join the all-out brawl. Flynn didn’t wake from petrification until a fistful of jelly salad gored the tree trunk behind him.

“Defend yourself!” Kat cried.

For once, Flynn didn’t debate her. He flipped over the gift table and ducked behind it as all hell tore through the picnic.

“Where the blazes is Dilly?!”

Kat came army-crawling through a slough of salsa to Flynn’s side.

“Can you call them off?” he asked her.

“Why me? You started this!” she yelled.

“Because you’re a woman! You know, native speaker and all?”

Kat glared at him.

“Come now, Kat, don’t be lazy!”

Kat peered over the edge of the table. “Wait, wait—I think they’re letting up…look.”

“Really?”

Flynn took a peek and promptly received a dollop of tapioca in the eye.

“That was cruel,” he grumbled.

“So, what’s your plan?” she asked.

Screams rent the air. Meatloaf flew overhead.

Flynn nodded. “Stay low. Ride out the siege. Wait till cover of night. We’ll break for the hills and meet at the old fishing pond. Here, pack some rations. The zucchini bread’s exceptional. Do you still prefer the end slices?” He selected two thick pieces of bread and wrapped them neatly in a napkin as she watched. “Hold up. Are you crying? What’s the matter?”

She shook her head. “Nothing. Absolutely nothing.”

They watched one another for a moment.

Flynn cleared his throat. “When I distract her, run.”

“Wait, what?”

“This is my fault. I’ve put off facing her long enough.” He gazed into her eyes, even lifted a hand to caress her cheek, smearing horseradish on her in the process. “Promise me something?”

“Sure, Flynn.”

“Pray for Pup Pup.” He looked to the battle. “And for me.”

He leapt to his feet, hurdled the table. Ms. Gollum was swinging a wooden salad spoon nearby. Flynn disarmed her. He flourished the spoon like a sword before his adversaries.

“Alright!” Flynn called. “Where’s the old hag?”

Memmie came. Blood-red soup stained her blouse, and her splayed white hair lashed the spring breeze like a slave-driver’s whip.

“Flinston!” she croaked. “Come over here for the spanking of your life!”

Flynn narrowed his eyes in defiance. “Gladly.”

Suddenly, a violent explosion quelled the fight like a crack of thunder. Light debris rained down, tinkling on the shattered wine glasses. Everyone dropped their ammunition and turned toward the cloud of floury smoke pluming out of the base of the rear brick wall of the farmhouse. A breeze dispersed the smoke. Two figures trudged through the wreckage.

“It’s Pup Pup!” Kat shouted.

“My God,” Flynn crossed himself. “He is risen—alleluia!”

Dill escorted Mr. MacArthur to his wife with a shrug. “I thought it was a candle.”

Mr. MacArthur blinked about. “Quite the picnic, sweetie. By the way, you accidentally locked me in the cellar again. Howdy, Flynn! Why ya covered in coleslaw?”

Kat eased beside Mrs. MacArthur, who blushed and huffed beside her husband.

“It appears retirement will have to wait, Memmie. Pup Pup’s mysteriously alive, and Flynn is still single.”

Mrs. MacArthur wrapped a wiry arm around Kat, savoring the young woman’s presence but especially the way Kat watched her grandson, who was passing out Dilly’s train pamphlets to the women with the fervor of a street evangelist. Yes, she thought, it had all worked out in the end.

“That may be, honey. But Cupid’s an archer not a gunman. The arrow takes longer because it seeks the right heart.”

“Cupid? It’s Easter, Memmie. Got your holidays mixed.”

Mrs. MacArthur just smiled. “Speaking of holidays, what are your plans for the summer?”