By the time we arrived, my aunt had washed the old face, and straightened the clothes, and laid out my grandfather's body on the bed in Michael's room. He had been dead an hour or slightly more when we got there.

We straggled down the huge concrete steps from the road, not together, and yet not quite separately either. We were conscious of each other in the silence in a way that we never were around the table at dinner, or watching television in the lounge at night. All the way down no one spoke, but my mother occasionally put out her hand to steady herself, and brushed my arm. It made my skin tingle and I was a little afraid for her. At the door, we rang the bell and stood around waiting.

My aunt Moira opened it. She said nothing, but hugged my mother and dabbed at her face with a wet handkerchief, blinking all the time and shaking her head slightly from side to side.

Helen and I followed them onto the verandah, and our father came slowly behind us. He was weeping softly, scarcely louder than a whisper, and kept his head down to hide his embarrassment. I went back and touched his arm, but he seemed not to notice. Moira began to cry in a quiet, constrained way at first, and made a tremendous effort to stop herself; but she lost her control and gradually was sobbing violently, with her chest heaving and her nose running. Which had the effect of encouraging my mother to do the same. Helen and I stood awkwardly by and wondered what we should do. In the stillness, the gentle rattling of one of the window blinds was the only sound to reach us beyond the awful wailing of the two women and the faint, gasping noise that my father was making. I studied the pattern on the lino at my feet and waited for something to happen. I felt cold, although it was Christmas Eve, and so hot that we left the top sheets off our beds at night, and sat around during the days feeling slow and listless. My nose, my fingertips and my chin were unmistakably cold. Helen was pale, and she was tapping her foot nervously. The paleness in her cheeks was not unusual, and the fullness of her hair falling about her face and neck made her seem to me quite beautiful. I wondered what she was thinking about our grandfather who lay dead on the bed in Michael's room.

I asked her to stop tapping her foot, and she looked up at me. As she did, her eyes rolled around in their sockets and she fell to the floor. Her hair came forward across her face and her legs bent back under her.

Moira and my mother came back to us immediately and my father started to loosen her collar.

"She's fainted," Moira said. "Get her some water, will you, Catherine? There are glasses over the sink in the cupboard."

I stood there staring at Helen and thinking how beautiful she was. I had heard what Moira said, but it didn't seem to mean anything. It struck me as nothing at all.

"Catherine?" It was my mother. "Did you hear what Moira said? Your sister has fainted. Will you get her some water?"

I could see her and hear her, but still it didn't mean anything to me. I was

aware of feeling cold again, and I could still hear the wailing and sobbing that had stopped, in fact, when Helen fell.

"Catherine!" She was angry now and her face was crinkling at the corners the way it always did when she was about to cry.

"I did hear her," I said, "but I don't understand." My father was tapping Helen's cheek, and she moaned, rolling her head to one side. Moira went off to the kitchen to get the glass of water and I continued to stare at Helen's face. I had never felt that I wanted to *be* my sister, but at that moment, with the colour returning to her cheeks, and the light catching the redness in the curls about her neck and forehead, I wanted more than anything to look like her. I felt that it must be a great advantage in approaching the world to know that your face was almost perfect.

As if it had been written, my mother began to cry again, but softly this time, and more as if she couldn't help herself than as if she were trying to outdo Moira in the expression of her feelings. She turned to me and said, as she had often said before, that I was cold and callous and that I had no thought or feeling for anyone but myself. I was not sure whether she said it because I showed no sign of wanting to comfort her, or because I hadn't gone to get the water for Helen. Either way, I didn't care and she knew it.

Helen was on her feet again and said that she felt better, so we went into Michael's room to see my grandfather's body. We went in quietly, my mother and Moira walking on tip-toes because they were both wearing stiletto-heeled shoes that made a lot of noise. I stood in the doorway while the others went over to the bed, and watched the eyes in the picture of the Sacred Heart that hung over it. Wherever you moved in the room the eyes seemed to follow you. My mother bent over and kissed his cheek. It disgusted me to see her kiss a corpse, even if it was the corpse of a gentle old man who had always treated me kindly, and told me wild stories that could not possibly have been true. Moira suggested that we say the Rosary. We knelt down around the bed and she started. She kissed the crucifix and blessed herself with it, and then, in a broken monotone, began the aspirations and the Apostle's Creed. There were just the five of us which meant that we would each get a turn at one of the Sorrowful Mysteries.

I took my own beads out of my pocket and gave them to my father who was kneeling beside me mumbling the responses. He had not been to Mass since the 1950's, since, as he said, "the Church went political," and he could not remember the second half of the Hail Mary. When his turn came I helped him by whispering the name of the decade, "The Scourging at the Pillar", and reciting the first half with him. When we reached a part he had forgotten, I carried on, and he picked it up again when some old familiar cadence of it gave him confidence to continue.

Although it was widely suspected in our family that he was less than fervent in his devotions, it was not known that he had abandoned the practice of the Faith completely by anyone besides my mother, Helen, and I. He dutifully attended weddings, baptisms and funerals with the rest of us, and even went to Helen's Confirmation, although he resisted in every polite way possible till the last moment. It was one thing in those days and in that clan, to object to the Church, to say even that there wasn't a

word of truth in any of it, but to display, or affect, or suggest in any way, an ignorance of so basic a virtue in man as the "Hail Mary" was distasteful and embarrassing to everyone concerned. In spite of everything, or perhaps because of it, he often remarked that "Cocky" Calwell was a Papal Knight and that somehow made it possible for him to exist in our midst. We could never completely dismiss him as a heretic, and I always included a special prayer for the salvation of his soul in the Commemoration of the Living. I could not bear the thought of my own father in Hell for Eternity, even if the Church had gone political.

For the duration of his decade we tried to pretend that he was overcome by the sight of his dead father, and saved Moira any distress on account of the state of his soul. Helen took up the next decade and he relaxed. Moira's eyes were closed, my mother's head was bent, giving the impression of intense concentration and sincerity, and my own head was tilted upwards to give me a better view of the Sacred Heart, Who presided at that gathering, sad-eyed and gracious, as if it were something that happened every day.

Helen spoke quickly in a voice that could have been a small child's and with the confidence that comes from constant daily repetition. It had a sing-song ring about it, and she ran words and phrases together, which in the normal, secular course of events would be stressed and pitched quite differently. I doubt that she was thinking of what they meant: just that she was saying the Rosary as she'd done yesterday, and would do tomorrow, and the day after that, and the day after that . . . Except that she was saying this one for the repose of our grandfather's soul, which may have been why she cleared her throat from time to time, and held her hands very tightly clasped together. None of us was actually praying.

When we'd finished, we followed Moira out to the kitchen at the back of the house. It was a huge house: every room was wide and uncluttered, and we were grateful to be such a long way from Michael's room. Moira put the kettle on for tea and cut some sandwiches which my mother helped her to serve. We had only just begun to eat and drink, when Michael came in with the priest. He was white-haired and reticent, and probably a little past middle-age, but was widely respected and admired for his ability to say Sunday Mass in twenty-five minutes or a bit less. Outsiders who came into the parish to witness this marvel were often discomfited to find that he managed it by leaving the sermon until afterwards, and then trusted in God and embarrassment to hold his people captive for a further fifteen minutes while he expounded principles of good Catholic living. Even so, they had to admit that, notwithstanding the sermon, his proficiency in Latin and the ritual of the Mass to the extent of twenty-five minutes, was worth the excursion. He'd been known to perform some of the fastest Nuptial Masses in the history of the Church in Australia, and was credited with a sense of humour—a mistaken impression which arose from his use of electrified bells and a taped version of the "Ave Maria" by Bing Crosby to see the parishoners out on Sundays. In fact, he thought of these last two as progressive innovations and was unaware of their mixed reception. His brogue was intact after thirty years away from home, and he had never

been known to speak a word he hadn't been asked for.

He came in looking solemn. Moira offered him tea and sandwiches, but he said that he wanted to start the Anointing straight away and would wait for his tea afterwards.

My father and I stayed at the table while the others went out again to where the body was. We sat and ate in silence, until at last he said, in a tone that suggested he felt he ought to say something: "The poor old bugger." I nodded. "I'll miss him, you know. He went bad at the end there, but he could have been worse. A lot worse—he could have gone really bad on us at the end."

I nodded again. I couldn't think of anything to say, and my mouth was full. Nothing more was said until later, when the others came back. We sat together eating, and looking around at anything we could see rather than at each other, and making sure we kept our mouths full so we wouldn't have to speak. They came in noisily and fussed around Father Nolan, making him fresh tea and more sandwiches. They seemed to be enjoying it in a subdued sort of way and took their busy-ness very seriously. The priest consoled my father by pointing out that my grandfather was almost eighty, and that it had to be expected sooner or later, and my father made the effort of agreeing with him enthusiastically. Then the conversation turned to other things.

I wandered out onto the verandah again and toyed with the idea of going to look at the body. It was something I felt I ought to do, but at the same time it frightened me a bit. I thought that later on I might regret having the opportunity to see him and not taking it, but I really didn't want to be in there alone with him. So I didn't go. Instead, I went into the bathroom and vomited.

I felt better almost immediately afterwards, and thought that I might be able to go back to the others and not find them oppressive. I washed my hands and dried them on a visitor's towel – Moira remembered small things even in a crisis – and was on my way to the kitchen when Damien, Michael's older brother, came in, followed by his wife and his father-in-law. I had never liked her, but was obliged to speak politely to her whenever we met because she had married my favourite cousin, and had, therefore, some call on my affection. Even so, I was always uncomfortable when she was near me because she was aggressively unintelligent, and seemed to derive some satisfaction from ordering me around on family occasions such as twenty-first birthdays. I regarded her as an intrusion into an intimacy which was precious and had endured many small crises before she came along. I blamed her, unfairly, for what was not her doing. Damien and I were no longer uncritically devoted to each other because we had grown up and valued other things more highly than each other. Not because this heavy-thighed, garrulous and over-bearing bitch had thrust herself awkwardly between us. Despite logic, I resented her and could not forgive her her limitations. He stopped to speak to me, but she tucked her arm firmly under his, smiled at me, and pulled him away towards the kitchen. As I watched them go, I was more alone and cold than I could ever remember. They passed me a few minutes later on their way to see the body, but I

kept my eyes trained firmly on their feet and tried to forget that Damien had shared some of the most wanton moments of my life, and that I had loved him for it.

There wasn't a book to read anywhere in the house. A few old school textbooks, and a Scout Manual of Michael's, but nothing I could actually read, so I went to the front bedroom and lay down on the bed. I could hear the voices from the kitchen, but they were indistinct, and it seemed as if they were all talking at once, so there was no point in trying to make out what was being said. There was a window-seat overlooking the garden and a mass of old lace curtains all around it.

For the first time that day I thought of Tom, and wondered vaguely what he was doing. I was drowsy in the heat, and weak from vomiting, and I wanted to fade out of it all and away from the priest, and the corpse and my sad father. It seemed to me then, that as I reached the point of sleep and relaxed the knot in my throat, Tom kissed me and stroked my neck, and started to unbutton my dress. And then, none of it seemed to be so intolerably awful after all.

G. JOHNSON