

## Feet by Seamus Deane

The plastic table-cloth hung so far down that I could see only their feet. But I could hear the noise and some of the talk, although I was so crunched up inside that I could make out very little of what they were saying. Besides, Smoky was whimpering as he cuddled up on my stomach and I could feel his body quivering every so often under his fur; every quiver made me deaf to their words and alert to their noise.

He had found me under the table when the room filled with feet, standing at all angles, and he sloped through them and came to huddle himself on me. He felt the dread too. She was going to die after they took her to the hospital. I could hear the clumping of the feet of the ambulance men as they tried to manoeuvre her on a stretcher down the stairs. They would have to lift it high over the banister; the turn was too narrow. The stretcher had red handles. I had seen them when the shiny shoes of the ambulance men appeared in the centre of the room. One had been holding it, folded up, perpendicular, with the handles on the ground beside his shiny black shoes which had a tiny redness in one toe-cap when he put the stretcher handles on to the linoleum. The lino itself was so shiny that there was a redness in it too, at an angle, buried in it like a warmth just under the surface. Una was so hot this morning that, pale and sweaty as she was, she made me think of redness too. It came off her, like heat from a griddle. Her eyes shone with pain and pressure, inflated from the inside.

This was a new illness. I loved the names of the others— diphtheria, scarlet fever or scarletina, rubella, polio, influenza; they almost always ended in an 'o' or an 'a' and made me think of Italian football-players or racing drivers or chess-players.

Besides, each had its own smell, especially diphtheria, because of the disinfected sheets that were hung over the bedroom doors and billowed out their acrid

fragrances in the draughts that chilled your ankles on the stairs. Even the mumps, which came after the diphtheria, was a sickness that did not frighten, because the word was as funny as the shape of everybody's face, all swollen, as if there had been a terrific fight. But this was a new sickness. This was called meningitis. It was a word you had to bite on to say it. It had a fright and a hiss in it. It didn't make me think of anything except Una's eyes widening all the time and getting lighter, as if helium were pumping into them from her brain. They would burst, I thought, unless they could find a way of getting all that pure helium pain out. I wondered if they could.

They were at the bottom of the stairs. All the feet moved that way. I could see Uncle Manus's brown shoes; the heels were worn down, and he was hesitating, moving back and forward a little. Uncle Dan and Uncle Tom had identical shoes, heavy and rimed with mud and cement, because they had come from the building site in Creggan. Dan's were dirtier, though, because Tom was the foreman. But they weren't good shoes. Dan put one knee up on a chair and I squirmed flat to see the scabs on the sole of the one that was in mid-air. There was putlock oil on his socks and black bars of it on the sole. But it was my mother's and father's feet that I watched most. She was wearing low heels that badly needed mending, and her feet were always swollen so that, even from there, I could see the shoe leather embedded, vanishing into her ankles.

There was more scuffle and noise and her feet disappeared into the hallway, after the stretcher, and she was cough-crying as my father's work-boots followed close behind her, huge, with the laces thonged round the back. Then everybody went out and the room was empty.

Smoky shook under his fur. It was cold in there with all the doors open and the winter air darkening. She was going to die and she was younger than me. She was

only six. I tried to imagine her not there. She would go to heaven, for sure. Wouldn't she miss us? What could you do in heaven, except smile? All the same, she had a great smile.

Everybody came in again. There wasn't much talking. My father stood near the table. I could smell the quays off his dungarees, the aroma of horizons where ships grew to a speck and disappeared. Every day he went to work I felt he was going out foreign, as we said; and every day when he came back, I was relieved that he had changed his mind. Tom was pushing a spirit-level into a long leg-pocket of his American boiler suit, and Dan picked up his coat, which had fallen off a chair on to the floor. I could see the dermatitis stains on his fingers and knuckles. He was allergic to the plaster he had to work with every day. Next month, he'd be off work, his hands all scabs and sores. Where would Una be next month?

They all left except my parents. He was at the table again, very close. My mother was standing at the press-cupboard, a couple of feet away, her shoes pressed together, looking very small. She was still crying. My father's boots moved towards her until they were very close. He was saying something. Then he got closer, almost stood on her shoes, which moved apart. One of his boots was between her feet. There was her shoe, then his boot, then her shoe, then his boot. I looked at Smoky, who licked my face. He was kissing her. She was still crying. Their feet shifted and I thought she was going to fall for one shoe came off the ground for a second. Then they steadied and they just stood there like that and everything was silent and I scarcely breathed.

That was my first death. When the priest tossed the first three shovelfuls of clay on to the coffin, the clattering sound seemed to ring all over the hillside graveyard and my father's face moved sideways as if he had been struck.

We were all lined up on the lip of the grave which was brown and narrow, so much so that the ropes they had looped through the coffin handles came up stained with the dun earth. One of the grave-diggers draped the ropes over a headstone before he started heaving the great mound of clay on top of her. The clay came up to the brim as though it were going to boil over. We placed flowers and leaned our hands on the cold earth as we had leaned them on the glossy coffin top and as we had pressed them on her waxen hands the night before at the wake, where one candle burned and no drink was taken. When we got back, the candle was out and my mother was being comforted by aunts and neighbours who all wore the same serious and determined expression of compassion and sternness, so that even the handsome and the less-than-handsome all looked alike. The men doffed their caps and looked into the distance. No one looked anyone else in the face, it seemed.

The children appeared here and there, their faces at angles behind or between adults, fascinated, like angels staring into the light. I went up to the bedroom where she had lain and sat on my bed and looked at hers and buried my face in the pillow where her pain had been, saying her name inside my head but not out loud, breathing for something of her but only finding the scent of cotton, soap, of a life rinsed out and gone. When I heard noise on the stairs, I came out to see my uncles lifting the third bed from that downstairs room up over the banisters. They told me to stand aside as they worked it into the room and put the bed where she was waked beside the bed where she had been sick. The wake bed was a better one, with a headboard. Deirdre or Eilis would have a bed to herself.

I came back only once, some weeks later. My mother had asked me to visit the grave and put flowers on it. They would have to be wild flowers, since shop flowers were too expensive. I forgot until it was almost four o'clock and getting dark. I ran to the graveyard, hoping it would not be shut. But it was too late. The gates were padlocked. I cut up the lane alongside the east wall until I reached the corner where the wall had collapsed about two feet from the top. It was easy to climb over and inside there was an untended area where the grass was long and where I had seen flowers growing before. But there were none, not even on the stunted hedgerow beneath the wall—not a berry, not a husk. I pulled some long grass and tried to plait it, but it was too wet and slippery. I threw the long stems away into the mottled air and they fell apart as they disappeared.

Running between the little pathways which separated the graves, I got lost several times before I found the fresh grave and recognized the withered flowers as those we had left a short time before. I pulled the wreaths apart, hoping to find some flowers not so badly withered, but there were very few. A torn rose, a chrysanthemum as tightly closed as a nut, some irises that were merely damp stalks with a tinge of blue—that was all. But I couldn't get them to hold together with the bits of wire from the original wreaths, so I scooped at the ground and put them in a bunch together, pressing the earth round them with my foot. All the while, I was saying her name over and over. Una, Una, Una, Una, Una. It was dark and I felt contrite and lonely, fearful as well. 'I have to go,' I said to the ground, 'I have to go. I don't like leaving you, but I have to go, Una.' The wall seemed far away. I got up off my knees and rubbed my hands on my socks. 'I'll come back soon. 'Bye.'

I set off at a run, along the dark pathways, zig-zagging round headstones and great glass bells in which flowers were stifling, Celtic crosses, raised statues, lonely, bare plots, a fresh grave where the flowers still had some colour even in the light that the

trees were swallowing into their trunks and branches. She came right down the path before me for an instant, dressed in her usual tartan skirt and jumper, her hair tied in ribbons, her smile sweeter than ever. Even as I said her name she wasn't there and I was running on, saying her name again, frightened now, until I reached the wall and looked back from the broken top stones over the gloomy hillside and its heavy burden of dead. Then I ran again until I reached the street-lamps on the Lone Moor Road, and scraped the mud off my shoes against the kerb and brushed what I could of it from my clothes. I walked home, slowly. I was late but being a bit later did not matter now. I didn't know if I would tell or not; that depended on what I was asked. I knew it would upset my mother, but, then again, it might console her to think Una was still about, although I wished she wasn't wandering about that graveyard on her own.

My older brother, Liam, settled the issue for me. I met him in the street and told him instantly. At first he was amused, but then got angry when I wondered aloud if I should tell my mother. 'Are you out of your head, or what? You'd drive her mad; she's out of her mind anyway sending you for flowers this time o' year. Sure any half-sane person would have said Yes and done nothing. Anyway, you saw nothing. You say nothing. You're not safe to leave alone.'

All night I lay thinking of her and hearing again the long wail of agony from my mother half-way through the family rosary. It made everybody stand up and Smoky crawled back under the table. I wished I could go in there with him but we all just stood there as she cried and pulled her hair and almost fought my father's consoling arms away. All her features were so stretched I hardly recognized her. It was like standing in the wind at night, listening to her. She cried all night. Every so often I would hear her wail, so desolate it seemed distant, and I thought of Una in the graveyard, standing under all those towering stone crosses, her ribbons red.

## Seamus Deane

Seamus Deane was shortlisted for the Booker Prize for Fiction in 1996 for his novel *Reading in the Dark*. He is also the author of five works of non-fiction including *Foreign Affections: Essays on Edmund Burke* (2005) and three collections of poetry including *Rumours* (1977). He is the editor of the *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*.