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Ramey D'Arcy

Kitty's Book of the Dead

Chapter 2 — The wake

Jimmy read the eulogy he had written for his mother:

"It's been said that we are past the end of History. This is not the case. We are nearing the end of one historical epoch and at the beginning of another. Today we live in an era of small history. We have petty leaders with feet of clay guiding us. We stumble and fall because our paths are not clear.

"Grandma Kitty, on the other hand, lived in the last era of Great History, where heroes and villains stood larger than life itself and History itself was a grainy black and white.

"We tend to see history as discontinuous periods of war and peace, famine and plenty within the reigns of Kings and Queens and it is, but it is also the continuous evolution of traditions and societies punctuated by brief episodes of heroism and villainy.

"Taken as the latter, Grandma Kitty led a heroic life. This plated lily of the Gilded Age traveled to Europe by steamship on the verge of the greatest catastrophe mankind has yet known. When Chamberlain declared 'peace in our time' she was there. On 'Crystal Night' in 1938, the night the holocaust began, she was there. As the Army of Darkness enveloped Austria she was on a train to Vienna, trapped on a siding for one long and interesting weekend. She traveled in High Society as well as steerage class on a refugee boat bound for Palestine. She was on the High Seas as war broke out ... in a German steamship bound for New York. She saw Heaven and Hell with her own eyes.

"Grandma Kitty was born Catherine De La Vargne Stevenson. From the Stevenson side of her family she received her intellect and forthright opinions. From the De la Vargne side she received her flair for the dramatic, her free thinking philosophy and her zest for adventure. That Grandma Kitty should find herself in the heart of a troubled Europe should come as no surprise. Her mother and aunt were the first women on record to conquer Mont Blanc, Europe's tallest mountain.

"This tradition of courage and adventure is what we honor today. The women of the De La Vargne, the Stevenson and now the Barnes clan have been present for every great adventure in our era. From climbing Mont Blanc to traipsing Europe on the edge of Darkness to raising a family in Tripoli under the guns of both Kadafi and Ronald Reagan the tradition continues. This is a celebration of that tradition.

"As one great epoch draws to a close and a new one begins, the torch is passed to a new generation of women whose courage sagacity and daring will define the beginning of the third millennium. Ibby, Kathy and Samie – you are the women of the next generation. Let this event not signal the end of an epoch but rather the beginning of your great adventure."

"Bravo," screamed Kitty.

"How did I do Mom," said Jimmy?

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"Fantastic James," She said smiling. "Well I've often wondered what generation we were in," Kitty said to her friend Helen sitting beside her.

"Yes, we're plated lilies of the Gilded Age," said Helen, "how very appropriate."

"We're certainly not sterling," said Kitty with a big grin to Helen and to Jimmy she said, "James, you'll do just fine tomorrow."

Word had gotten out that Kitty was having a wake, a living wake and that this was going to be an event. Everyone in the county knew Kitty since she had run just about everything at one point or another. The day before the wake, Jimmy had taken his mother shopping at the Super Soby's in New Glasgow. As they went up and down the isles Kitty would cheerfully yell to everyone she knew and some she didn't, "Are you coming to me wake?" For the most part the answer was, "Of course Kit, and wouldn't miss it."

Jimmy shook his head and kept his distance. Jimmy was mildly embarrassed watching his elderly mother hunched over a shopping cart, running, well, pushing the cart through the grocery store faster than he thought she should and yelling at everyone in sight in her mock Scottish brogue but then she had always done things like that.

The first time Jimmy had heard about his mother's idea of a wake was when he had called her in the early spring to say he was planning on bringing his family up to see "Grandma Kitty" in the summer. "Splendid altogether," she'd said, "You can come up for my wake."

"I didn't know you were dead," Jimmy had said, astonished.

"I'm not ... yet," his mother had said emphatically, "but a wake is the best party a person can have but the guest of honor doesn't usually get to enjoy it. I plan on enjoying mine!"

So Grandma Kitty was having a wake and everyone in the county knew about it.

"How many people are you expecting," Jimmy asked her when they were back in her car?

"Oh a few hundred," was the answer.

Jimmy didn't believe it so he had only set out about fifteen chairs, all he could muster, in a semicircle at the top of the incline next to the house. The lawn sloped gently away from the house so Jimmy thought that everyone attending his mother's wake could sit in the chairs while anyone that wanted to say anything could stand at the bottom of the natural amphitheater that was bordered by brambles. It didn't turn out that way. Too many people showed up.

The first hint that Jimmy's guess was dead wrong came at 5:30 AM on the morning of the wake when he was woken up by the "beep, beep, beep" of a truck backing up.

"Go down and make them coffee," he heard his mother say from her bedroom, "That would be the CBC crew from Halifax up to film me wake."

This was followed almost immediately by a crash at the back door.

"Hello Kit," boomed a voice from the kitchen below. It was Vern, "The

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people from the home are here and want to move into your garage. Shall I move your car? I'm going to cut the field for the cars. Now I'm only going to cut about ten acres since it's not really ready for haying yet but you should have room for few hundred cars if I calculate correctly."

"Vern, I'll take care of the car," Jimmy yelled down the stairwell.

A minute or so later Jimmy was dressed and Kitty was standing in the doorway of her bedroom looking completely disheveled. "I'll make my grand entrance in about an hour after I put myself together," she said grinning from ear to ear.

By the time Jimmy got downstairs he could already hear Vern out in the field mowing. Someone from the Odd Fellows Home had already started a big percolator of coffee in the kitchen and a coffee filled thermos was on the kitchen table for early comers. Jimmy grabbed his mother's car keys and went outside to move her car. It wasn't even 6:00 AM but there were already several dozen cars and a large truck on the field Vern was mowing. Two cars from local radio stations were parked on the front lawn and two TV remote trucks were blocking the front of the driveway and an already harried producer was yelling instructions to a grip about cabling.

Kitty's car had been pushed out of the garage and onto the shoulder of the road and the garage was rapidly being filled with industrial grade restaurant equipment borrowed from the Odd Fellows in Pictou. The smell of bacon grease was already in the air as the four cooks and six servers prepared to cook breakfast and lunch for ... hundreds.

About 10 AM Kitty was ready to make her grand entrance. The diamonds were real, the emeralds and jade necklace were real but to anyone who inquired she would say, "Oh heavens no, they're paste. The real ones are in the vault in New York." Kitty loved doing that to people. It left everyone from farmer to "Socially Registered snoot" scratching their heads wondering. About the only thing Kitty wore that wasn't insured for tens of thousands of dollars was the green cotton dress she had bought in Halifax for \$30 almost ten years earlier because it matched her necklace.

When Kitty was sure she looked the part she wanted to perform, that of "the grand dame" (with the word "grand" pronounced with a Scottish accented rolled "r") she carefully snuck down the stairs making sure no one was in the kitchen so that she could perform her morning rituals in private. These included, taking a dozen pills chugged with a cup of coffee, checking her blood sugar levels and giving herself shots of two different kinds of insulin. She preferred doing all that in private since needles make some people nervous and her various medical conditions were no ones business but her own. When she was ready she stood up from the kitchen table, threw her shoulders back, thrust her chin forward and marched into the sunlight.

By now there were thirty or forty people milling around in the yard. Kitty made the rounds inspecting preparations like a general before a battle. She made little suggestions here and there that were swiftly acted upon with a big smile and a "Yes Chef." She was the boss or rather had been. The twenty or so people from the Odd Fellows Home had mostly worked for her as either cooks or as part of the dining room staff. For over 20 years Kitty had been the undisputed queen of the Odd Fellows kitchen and in retirement she was still held in the highest esteem.

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Kitty was, after all, the only internationally licensed and certified "Master Chef" in all of Pictou County and one of less than a half dozen in the entire province. Of all the places in Nova Scotia Kitty could have cooked she chose to make the Odd Fellows retirement home her kitchen. While Kitty and her staff boiled hundreds of pounds of peas, mashed potatoes and roasted meat for the four hundred or so residents of the home she conducted gourmet cooking classes for the farmer's wives and laid off machinists that constituted her crew. They loved her for it. They had their very own Julia Child in the kitchen. What the staff found hilarious was the fact that Kitty not only looked like Julia Child, big and busty, but she also had the same demeanor and high pitched squeaky voice. They were cut from the same cloth.

Jimmy had arranged the chairs up near the house in a semicircle but Kitty thought it might work better if the chairs were at the bottom of the yard. She enlisted the help of some children that were scurrying about to move a plastic lawn chair to a position more to her liking. She plopped down in the chair and immediately fell over backwards doing a full backwards summersault into the brambles.

She lay on her back in astonishment. Her first thought was, "Did I break anything?" She wiggled her legs, arms and neck and finally her nose and concluded that all but her dignity was intact. Next she carefully checked her necklace and earrings and concluded that they were intact too. Finally she looked up and said to the gathering crowd, "I could use a hand here." A TV cameraman put down his camera and waded into the brambles to help. Kitty promised him some extra cookies to take home as he pulled her to her feet. Dusting herself off she bowed to the assembled but speechless crowd and announced that she thought Jimmy was better at arranging chairs than she was. The laughter broke the tension and Kitty announced to the multitudes that the arrangements were, "Splendid altogether."

As noon approached the smell of cooking hamburgers and chicken filled the air and the crowd had swelled to over two hundred. The reporters, there were now about a dozen both print and radio, were having a field day taking pictures and interviewing everyone willing to be interviewed. Some were interviewed multiple times. Anyone that appeared to be a local dignitary and that included anyone dressed better than the average farmer, was made to run the gauntlet of reporters, giving their name and have their pictures taken as they walked from the road to their chairs on the lawn. For many it was extreme flattery and more peacocks and peahens emerged from the gauntlet than entered it. Some of the dignitaries were real, as real as there are such things in Poplar Hill and the rest imagined themselves to be.

There was the retired politician, a respected member of parliament in his day whose motto was "No soft soap with Harvey A, vote him in election day." Kitty had a full collection of soap dishes Harvey had given her over the years. He had always made it a point of visiting Kitty when he was running for reelection because she listened to what he had to say and, even when she vehemently disagreed with him, she would draw him out as few others could; besides she always fed him well and sent him on his way with a glass of sherry in his belly. Harvey always gave a great inter-

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view and the reporters loved it. He played the Grand Old man to Kitty's Grand Dam image although Harvey's image was a bit tattered.

Not to be out done were the two gentlemen in full Kilt; men Kitty had called her "Gentlemen Callers." One had spent his life in the Canadian Air Force, had never been married and had retired as a Brigadier. He always showed up unexpectedly at her door wearing a kilt, with a military jacket bedecked with colorful ribbons. Kitty has asked him several times what the ribbons were for and had always gotten something that sounded like "brahump" in return. Everyone whispered that he was important and famous but Kitty had never heard of him before and his name never came up in the Canadian media so Kitty really didn't know what he might be famous for. Of course, Kitty would feed him whenever she showed up and send him on his way with a glass of sherry. She often wondered if he was trying to get the nerve up to ask her on a date but it had never come to that.

The other gentleman in a rather more traditional Kilt was said to be the chief of a minor branch of an obscure clan. His clan had apparently been encouraged to leave Scotland for one reason or another and had settled in Cape Breton Island in Nova Scotia. Daniel MacDaniel was his name and a thicker brogue could not be found this side of Newfoundland. Daniel had come in handy whenever Kitty needed an escort to some function or another. He was always obliging and would drop whatever he was doing to escort Kitty to things like the annual Hector Society fundraiser. He once gave up a vacation to Bermuda to escort Kitty to an event in Halifax. His picture had been in the Halifax paper standing next to Kitty and that had made him a petty celebrity. Kitty thought that Daniel could swagger in his Kilt better than anyone she knew, better than the Brigadier who always slumped a little in public. After running the gauntlet of reporters Daniel bowed to Kitty and kissed her hand slowly making sure all the TV cameramen and press photographers got a good shot. Kitty just laughed and bowed in return, she loved it.

Helen "O" and Carry Best snuck in around the back not to avoid the press but just to be able to get to a seat without having to stand in line. Carry Best was Nova Scotia's best known woman of African decent, multiply honored she arrived bedecked in all her ribbons and honors. She was a firebrand and naturally attracted to Kitty. They really liked each other and in private would tell off color jokes for hours, laughing until they almost needed reviving with oxygen. In public they were the very model of propriety. Carry's constant joke was that she could get financing for any project Kitty could dream up if Kitty could prove that she was "touched by the tarbush." They would laugh hysterically at this private joke that continued for years. Kitty's hair had been curly as a child and she had photos to prove it.

Helen was Kitty's best friend; their parents had been "best friends" too. Helen was ten years older than Kitty and could remember when Kitty was born. Their families had lived next to each other both in New Canaan and in New York City. They were the scions of "very old money," when life was swell. When Helen was younger she hung around with Eleanor Roosevelt's artsy Greenwich Village gang. Helen's father had been a neighbor of Eleanor's as a child; they were friends so Helen grew up thinking of the older Eleanor as an aunt.

When the county closed Poplar Hill's one room schoolhouse Kitty bought it at the county auction and immediately sold it to Helen as a summer cottage. It was payback for Helen covering Kitty's check when Kitty had driven by the house in Poplar Hill, saw a "for sale" sign and had written a check on the spot. Kitty's decision to move to Nova Scotia had been impulsive and Helen was a willing accomplice. The Canadian presses knew Cary Best and the "gentlemen callers" and were both polite and insistent in their interviews and photographs, Helen was left alone.

By one P.M. the field was filled with cars as were the ditches on both sides of the road for half a mile in all directions. Jimmy overheard one radio reporter estimating "well over 400 people in attendance." Almost everyone had been fed and Vince had already made an "emergency" trip into Pictou for more beer. Lined up at the top of the hill were Kitty and her "dignitaries." The radio, TV and print reporters took their turn interviewing Kitty. Jimmy overheard Kitty answer one TV reporter's questions with, "I'm far from dead but I do have a number of life threatening conditions so I thought I'd enjoy my wake while I still could." When she spoke to her local friends Kitty often feigned a Scottish accent but whenever she was "on stage" her voice was far more theatrical and reminiscent of the voice of a 1930's Hollywood starlet. It sounded almost English.

After all the reporters were satisfied Kitty rose to her feet and clapped everyone to attention. "I want to thank you all for coming to me wake," she said in her mock Scottish accent and with a flourish of her arms, "Any good wake requires a eulogy and my son James has been kind enough, and brave enough to have written one. I had asked a professional, the Reverend MacDonald to deliver one but he has declined preferring to wait for a more auspicious occasion. I am sure he will be rewarded for his patience." Reverend MacDonald bowed deeply to Kitty while grinning from ear to ear. By now everyone, Kitty included, was grinning from ear to ear.

The moment Jimmy finished reading his eulogy the loud high-pitched squawk of a trucks air breaks broke the silence. Everyone looked in the direction of the road. A big yellow school bus had stopped in the middle of the intersection, a plastic banner tied to the side of the read, "Heatherbells (all girl) Bagpipe Band."

A middle aged woman in the Heatherbells uniform came running up to Kitty panting, "Today was the girl's annual picnic and the girls voted to come serenade you at your wake," "What would the deceased like to hear," she asked?

A look of consternation clouded Kitty's face for a moment then she lit up, "Dirges, nothing but dirges," she replied with a smile.

Jimmy leaned over to his mother and asked, "I didn't know you liked bagpipes?"

"I don't," Kitty replied, "but under the circumstances they are appropriate." She winked as she turned down her hearing aids.

Jimmy gave his mother a quizzical look then they both burst into uncontrollable laughter as several dozen young girls in Kilts, plaid shirts and bonnets came slowly marching into their midst playing "Amazing Grace" on their bagpipes and muffled drums. By the time the song was over there was not a dry eye at the wake, mostly from laughter.

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After a half dozen dirges Kitty stood up and thanked the Heatherbells for coming and told the girls to go get something to eat. The twenty young girls quickly scattered, running for the makeshift kitchen in the barn. The band director let them eat then arranged for groups of three pipers to play while wandering among the guests in the field.

By five in the afternoon Kitty realized that no one was leaving. The food was gone, the beer was gone and the press was packing up if they hadn't already left and the kitchen had been packed up and was heading back to the Oddfellows Home. Kitty called the Heatherbells band director over and asked her to summon the girls and have them form up in the driveway "en mass" and play some martial music. After a few tunes Kitty hobbled over to the Drum Major, grabbed the baton with one hand while steadying herself with her cane with the other and started marching. The band followed.

Jimmy grabbed his video camera and tried to capture the scene but he and everyone else were laughing hysterically watching Kitty maneuver the band. The video ended up looking like war footage shot during battle it was so jumpy.

After marching the girls up and down the street several times Kitty marched them down the street to their buss, stopped and put down the baton which the girls rightly interpreted as an order to stop playing.

Kitty climbed up on the steps of the buss and said with a broad smile, "I want to thank you all for serenading my wake. I now understand why the Scotts went into battle with bagpipes blaring. On the one hand the sound of a bagpipe should rightly terrify anyone not familiar with it, man and beast alike. On the other hand the sound of a bagpipe has clearly been crafted to wake the dead should there be any after a battle. I want to thank you all for waking the dead today. It's been a battle getting this far and victory is just over the horizon. Again thank you all for coming and I trust I shall offer no more than one opportunity to play on again on my behalf."

The girls were giggling with delight and the crowd of adults that had followed like followers of a pied piper were still doubled over in laughter. With a serious nod Kitty handed the baton back to the Drum Major, waved, turned to walked back to the house. Like a good politician she shook hands with everyone she met on the way and thanked them for coming. The party was over and in less than 10 minutes Kitty had cleared the yard of visitors after thanking each one profusely.

"Quick, what time is it," Kitty asked Jimmy?

"Ten of six," he replied, "why?"

"The news is on and I want to catch my 15 seconds of fame," she replied with a grin.

They settled in front of the TV and turned to the Halifax news. Kitty's wake was the "human interest" story of the day. The reporter described the food service while the video panned the makeshift kitchen in the garage then played about 15 seconds of the interview with Kitty where she described having "a number of life threatening ailments" and ended by panning the "dignitaries." All in all it was nearly a minute of air time.

"Not bad at all," exclaimed Kitty, "let's see if I get another minute on *The National*."

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Jimmy timed it with the second hand of his watch, Kitty's story got exactly 30 seconds.

Satisfied, Kitty announced that she could now, "rest in peace," rolling her R's with her mock Scottish accent.