

Dead Man Talking

Roddy Doyle

Chapter 1

I met Joe again the night before his funeral.

Let me explain.

When I was younger than I am now, I knew a man called Joe Murphy. In fact, I knew him before he was a man. I knew him since we were kids.

We were best friends.

But I hadn't seen Joe in nine or ten years. We'd had a fight.

A big fight.

I know what you are thinking. At least, I think I know what you are thinking. 'It must have been about a woman.' But you are wrong. The fight had not been about a woman. It had been about a horse. It had been about a horse and three women.

But the story isn't really about the fight.

I don't know where to start.

I can start in Joe's house, the night before his funeral. Or I can go back to the time when we had the fight. Or I can go all the way back to the time when we were two small boys playing football.

We were best friends, kicking the ball against the side wall of Joe's house. We were both going to play for Manchester United and we were never, ever going to fight.

If I was reading this story, I would want to read about meeting Joe the day before his funeral. Because it is a bit mad. It is not something that happens every day, is it? If it was the day before his funeral, Joe must have been dead.

That is what you are thinking.

And you are right. He was dead.

He was dead. But then he started talking to me.

I don't know where to start.

I don't even know if I want to start.

But I have to.

Chapter 2

Everything was normal.

I drove home from work. I'm a printer.

I was a printer.

I drove home and parked the car. I went into the house and kissed my wife, Sarah. It was what I did every day.

'How was work?' she asked.

'Grand,' I said. 'And you?'

'Grand too,' she said.

Sarah worked down the road, in the local supermarket.

We had the dinner – fish and chips. Sarah had got the fish and chips on her way home from work. She had texted me. *Chipper? X*. I had texted her back. *For sure – lol. X*.

'Lovely bit of fish,' I said.

'Yes,' she said. 'And the chips are perfect.'

'Lovely.'

It was not the most exciting chat we ever had. But I need you to know that it was normal.

At least, I thought it was normal.

'I think I'll go for a pint,' I said.

'Grand,' she answered.

This was how it was every night. I went for a pint, just one. And Sarah watched crap on the TV. Then I came home and we would both watch crap together.

I stood up.

'See you later,' I said.

'Yes,' she said. 'Enjoy your pint.'

I got my coat and went to the front door. I put my hand on the handle.

I heard Sarah.

'Pat!'

Her voice was high. She sounded scared, like she had just seen a mouse or something.

'What?' I shouted.

'Pat!'

Now I was scared. I went back to the kitchen.

'What's wrong?'

She was standing now. She was holding her mobile phone.

'It's Joe,' she said.

'Joe who?' I asked.

She shouted at me.

'Joe!'

She looked pale. Her hands were shaking.

I understood now.

'My Joe?' I said.

She nodded.

'Yes.'

Joe had been the best man at our wedding.

'Oh, God,' I said. 'What happened?'

'He's –'

'Dead?'

'Yes,' she said. 'Pat, I'm so sorry.'

She started to cry. And so did I.

She hugged me.

'I'm so sorry,' she said again.

I was glad she didn't say more. She just held me.

'How did you find out?' I asked her.

She held up her phone. I had not heard it ringing when I was going out of the house. But I didn't say anything. I forgot about it. It was not important.

'You are cold,' she said.

But I was not cold. She was. I was shivering – because I was holding a very cold woman.

I let go of Sarah. I stepped back and looked at her, carefully.

'Are you okay?' I asked.

She seemed stiff – solid. Like a statue. A statue made of ice. Green ice.

Then she moved. It was like she moved just an inch. I think it was the light coming through the window. The sun was low outside. It was nearly night, and the sun had gone into my eyes. It had made me think that Sarah looked like ice. But now she was back to normal.

But I know now. Nothing was normal.

Chapter 3

I went for a walk.

Sarah didn't want me to. She looked worried, even a bit angry.

'I need to get some air,' I said.

I needed to move. I did not want to stay still. Walking helped me when I needed to think.

'I'm going,' I said. 'Okay?'

'To the pub?' she asked.

'No.'

She looked happier when I said that.

'Don't worry,' I said. 'I won't go drinking.'

She smiled.

'I wasn't worried,' she said.

I was not a big drinker. But I used to be. It worried Sarah, sometimes. She was afraid I would become a big drinker again.

'I won't be long,' I said. 'Just around the block.'

'Bring the dog,' she said.

It was our joke. We did not have a dog.

I went to the kitchen door. I stopped.

'What happened?' I asked.

'To Joe?'

'Yes.'

'I don't know,' she said. 'Just that he died.'

'Who phoned you?' I asked.

She looked down at the phone.

'It was a text,' she said.

'From who?'

'Oh,' she said. 'Karen.'

Karen was Joe's wife. I had not seen Karen in years.

'She had your phone number?' I asked.

'Someone must have given it to her,' said Sarah.

'Okay.'

I went to the front door. I put my hand on the handle.

It was strange. The last time I was at the front door, I had a friend called Joe who I had not seen in years. I was not thinking about him.

Now, just a few minutes later, Joe was dead, and I could think of nothing else.

'Bye,' I shouted.

Sarah didn't answer.

I walked out of the house.