**Winning Story 2023 by Katy White, TCD**

*In Sickness and In Health*

Feedback from Roddy Doyle

“A terrific story, chilling, clever and darkly funny, written by a writer in total, confident control of her/his/their craft”

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Wednesday afternoon is mushroom soup, which I detest, but is his favourite. It was always a point of contention in our relationship, his love of mushrooms and my inability to stand them. That is what I am thinking about as I fill the syringe with the grey stuff and push it slowly into the tube that goes up his nose and all the way down to his stomach, watching him watch me as I do it. ‘Is that alright?’ I ask him, and he blinks to assure me that it is. ‘It’s romantic, when we feed each other,’ I say, making a pass at flirting, feeling a turning of my stomach that has nothing to do with the mushrooms.

I am quite used to the rhythm of the hospital now. The nurses know me by name, I am on nodding terms with the other devoted family members that keep vigil at bedsides, all part of the same exclusive club. More than once I have overheard us referred to as ‘the young couple’, I guess because we are young, by hospital standards. The time has passed by remarkably quickly, days slipping into weeks slipping into months. Plans are being put in motion for his homecoming - the stairs are being adapted, home-help staff are being briefed, the nurses are training me as their protégé. It has been made clear to me that I am a key player here, the central cog in the wheel that will allow him to cycle back to his old life. Our old life. Only, no one has asked me about what that really looked like.

When I got the phone call from the hospital, we hadn’t spoken in three days. It was late, I knew he was at a party, I assumed he was calling because he was drunk and missed me. The following 24 hours were a blur - car accident, shattered pelvis, ribs, spine, induced coma, ICU, can you come, now, now, now - and I remember a distinct feeling of weightlessness, as if I was being dragged along with the tide, as if this had always been destined to happen. The invisible string between us pulled on my ribs as it brought me to him. ***I am his wife.*** During the earlier, more tumultuous years of our relationship, we used to joke about how we just couldn’t leave each other alone, and it turned out that was still true. Fate wouldn’t let us get away from each other, even when we wanted to.

We first met as assigned partners in a lab that compared the stress versus strain graphs of different materials. This obviously provided excellent fodder for our wedding speeches six years later. Within those years, there was certainly stress and strain, but on the background of being madly in love this didn’t matter. We had grown together all our adult lives, so it made sense to get married even though we were young. We knew that some people were sceptical and we downplayed it light-heartedly - tax reasons and all that, and sure why not have an excuse to throw a big party for all of our friends - but we both knew, in between throes of passion and dull Tuesday afternoons, that we couldn’t imagine doing life any other way. Everything was better with him - date nights, trying to fix the printer, beach days, sick days, parties, funerals. We had seen all the worst parts of each other and kept coming back for more.

Today one of his nurses is showing me how to manually evacuate his bowels. The doctors hope that he will regain continence in time, but for now it is important I know how to do it if there is to be any hope of him living at home. I remember the first time we were exposed to the full extent of each other’s bodily functions, in a dilapidated B&B in Tramore back when we were broke, after dinner one night when we had shared a plate of questionable mussels and then had to share a toilet. After the initial mortification, there was something exhilarating about that closeness - about somebody seeing you like that, and you seeing them, and still being in love with each other - that I find difficult to recreate now as I snap on a pair of plastic gloves in the cold clinical light of the ward.

It’s hard to say if our relationship changed because we got married, or if it would have changed like that anyway. Suddenly life seemed to pull us in every direction. We both became acutely aware of how big and wide the world is. I felt like I didn’t know him like I once had, and I was struggling to know myself as a result. I always thought we were too interesting to get caught up in the things that regular couples fight about - this job is more important, we don’t have the money for that, I’m not ready - but it turns out, we are exactly that uninteresting. There are times, especially over the last few months, when I think about what my life would look like if I had made different choices. But being in love with him doesn’t feel like a choice.

I knew pretty much straight away what was going on - maybe I was hyper-aware of it from my own behaviour - but I still valiantly ignored it. The second time, too. And the third time. It’s incredible, really, how much you can ignore if you don’t want to see it. Late nights, the inconsistencies in the story, phone face down on the bedside locker, the distance I felt growing between us, the sympathetic looks from friends, a thousand tiny betrayals. And now circumstance has slammed us back together, closer than I ever thought possible. Once the nurse is finished her tutorial, she asks me ‘Any questions?’. ***Yes****,* I think, ***Is this love?***

I watch his eyelashes as he sleeps. There are no choices to be made anymore. We have built our lives around each other. All the worst parts of him - that he is arrogant, unreliable, infuriatingly charming - pale in comparison with the fact that I am in love with him. Within the first few days of his hospital stay, I knew this was how it was going to be. I could feel the window closing, things we will never talk about, conversations that will be put on hold for the rest of our lives. Our relationship is complicated, but at the end of the day it’s very simple. He needs me now, yes, but I need him too. I have spent many a dull hospital visit meditating over a line from a Robert Frost poem. ‘Home is the place where when you have to go there, they have to take you in.’ I will take him home.