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All the Trappings of a Funeral, With the Exception of One



AT LAST, ACCEPTANCE Because of the funeral, Aidan Fontana, 5, acknowledged for the first time that his father was dead. But there have also been other, less helpful effects.

By CHARLIE LeDUFF

The funeral could not have been more beautiful had there actually been a body.

The priest still wore his white vestments. The pipers still played. A thousand heavy hearts wiped their noses and stared at their shoes.

The veneer was there, but the coffin of Firefighter Dave Fontana was empty. It was a prop on loan from the local funeral director.

When the Mass last week let out, the limousine followed the pallbearers who in turn followed the caisson. Five-year-old Aidan Fontana sat inside the black car wearing his father's helmet.

"Mommy," the boy said to his mother, Marian, as he stared out the window at the spectacle of a thousand firefighters saluting him, "I'll remember this day for the rest of my life."

"Good," she said. "That's why we did it — for you."

It was the first time Aidan acknowledged that there would be a life without Lt. Dave Fontana. Daddy was dead. He finally believed it and he returned the salutes of the firefighters.

The widow cried and wiped her eyes and tried to appear as though she was happy. But there was no happiness anywhere inside Marian Fontana. Grief is not a neat little package, she said. An empty box does not change what happened. She would happily move forward if she could figure which direction that was.

SQUAD 1

The Empty Coffin

The borrowed box was supposed to be the first step in a new and normal life for the family and friends of Dave Fontana, one of 12 firefighters from Squad 1 in Park Slope, Brooklyn, where he also lived, who were killed at the twin towers. It brought that, but it also brought strange, unexpected effects.

The little boy has grown sullen now that he understands the meaning of Sept. 11. He throws tantrums when it's time for bed, something he never used to do. The widow is less content than before. Her days are still consumed with bills and paperwork for the Fire Department. An artist, she has no shows planned.

Mr. Fontana's fellow firefighter and friend, Sean Cummins, sits and waits with other members of Squad 1 for a good fire — a fire in which nobody gets hurt, but that provides some action to take their minds away from the wilted flowers sitting in pitchers of black water. They have carried coffins at a half-dozen funerals and they'll attend a half-dozen more.

Mr. Cummins has trouble with the mock

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funerals. "Carrying empty caskets, it doesn't feel right," he said at the wake as he stood away from a group of firefighters who were dusty and carried the unmistakable stench of ground zero.

"It is mostly firefighters they are finding, he said, because bunker gear is not easily destroyed and has the preservative qualities of a rubber bag.

"With a little more time," Mr. Cummins said, "I'm sure we could find Dave. With just a little more time."

The combination of the funeral dress blues and his small frame gave Mr. Cummins the appearance of a steeplechase jockey. He looked into the warm sun and commented on the incongruity of the day. The shadows of the branches danced in the stained glass. The dead leaves blew down the sidewalk, making a scraping sound.

"Ah good lord," Mr. Cummins said as he put on his white gloves and prepared to stand over an empty coffin. "I hope it's like this when I die and not a miserable day. Rain, now that would be awfully Irish."

He makes his home in Rockaway Park, Queens, an Irish enclave on the west end of the Rockaway Peninsula. His house is of the Queen Anne style, large with white siding. There is a flag in his and every other yard, and one morning last week a fire truck was on the block checking hydrants. The place has a seaside New England feel, except that it is 12 miles east of Manhattan and about 90 people from the neighborhood died on Sept. 11.

One of those missing is Gerard Dewan, a firefighter who lived in the Cummins's basement. He was assigned to 3 Truck in Manhattan and his room is exactly how he left it, his bed made, the newspaper from Sept. 9 on the table.

There is to be a funeral for him in Boston this week. And again there will be no body. Sean and Maureen Cummins will attend. Then they will return home and pack the remnants of his life.

"He didn't have anybody in New York," Mr. Cummins said as he stood in his bathtub repairing some leaking pipes, a job he put off for six weeks. "Gerry really found a family here with us."

The small details of domestic life are monumental tasks these days, Mrs. Cummins said. The pipes still drip, the garden needs tending, the children still need to be put off to school. Then again, she said, married men are more fortunate. At least there is a routine for them.

"I know there is a part of him who wishes he were in the towers that day," she said as she put on the

Squad 1

This is the second article of a series on the lives of those left behind by Dave Fontana, one of 12 firefighters from an elite fire and rescue unit in Brooklyn killed on Sept. 11 at the World Trade Center.

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Nancy Siesel/The New York Times

At the wake for Dave Fontana, firefighters took turns standing guard by the empty coffin. "With a little more time," a colleague said, "I'm sure we could find Dave. With just a little more time."

kettle. "He's tough in public, but he's weak with us."

Last week, Mr. Cummins installed a fake fireplace in his living room so he could sit with his children and stare at the electric flames. It reminds him of simpler times in Ireland, where he grew up in Dublin. He can sit for hours and say nothing.

Mr. Cummins and Lt. Dennis Farrell, the leader of Squad 1, were supposed to speak at Mr. Fontana's funeral, but neither did. Mr. Cummins could not bring himself to regale strangers with stories of their firehouse antics. And Lieutenant Farrell felt he had spoken at too many funerals already.

He, too, was close with Mr. Fontana. As leader of the squad, he has taken on many of the burdens of putting the station house back together. The widows of his men turn to him. He's a strong man. They will have to put their own homes back together, but it's nice to know the lieutenant is there.

Aidan Fontana is coping better at school now. When Mrs. Fontana drops him there, he doesn't cling so much. That's progress, she said. The kids made him a book to make him feel happy. It told stories about him and his father. He said he liked it. He likes the letters and presents people send him too.

He points out pictures of his father that are scattered around the living room and speaks of their time together in the past tense. He's got good memories of the beach, of being kissed by him.

It's worse for the mother. She has wept publicly only once, at the funeral as she delivered her husband's eulogy. She spoke of how they fell in love many times, how he proposed in the park in the thunder and lightning, how he would whisper "I love you" in the sleeping boy's ear so he would know it deep in his subconscious.

Mrs. Fontana threw a large party after the funeral and many of Dave's admirers drank and ate and laughed late into the evening.

The coffin was returned and she packed her bags to run away for the weekend. The apartment was littered with details of the funeral.

"It wasn't a funeral for me," she said. "I didn't have a body. I don't feel closure and maybe I never will."

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