

Cast a Cold Eye

Stephen O'Connor

I'll call him—well—considering the nature of the story—I'll call him Marley. And then I can say, along with old Boz, "Marley was dead." That is, he was dead to me. I *believed him* to be dead. Was I *certain*? Well, I didn't see the body. How do we know that most people are dead? We hear it. I don't get the local paper, so I'm not likely to read an obituary. Usually, what happens is I get gabbing with some high school chum about the old days and a name comes up, and I ask, "Is he still around?" And the chum says, "No, he died in the late nineties," and adds the cause of death if he knows it. Or, for instance, last Saturday morning, down at the coffee shop, I hear someone say, "Jeez, I saw Kate Ross just the other day at Brook Farm. She was walking out there with her dog, the Australian collie or whatever they call them with the blue eyes. She was a big hiker. She used to post a lot of pictures of sailing on the Merrimack."

"Kate Ross died?" I ask.

And everyone nods, and the same someone says, "Never sick a day in her life. Just told her daughter she was tired and wanted to lie down and—boom! Just like that."

This news requires that I readjust my mental picture of the world. Kate Ross—dead. No more to walk with the blue-eyed dog, nor wander fields where the moorcock calls, nor glide under a billowing canvas over the back of the Merrimack, nor tweet, nor post, nor like. Nor nothing. Alas, we could not entice her a while to stay. In nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti.

How did I hear that Marley was dead? It began more gently. I heard he was sick. Then I heard he was in a coma. Weeks later, I heard that his stomach was full of some strange bacteria—ripe with it—and that these bacteria were multiplying and could not be killed by any intravenous antibiotic. Poor guy was nothing more than a comatose bio-hazard bomb. I understood he would never come out of it, that they had told his wife to prepare herself and to make the arrangements. I heard she went and picked out a coffin. And then I didn't hear anything for a couple of days, but when I asked, I heard—I *clearly* heard *someone* say: "Marley is dead." I had no reason to disbelieve it. Consequently, I made the mental adjustment. Marley and his bacteria—gone. I hung his image, the affable pock-marked face topped with wispy hair, in the "Gallery of the Dead," that hall of portraits in our minds that grows longer with time.

I didn't think it odd that I heard nothing of the funeral because Marley was not a close friend. I taught an English class for blockheads in summer school for a few years, while he was teaching an Algebra class, but we worked at different schools during the year. I'd see him around the building during the summer session, coming or going, maybe exchange a bit of Red Sox chat in the lounge area, and then, the five weeks was up. I wouldn't see him again until the next summer, if I worked. But I would run into George or Linda or other people connected with the program who knew him better than I, and it was they who had informed me of his lapse into a coma, of

his impending demise, and one of them, I forget whom, of his passing. I said a brief prayer, after my agnostic but literary fashion:

*O man! hold thee on in courage of soul
Through the stormy shades of thy wordly way,
And the billows of clouds that around thee roll
Shall sleep in the light of a wondrous day,
Where hell and heaven shall leave thee free
To the universe of destiny.¹*

That evening, out on the deck, I raised a glass of vino to him. “You were a good sort, Marley,” I said to the moony night. “Farewell!” I thought little more of Marley, to be honest. I had my own death to think about, which could not be far off, relatively.

Dead. Toasted. Hopefully not roasted. Picture in the gallery. Gone. Mental Adjustment complete. Bacteria victorious. Man defeated. Life goes on sans Marley.

Six months later, I found myself in an old mill building which had been converted for modern use, and where, on the sixth floor, my doctor bustles about in his white coat. After my checkup, I was descending on the elevator with four or five other people, thinking about my slightly high cholesterol, my climbing PSA, and the doctor’s admonition to cut the drinking down to two glasses a week. A week! Barbarous. I was lost in these sullen reflections, examining my own reflection in the polished silver doors in front of me, when the car jolted to a stop with a jarring ding and the doors slid open. And there, directly in front of me, a foot away, on two living legs, looking a bit pale but not ghostly, was a living Marley with his pock-marked face and wispy hair. “Jeeeesus Christ!” I cried, (unwittingly invoking the name of an earlier *resurrectee*). I staggered backward into the citizens who, in their efforts to exit, were pushing me toward the dead man.

There were expressions of bewilderment from those who had travelled down the shaft with me as I resisted their propulsion. The reason for my odd behavior was instantly made clear to them by my tactless, tasteless, and utterly spontaneous cry, “*I thought you were dead!*”

Marley stopped there in front of the elevator and responded casually, “Everyone thought I was dead.” The crowd sauntered on, looking over their shoulders, while an elderly couple shuffled onto the elevator, which left without my now living friend.

I resisted the temptation to test his substantiality with a poke. “What the hell happened, Marley?”

“No one really knows. After they had given me up for a goner, I suddenly woke up, and I recovered.”

¹ From Percy Bysshe Shelley’s “On Death”

“I apologize for my outburst,” I said. He shrugged it off. I was still puzzled. “So—now—I don’t know how to say this, but didn’t they tell your wife to make the funeral arrangements?”

“Yup. She bought the very cheapest coffin they had, by the way. Not that I would have noticed...”

“No. I suppose not.”

“Still...” he said, looking somewhat wounded. He asked if I would be doing the summer school that year and we spoke about that. The ding sounded, the elevator doors opened again, and I realized I must be holding him up from some appointment. “Well, I’m very glad to find you so...not dead.”

“Thanks.”

As I said, we were not close friends, and we had exhausted the momentous topics of summer school and his not being dead. “Let’s get together for coffee sometime,” I said in parting.

“Sure. Great,” he said, but I didn’t even have his number, and as my grandfather used to say, “Sometime is no time.”

The final act of this little drama came a few months after the elevator encounter. I ran into George at Market Basket. “Hey, hey, hey,” he said. That was his customary greeting.

“Have you seen Marley?” I asked.

“Poor Marley’s dead,” he said.

“No! He isn’t! I ran into him downtown. Let me see, it was...”

“He died on Friday.”

Now I had just removed the image of Marley from the Gallery of the Dead and replaced the old familiar image triumphantly upright on the plane of the living. With us. And here was George telling me to lay poor Marley low once more. “Are you *sure* he’s dead?” I asked.

“I ran into Dick Flanagan at the Worthen. He mentioned it.”

“Dick Flanagan mentioned it, eh? That’s the same Flanagan who once told us he was having a sexual relationship with a female demon spirit, an incubus?”

“I think it was a *succubus*. The difference is...”

“I don’t care what the difference is! Flanagan is *non compos mentis*. I’m not going to be surprised by a living Marley again based on Flanagan’s word. I’m going to investigate.”

Investigate I did. I cut my food shopping short and drove home to search online through the obits in *The Lowell Sun*. Well, there was no question. There, among the photos of the recently dead, was the pock-marked face, the wispy hair, and the placid eyes taking a last peek at the living public. “Passed away suddenly at his home.” It turned out that the wake was that afternoon, and I thought I should go.

There wasn’t much of a crowd, just a few of the teachers who had worked with him at the high school and a gaggle of cousins. His wife, I have to say, looked good in black; she was taller than he had been, and I apologized mentally to old Marley if I gave her physique an approving gaze. I’m sure he would have understood. *I’m not dead, yet*. I took her proffered hand and told her that Marley was a good guy, that I had always enjoyed working with him, and that I was sorry to see him go. I didn’t say, “for a second time.” I was glad I had come because she looked touched. She was very sweet. I was hoping they had given her all her money back for the first coffin and maybe a break on the second, which by the way, did not look cheap to me, but I confess I’m no connoisseur of coffins.

I moved on and knelt in front of Marley and said a prayer from Tennyson:

*Behold, we know not anything;
I can but trust that good shall fall
At last—far off—at last, to all,
And every winter change to spring.*²

I don’t know if I would have been entirely shocked if, like Finnegan, Marley roused himself and sat up, saying, “Everyone thinks I’m dead, again.” The whole series of events left me with an odd feeling. You’re alive. You’re dead. You’re alive. You’re dead again. There really didn’t seem to be a lot of difference in the grand scheme of things. No noticeable vibrations in the fabric of *our* reality. Physicists now believe our past and our future is forever being lived and relived somewhere in space-time, or so a professor told me down at the coffee shop. *Behold, we know not anything*. Shakespeare probably had it right, though. We are all players with our entrances and our exits, and unlike Marley, no re-entrances. For when we exit this brightly lit stage, it’s damnably dark and cheerless in the wings, and you will never hear your cue, unless it’s for the last great curtain call.

Stephen O’Connor’s work has appeared in *The Massachusetts Review*, *Aethlon*, *The Amsterdam Quarterly* and elsewhere. He is the author of the story collection, *Smokestack Lightning*, and the novels *The Witch at Rivermouth*, *The Spy in the City of Books*, and *This Is No Time to Quit Drinking*, which was recently a finalist in the American Bookfest Best Book Awards.

² From Alfred Lord Tennyson’s “In Memoriam”