

# HIS WORLD

*Lionel Mullally*

AT FIFTY-TWO years of age, Peter Daly was often described as a career civil servant. He wasn't.

He was a civil servant but was not career orientated and had been in his Executive Officer role for twenty four years. Several younger members whom he had trained, supervised and mentored had progressed along the ranks and moved to other sections or departments. Peter hadn't.

He'd smile and say 'I'm happy as I am!'

Some of the younger ladies in the office thought him older than his years.

"He dresses old," said one, "Who wears Farah slacks these days?"

Peter always dressed for his office role in standard shirt, tie and trousers. He was never flamboyant. Perhaps, a Santa tie at Christmas.

He was polite, friendly, yet private, smiling and always helpful. He was, in a word, nice. And so, therefore, was often the subject of casual humour at his expense.

"Coming on the beer tonight with us Peter?" they'd ask smiling, knowing the standard answer, and miming the words behind him.

"No thanks. A night in with the missus and the soaps and some reading beckons. Another time perhaps."

"That wife of his has a tight rein on him" they'd whisper. "God love him, he's got no life at all with her."

At five thirty Peter would tidy his desk and bid the others

goodnight. He'd gather his coat around him, place his newspaper and lunchbox in his eco friendly carrier bag and depart for home.

"He'd be great in a quiz, wouldn't he?" suggested a colleague, "he must be an expert on the soaps, books and TV!"

"He wouldn't go to one in the first place" was the answer, "probably wouldn't be allowed! A few hours at the Christmas do and the same at a retirement function is all he's permitted! And you never see his missus with him."

They chuckled and readied for home.

Peter walked the half mile to the bus stop, waited and boarded his bus. He sat on the left near the back, among some familiar faces, nodding and smiling as he did. After thirty minutes he alighted at his stop, turned left and walked through a narrow lane, emerging onto a quiet cul-de-sac. At the fourth house he opened the gate, promising himself to oil the hinge that addressed him, and walked in the twelve steps. Sliding open the porch door, he removed the key from his pocket and, unlocking the front door with it, entered home. He placed his bag at the foot of the stairs on his left and walked further in to disarm the alarm. He returned to close the door and pick up the post from the floor. He looked through the envelopes as he walked into the kitchen and, in a practiced move, filled the kettle, turned it on to boil and turned on the TV in the

sitting room. For the next hour he prepared and ate his dinner, drank two mugs of tea, scanned the news on Teletext and laughed quietly to a comedy programme on the screen. At ten minutes to the hour he washed all and put away his mug and plate to their spaces. He put on his coat and placed the book, Jo Nesbo's *The Snowman*, in his bag, set the alarm and left.

The walk took just over half an hour. As he entered through the automatic doors of the building he opened his coat zip and felt the heat greet him.

"Good evening ladies" he said, "how are you today?"

Smiling back, they'd answer and he would enquire after a named son or daughter or husband.

"I'll talk to you later," and he'd finish with, "best not be late for Coronation Street."

He'd take his leave of them and walk the hall, his steps echoing slightly in the emptiness. He'd pause, knock gently and open the door, entering the room.

"It's only me."

He walks to the side of the bed and reaching over, gently kisses his wife's brow. He moves a stray hair, looks again and smiles.

"Hello love," he whispers.

Turning, he removes his coat and hangs it by the door and takes his seat beside her.

"I haven't missed anything I hope" he continues, and reaches to collect the remote and turn the

volume up on the TV. He reaches over to hold her hand. They watch in silence. Peter would exclaim or show surprise at a turn in the show, point out an interesting moment or laugh at the latest witty remarks from one of the characters. Peter tells her of the day's events at work; of Paul and Claire in the office and a deadline missed; of the news from his mother in Dublin; and the latest in the papers. The steady breathing from his wife and muted beeping are the only response.

At 9pm, Nurse Elaine calls in with a student and greets Peter. They know each other well and are relaxed and comfortable companions. Reading the monitors and taking notes she talks, asks after his work, tells of the first steps her grandchild has taken, and the first bruises from the first fall. They share a few more stories, comment on the weather and the hopes for the county team. Peter had read of the last match and Elaine mentioned watching it in the freezing cold from the stands as her nephew had made the county panel.

Elaine helps Peter to freshen the pillows and settle his wife. As she leaves Peter removes the book from his bag.

She pauses and watches as he takes the marker from its page and settles again asking,

"Now, where were we? Ah yes, the scary bit!"

He thumbs a page and continues to read to his wife from where he had left off.

"Who's that man?" asked the student nurse to Elaine as they continued their rounds.

"Peter Daly," she replies, "a lovely man. He was a great com-

fort to me two years ago when my husband Dan passed away. He has been coming here for years. He's here every night at the same time to watch the TV with his wife and read her a book. He stays with her till almost eleven o'clock most nights"

"Is she getting better?"

"No, unfortunately not and she never will. She's been like that for twenty one years now. A road collision. Her brain stem is severed from the spinal cord. It can never repair. Her body continues to breathe and the cardiac and respiratory systems are fine, but she is not and never will be conscious again".

"Oh that's terrible. But why does he come every night. I don't mean to sound cruel, but she wouldn't know. She doesn't know him anymore."

Elaine smiled.

"He was asked that once and he replied, 'but I know who she is'.

He never misses a night with her. I heard too from his sister, that, just before the accident, his wife had joked that if he really loved her he'd shout it out to the world. He reached over and whispered in her ear 'I love you'. When she asked why he didn't shout it out for the world to hear, he replied that she was his world".

They continued their round.

Later, Peter marked the page of the book and placed it in his bag.

As he freshened the pillows once more and straightened the sheets he spoke of the new person in the office, that they were related to an old neighbour of theirs, of the talk of the changes that the new Minister would make in the department.

"But, haven't we heard all that before! Now, I best let you get

some rest". Reaching in till their foreheads touched for several seconds. His eyes remained closed as he whispered 'I love you'. He remained close and still for a few seconds more.

"I'll see you tomorrow."

He left the room and quietly closed the door. On the way out he said goodnight to Elaine and the other nurses. He walked home and entered the house again as earlier. He turned the TV on and caught the last of a film that he silently promised to get on DVD sometime. He prepared for and settled into bed.

He awoke at his usual time of six thirty the following morning. He rose and dressed to walk for almost an hour, exchanging waves and salutes with the familiar like-minded others before returning to breakfast, shower and dress for work. As he entered the office he smiled a morning greeting to Paul who commented on the nights events in the pub.

"Did you go out yourself Peter?"

"Ah no. Watched TV and chatted with herself mostly. Some funny bits on the TV and told her all about yourself and Claire's mishap on the project. Quiet enough otherwise."

Paul nodded. He turned and asked Peter if he would help him with his application form for the promotion role that had been advertised.

"I'll go for it" said Paul, "I think I'd like the role and the move. Six years here is long enough for me".

"No problem" answered Peter, "bring the form in later and I'll go through it with you."

The day, like other days, continued its familiar rhythm.