

May I Have This Dance?

“Damn this old thing!” Aidan cursed as he tried to revive the stalled engine of the riding lawn mower with another turn of the key. The motor whirred, then sputtered, then fell silent.

“You would think that the City could provide equipment that works,” he pouted as he pulled himself from the torn vinyl seat of the mower. Then he stormed around to the front and pulled open the hood. Steam shot up and into his face.

“Damn!” he cursed again, rubbing his eyes. He looked around at the large cemetery and then at his watch. It was almost 7:00. Long shadows were already falling across the rows of burial mounds. He was never going to finish the job today with such a temperamental piece of equipment. “I’m going to tell Gus that if he doesn’t give me a dependable mower, I’ll quit!” Aidan imagined this scene in his mind. He chuckled when he realized that this confrontation would never happen. His buddies teased him that he was a “Yes Man” and he guessed that they were right. But this attitude had earned him the respect of his high school teachers, college professors, and his boss Gus.

Aidan had taken this job working for the City during the summer break between his freshman and sophomore years of college. The job included anything from trimming back tree branches that blocked some intersections throughout town to landscaping projects around the City buildings. It was menial work, but a good break from his tireless studies at the university.

Aidan put his hands on his slender hips and let out a frustrating sigh. He looked down at the small shed at the entrance to the McKeever Cemetery some 75 yards away. He then put the mower in neutral and began to slowly steer it toward the shed. “They don’t pay me enough money to do this job,” he muttered.

Aidan pushed the mower some 20 yards and then stopped and straightened his lean athletic frame. He pulled a red handkerchief out of the ripped back pocket of his Levis and passed it over his tanned face and neck. “Whew,” he said. “I can’t believe it is still so hot this late in the day.”

Aidan pulled a bottle of water from his pack that was stored behind the seat. He twisted the cap and took three long gulps. Then he doused the rest of the water over his sweaty head.

He was positioning his body to continue with the arduous trek to the shed when a slight movement to his right caught his eye. He straightened again and turned his head to a secluded plot on a grassy knoll some distance from where he stood.

The plot was sheltered by a mature weeping willow tree. A single tall tombstone claimed the knoll. A granite bench was planted at the foot of the grave. A tiny woman was sprightly climbing the small hill toward the gravesite. From where Aidan stood, she seemed to be an elderly woman, possibly in her late sixties or early seventies. She was dressed in what seemed to be a party dress, not something that one would wear to pay respects to the dead. Aidan was surprised at how easily she was able to climb the hill, considering the dress shoes that she was wearing. He looked around for her car, but spotted no vehicle. He thought it curious that someone was visiting the cemetery on a Friday night. Most people visited the graves of their loved ones on the weekends.

Aidan quietly moved close to the knoll, careful to avoid being noticed by the visitor. He continued to observe this woman as she reached her intended destination. She hesitated for a moment when she arrived at the gravesite, possibly greeting her dearly departed, Aidan assumed. Then the woman bent and placed a small bouquet of flowers at the base of the tombstone. She

turned and set her pocketbook down on the granite bench. It seemed to Aidan to be a well-rehearsed routine.

A stray ray of sunshine caught the crystals in the string of beads that she withdrew from her purse. The aged woman took a few steps to the other side of the bench, knelt slowly onto the hard ground, and placed her bony elbows on the bench for support. Aidan could see that she was reciting the rosary from the discernable movement of her lips.

Aidan admired this heartwarming scene for a few minutes longer and then returned to the lawn mower. He dug his feet into the soft grass and continued to push the mower to the shed. After he finally reached the shed, he pushed the mower into the small building and locked the doors. As he was getting into the City truck, he glanced up toward the shady knoll. There, under the canopy of the tree, this little old lady was swaying with an invisible partner on her dance floor – the grass covered grave.

In the City shop the following Monday morning, Aidan mentioned the woman that he had seen in the cemetery to the group of his co-workers.

“That’s just the Loony Lady.” Mac brushed his hand through the air to dismiss her. He took a gulp of coffee out of his paper cup and stuffed half of a frosted donut into his mouth.

“The Loony Lady?” Aidan wanted more information.

“They call her the Loony Lady because she dances on her husband’s grave,” another employee explained. “If that’s not loony, I don’t know what is,” he chuckled.

“Yep, she shows up every Friday night, rain or shine,” Mac said. “Don’t know who she is or where she comes from. Never seen her in a car. Maybe somebody drops her off so she can pay her respects and then they pick her up when the dance hall closes.” He emphasized ‘dance hall’ for effect and the group of men laughed in response.

“How long has she been doing this?” Aidan was curious about this romantic ritual.

“Ever since I can remember,” another employee offered. The others nodded. “Probably since her husband died.”

“When was that?” Aidan asked.

The men shrugged in unison and then rushed to the job assignment listing that was being posted by Gus, the City Foreman.

“Morrissey,” Gus called to Aidan who was still sitting at the break room table, a bit mystified over the story he had just heard.

“Morrissey!” Gus called to him again.

“Yes, Sir.” Aidan dismissed his curiosities about the woman, stood, and addressed his boss.

Gus took a thick unlit cigar out of his mouth and said, “The mower needs parts. Help Randy today with planting pretty flowers in the medians downtown.” His gruff voice made his request sound comical.

“Yes, Sir,” Aidan responded.

The foreman went back into his office and closed the door.

“Yes, Sir. Yes, Sir,” his co-workers mimicked Aidan in fun. Aidan gave them an embarrassed grin and then followed his partner for the day outside and into a City truck.

When Aidan reported to work the next day, Gus told him that they had received the parts for the mower and it was running like new. He could finish mowing the cemetery.

“Yes, Sir,” Aidan replied. He heard the muffled guffaws of the guys behind him.

Aidan grabbed the keys to a City truck and drove across town to McKeever Cemetery. He unlocked the shed, jumped on the seat of the mower, and turned the key in the ignition. As

promised, the engine started without a struggle. Aidan pulled his cap down over his forehead and then began his work.

He made his normal route through the cemetery over the burial mounds and around the lichen-covered stones. Aidan actually liked the solitude of this job. As much as he enjoyed the harmless bantering of the guys, he liked working alone in this peaceful spot. Guy knew this, and would assign Aidan this duty every Friday.

“Gotta keep the graves neat for the visitors, otherwise, we’ll hear about it,” Gus was adamant that the cemetery’s grass be kept trimmed.

When Aidan reached the isolated knoll, he shut off the mower and climbed off of the seat. Out of curiosity, he walked to the tombstone and read the inscription that was etched into the gray granite stone.

Daniel Patrick Quinn

1930 – 1955

Beloved Husband of Rosemary

A small bouquet of forget-me-nots, neatly tied with a blue ribbon, was resting at the base of the stone.

Aidan turned and walked to the mossy bench, wanting to get out of the hot sun for a short time. He sat down and stretched his long legs out in front of him. Then he took a deep swallow from his water bottle, closed his eyes, and let his head fall back.

“Well, I’d better get back to work,” Aidan sighed. He reached down to pick up his water bottle and then noticed the two small bare patches of earth on the other side of the bench. Aidan wondered for a moment and then remembered the Loony Lady. The grass must have been worn over time from her tiny knees kneeling in prayer. Aidan looked at the tombstone again. Her

husband died in 1955. Could this little old lady have been coming here every Friday night for fifty years?

The Friday of the following week, Aidan got an early start on mowing the cemetery. He prayed that the mower wouldn't break down. He had a date with Emily Martin that evening at 7:00. Aidan wanted to finish the job early enough so he would have plenty of time to go home and shower. It was his first date with her and he couldn't be late.

It was just past 6:00 when Aidan completed his long day in the sun. He put the mower in low gear and was heading back to the shed. Then, over the gentle purr of the engine, soft soothing music reached his ears. Aidan looked in the direction of the music, and again, his eyes landed on the small distant hill. He slowed the mower and then turned off the engine. He quietly lifted himself off of the seat and silently crept within ten yards of the secluded plot and poked his head around a tall tombstone. Then Aidan watched the beautiful sight before him.

She had her arms held out, perfectly holding her invisible partner in a dance embrace. Her left hand was on his right shoulder, her right hand lower and against his chest. She stepped and turned, stepped and turned, in perfect rhythm to the Irish tune *Danny Boy* that was playing on an old cassette player that sat on the bench. Her small head was tilted upwards and she was smiling a flirtatious smile at her partner.

*And I shall hear, tho' soft you tread above me
And all my dreams will warm and sweeter be
If you'll not fail to tell me that you love me
I'll simply sleep in peace until you come to me.*

Aidan shifted his feet, and in doing so, knocked over a pot of flowers that was arranged around the gravestone that had been supporting his body. "Damn!" Aidan said under his breath.

Immediately, the woman stopped her dancing and her eyes darted in Aidan's direction. Clearly embarrassed, she moved quickly to the bench and turned off the music.

Aidan, more embarrassed than the woman for spying on this private reverie, immediately raced to her to apologize. When he reached her, she was gathering her purse in one hand and the old cassette player in the other.

"Ma'am, please wait," Aidan begged.

"I must go now," the woman said in a soft voice. She lowered her eyes.

"Please wait," Aidan said again. "I didn't mean to intrude, it's just that," Aidan paused, "it's just that I was so enjoying watching you dance. I didn't want to spoil it for you," he paused again, "or for me, by making my presence known."

The woman looked up into Aidan's sincere eyes. "Well, young man, you certainly did startle me." She patted one tiny hand against her tightly permed gray hair as she attempted to regain her composure.

"I'm sorry, really, I'm sorry," he fumbled, stuffing his hands in the pockets of his jeans. "Please, can we sit for a minute and let our heartbeats return to normal?"

The woman hesitated and then relented with a nervous smile. She lowered her petite frame onto the bench and Aidan sat down beside her. Her sweet perfume subtly surrounded him.

"My name is Aidan. Aidan Morrissey." Aidan offered. "I work for the City and usually have mowing duty." He motioned to the riding mower that was parked at the bottom of the hill.

"Well it's nice to meet you, Mr. Morrissey. My name is Rosemary." The woman fingered the string of pearls that decorated her wrinkled neck. "I'm sure that you must think that I'm a crazy old woman for dancing in a cemetery!" Her cheeks turned a deep shade of rose.

"No, no, ma'am," Aidan stuttered.

“Well, let me assure you that I haven’t escaped from the Nut House, Mr. Morrissey. I really am not sick.” She turned her head to look at the tombstone in front of them. “Well, maybe I am a little sick – love sick!” she laughed. Aidan smiled at the brightness in her gray eyes.

“Your husband,” Aidan nodded at the grave. It wasn’t really a question nor was it an acknowledgement.

“Yes, my dear Danny Boy,” she sighed. “My Danny Boy, I called him and he called me his Wild Irish Rose.” Her giggle was that of a shy schoolgirl. “My true love, my only love.” Her voice was laced with melancholy.

“Oh, please forgive me, young man. I must sound so silly.” She looked at the lowering sun. “My goodness, it’s getting late. I’m sure that you must have better things to do on a Friday night than spend time chatting with an old lady. You go on now.” She gently prodded Aidan with a pat on his arm. “I think I’ll rest here just a little while longer.”

Aidan got up to go. Glancing at his watch, he noticed that it was 6:50. So much for making a good first impression with Emily.

“Can I give you a ride somewhere, Mrs. Quinn?” He scanned the surrounding area of the cemetery. “I don’t see your car.”

“Oh, no. Now scoot. It was so nice visiting with you, young man.”

Aidan smiled at her and started down the hill. When he reached the mower, he turned to look back at her. She was gone.

It was pouring rain the following Friday so Aidan was assigned a job at the library moving books out of one of the rooms so it could be painted. He dashed to his truck after he got off work and turned the windshield wipers on full speed. He had another date with Emily and

had turned down an invitation to get a few beers with the guys so he could pick up Emily on time. It took his best sweet-talking for her to forgive him for being late the week before. Aidan had the feeling that this girl had little interest in him. He was going to have to figure out a way to change this.

Aidan had held a desperate crush on Emily Martin throughout high school, but was too shy and awkward to ever approach her. One year of college had developed his physique as well as his self esteem. He wasted no time once he returned home for the summer to pursue the girl of his dreams.

Aidan pulled out of the employee parking lot and set out for his home. He drove slowly across town in the beating downpour, weaving around flooded potholes along the way.

The route to his home took him past McKeever Cemetery. As he was passing the black iron arch that marked its entrance, he glanced into the darkened field of graves. Aidan placed his foot softly on the brake pedal.

Through the foggy, rain-blurred window, Aidan noticed a huge black umbrella under the willow tree up on the far knoll. It was swaying back and forth, matching the steps of the small form that danced beneath it.

“Rain or Shine,” Aidan remembered. He lifted his foot from the brakes and drove on.

Throughout the following week, Aidan found his thoughts continually returning to this old woman. He wanted to know more about her for reasons he couldn't understand or explain.

On Friday, after the mowing was complete, Aidan began the task of trimming around the gravestones. He planned on working his way up to the knoll, hoping that the woman would be done with her prayer by the time that he arrived in that part of the cemetery. He wanted to talk to her again, but did not want to interrupt her sentimental ritual.

When he was finished with the trimming, he headed toward the knoll and was happy to see her sitting on the bench.

“Hello, Rosemary.” Aidan greeted her with a smile.

“Hello again, young man.” She smiled when she saw him and patted the space next to her on the bench. “Won’t you join me for a chat?”

“I’d love to.” Aidan accepted her invitation and sat down next to her.

Rosemary took in Aidan’s large frame. “You remind me a little of my Danny,” she said. “Big, strong, athletic.” She smiled. “And he had big blue eyes too. And his smile! Oh, his smile!” she sighed and placed her hand over her heart. “It could melt the heart of any girl. But I was the lucky one.”

“How did you meet Mr. Quinn?” Aidan asked.

“At a dance, of course!” she laughed. “Every Friday night there was a dance at the Legion Hall. Danny literally swept me off my feet and onto the dance floor the first night that I attended one of the dances. I had just turned twenty-one and was so excited to finally be able to attend a dance! How I prepared all week for this – my dress, my hair, my shoes – it all had to be perfect.”

“Danny and I never left each other’s side that night, nor did we in the years that followed. That is, until he was taken from me.” Her tone sobered and her tiny chin trembled slightly.

“I didn’t want his death to put an end to our Friday night dances. He wouldn’t have wanted that either. So I come here and dance with him every Friday night.” She looked at the grassy mound before them. “I think he smiles when he hears my dance steps on his grave.”

Rosemary then reached inside her pocketbook and took out her billfold. She opened it and pulled out a small black and white photograph that was cracked from years of loving handling.

She handed the picture to Aidan. Rosemary's husband was wearing a dark suit and stood a good foot taller than she. He had a firm jaw line and the winning smile that Rosemary had boasted. Rosemary was wearing a flowing dress that accentuated her attractive figure. Her long dark hair was settled perfectly across her shoulders.

"You made a very handsome couple," Aidan remarked as he handed the photograph back to Rosemary. She gazed at it and said, "This was Danny's favorite dress. It was a deep red and I had red shoes to match. Danny said that this dress made my spirit come alive." She sighed and returned the photo to her billfold.

"Do you take your girl dancing?" Rosemary asked Aidan a few moments later.

The question took Aidan by surprise. "Dancing? No, we haven't been dancing." He was embarrassed to admit that he had just taken Emily to the local bar where all of his buddies hung out. The date planned for that night was a drive-in movie.

"You must take your sweetheart dancing if you want to win her heart," Rosemary stated matter-of-factly.

"I'll keep that in mind," Aidan replied.

"It's getting late again, young man. Let me say my goodbyes to my Danny Boy," Rosemary said.

"Sure, Rosemary." Aidan stood. "Will I see you here again next Friday?"

"I always go dancing on Friday nights." Her eyes twinkled.

Aidan smiled and left her on the stone bench. When he turned back, she was gracefully waltzing across the grave.

As promised, Rosemary was at her husband's gravesite the next Friday evening. She was wearing a smooth satin dress with a lace collar. She had on her pearl necklace and matching earrings fell from her sagging earlobes.

"How are you, Rosemary?" Aidan asked as he sat down beside her.

"Oh, fine, fine. Just a few nagging aches and pains," she smiled. "These old bones of mine!" she exclaimed with a sigh. She rubbed the rosary beads that were entwined in her gnarled arthritic fingers. Aidan immediately noticed a marked change in his new friend. She seemed less spirited, less animated, less... alive.

Rosemary reached inside her pocketbook and took out a cotton handkerchief. She delicately pressed it against both temples before returning it to her purse.

"I dreamed about my Danny Boy last night," Rosemary's eyes took on a distant, dreamy look. "We were at a dance hall, but not the Legion Hall where we always went to dance. This dance floor was a shining gold and the hall was so bright, so bright." Her voice trailed off. She was silent for a moment, recollecting her dream, and then she continued.

"Danny was wearing his best suit and he sauntered across the dance floor to me, just like he did the night we first met." She smiled at the memory. "When he stood before me, he bowed and asked, 'May I have this dance?'" Rosemary cleared her throat and looked at Aidan.

"I took his hand and he led me to the dance floor. Oh my! How we danced!" Her face glowed from the telling of this dream. "We floated across the dance floor like we had wings!" Aidan noticed that a tiny tear had spilled from one of her eyes and was making a slow journey

down her cheek. But the look on her face was not one of sadness. The look on her face was one of eager anticipation.

“How did your husband die?” Aidan shifted his weight on the bench. He was a little uncomfortable with her show of emotion.

“A car accident killed him and our unborn baby.” Rosemary stared straight ahead. Her voice was flat when she continued. “He didn’t even know that I was expecting. I was going to tell him over dinner. We never made it to the restaurant.”

“And you never remarried?” Aidan asked.

“Heavens no!” she exclaimed. “Such love as what I felt for Danny could not possibly present itself twice in a lifetime.”

She lifted a fresh bouquet of forget-me-nots from where they lay on the bench between them and then attempted to stand. She was unbalanced and Aidan quickly stood and took her arm.

“I’m fine now, Aidan. Thank you.”

He let go of her arm and she walked slowly to her husband’s tall headstone. Her steps were small and unsure. Rosemary gently kissed the velvet petals of the flowers and then bent slightly to place them on the grave. Then she put one hand on the thick stone to support her weak body.

Feeling suddenly like an intruder, Aidan said, “I’d better go now, Rosemary.” He moved to her. “I will look forward to seeing you next week.”

“Yes, yes, of course, young man.”

Aidan turned and had taken just a few steps when he heard Rosemary softly say, “I will see you soon.” As he continued down the hill, he wondered if these words were spoken to him or to her dead husband.

Rosemary did not appear the following Friday. Aidan tried to dismiss her absence, convincing himself that she might be visiting family. But when she wasn’t in the cemetery the next Friday, Aidan began to worry. He searched the phone directory but could find no listing for any Quinn. Getting desperate by the middle of the week, he called all of the hospitals in the area. No one by the name of Quinn had been admitted.

Reluctantly, Aidan called the local funeral home. “I’m sorry, Sir,” the funeral director sympathized. “Mrs. Quinn died peacefully at her home over the weekend and was laid to rest on Monday. She is interred at McKeever Cemetery.”

Aidan waited until Friday to visit her gravesite. He somberly walked to the top of the knoll and looked down upon the fresh grave. The sheltering branches of the willow tree caressed the new stone that stood next to the weathered one. Aidan was surprised that a marker had been erected so soon. When he read the inscription, he knew that she had planned her stone before her death.

Rosemary Elizabeth Quinn

1935- 2008

Loving Dance Partner of My Danny Boy

The sun was bidding its daily farewell as Aidan began his walk down the hill. He stopped when the faint melodic lilt of *Danny Boy* floated down to him. “*I’ll simply sleep in peace until you come to me.*” Aidan turned and looked up at the dual plots.

Remnant rays of the fading sun were finding their way through the long swaying branches of the weeping willow tree, amazingly producing a soft strobe light effect. In the deepening light, Aidan could barely make out the forms of a young Danny and Rosemary Quinn, peacefully dancing in each other's arms. She had one hand on his shoulder, the other on his chest. He was wearing a black suit; she was wearing her flowing red dress. They were smiling.

When Aidan got home that night, he called Emily. "Would you mind if we didn't go to the party tonight?"

"Why?" Emily asked.

"I want to take you dancing."

"Dancing?" Emily sounded surprised. "Okay," she agreed, wondering what had brought on this change of plans.

"I'll pick you up in an hour. Oh, and Emily?"

"Yes?"

"Do you have a red dress?"