

LAST FIRST (first first first...)

By **MARTIN** Keady

WHY I LIKE IT: *Drama Editor JANET EHRLICH COLSON writes...*

Martin Keady's LAST FIRST is a heartfelt short play with an intimate style and an expansive scope. The play, based on a true story, takes place on a small boat, chartered by Captain Neil, an "undertaker of the seas," who provides a safe space for the dumping of cremated ashes over the side. With water splashing off the deck of the boat along with the character's Irish and English accents, the play comes off the page creating an evocative experience as a mother and daughter say their final goodbyes. LAST FIRST raises issues about survivor's guilt and how each member of a family confronts grief in their own way. As audience, we are included in the process of paying respects to a loved one and healing from the trauma of an untimely death. The play aptly deals with a gamut of emotions from sadness to frustration and even humor as the two women find it as difficult to open the box of ashes as it is to let go of them.

MARY:

It's what he wanted, Mum, and we have to respect that.

LORETTA (nodding):

I know. And I do...however hard it is. *(She looks as if she might cry, but somehow stops herself.)* Right...shall we get on with it?

MARY:

I think we should. We've only got the boat for an hour.

(Spacing and format is playwright's own.)

LAST FIRST

A Short Play
by Martin Keady

Based on a True Story

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For my mother and sister.

LORETTA (60), her daughter, MARY (30), and NEIL, the skipper (also 30) are on a small boat. NEIL stands at the stern, holding the tiller, while LORETTA and MARY sit in front of him. LORETTA is holding a small wooden box.

NEIL (looking to one side):

Hold on!

A wave hits the boat. NEIL just keeps his footing, while LORETTA and MARY hang on to the sides: MARY with two hands; LORETTA with one, as she holds the box with the other. The wave passes and NEIL looks off to the other side.

NEIL:

Bloody pleasure boats!

When LORETTA speaks, she does so with a strong Irish (southern Irish) accent: both NEIL and MARY have English accents.

LORETTA:

I suppose this must be the *opposite* of a pleasure boat.

NEIL:

What?

LORETTA:

Well, it's more like a *death* boat, isn't it?

MARY:

MUM!

NEIL (smiling):

As I explained when you called me, Mrs Kelly, I provide a boat for individuals or families who want a boat all to themselves for special, *personal* reasons. (Pause.) Anyway, I'll leave you to it. I'm going in the cabin - (He points ahead, off-stage.) I'll wait there for as long as you want, or need. Just call out, or knock on the door, when you're ready.

LORETTA:

Thank you, dear.

MARY:

Yes, thank you.

He nods, smiles and walks forward towards the cabin (exiting).

LORETTA:

He seems nice.

MARY:

I suppose he has to be.

LORETTA:

What d'you mean?

MARY:

Well, otherwise he couldn't do this job. I mean, did you ever meet an undertaker with bad manners?

LORETTA (looking upset):

I wish we were dealing with an undertaker now, rather than - *(She looks around her, at the sea and sky, then at MARY.)* Well, *this*.

MARY:

It's what he wanted, Mum, and we have to respect that.

LORETTA (nodding):

I know. And I do...however hard it is. *(She looks as if she might cry, but somehow stops herself.)* Right...shall we get on with it?

MARY:

I think we should. We've only got the boat for an hour.

LORETTA:

I don't mind paying for another hour. We can *take* longer, if you *need* longer.

MARY (shaking her head):

No, Mum. I don't. And neither do you. So let's do it, please.

LORETTA:

Alright, then.

LORETTA lifts up the box in both hands and she and MARY stare at it.

LORETTA:

I can't remember how they said to open it.

MARY:

They said the top should just slide off.

LORETTA:

Right.

She puts one hand on top of the box, ready to slide the top off.

MARY:

Not here! You've got to move nearer to the side of the boat, so he goes overboard. We don't want him *blowing* about the boat, do we?

LORETTA:

No. Right. OK.

She moves further over and then tries to slide open the top of the box.

LORETTA:

It won't open.

MARY:

What?

LORETTA:

It won't open - it's stuck!

MARY:

No, it's not. Let me have a go. (*She takes the box and also tries to slide the top off.*) You're right. It won't.

LORETTA:

See? I told you!

MARY:

So what do we do *now*?

LORETTA:

We could just throw the whole box in.

MARY (obviously horrified):

No way! There's enough *crap* in the sea already: I'm not adding to it. Besides, you're supposed to *scatter* ashes, not just *dump* them. (*She looks ahead.*) Maybe Neil can help.

LORETTA:

What? No! Don't bother him.

MARY:

Mum, this is his job! He probably deals with this kind of thing *all* the time.
(Then, calling out -) NEIL!

Instantaneously, as if he were waiting to be summoned, NEIL returns.

NEIL:

Can I help?

MARY:

I hope so. The top of the box is stuck. We can't open it.

NEIL (smiling):

You'd be *amazed* how often that happens! I think they must use *super-glue* or something. Here, let me try. (*He takes the box from MARY and tries to slide the top off - in vain.*) You're right - it's stuck. Fortunately, that's precisely why I always bring my *trusty tool-kit!*

He hands the box back to MARY, goes to the tiller and takes out his tool-kit, which is stowed beside it. He takes out a screwdriver, comes back over to MARY and retakes the box from her. Then, holding the box with one hand, he holds the screwdriver in the other and stares down at the top of the box.

NEIL:

Oh!

LORETTA:

What? Is something wrong?

NEIL (nodding):

I'm afraid there is. I've never seen this before, but somehow they seem to have *sealed* the top shut.

LORETTA:

What?!

MARY:

You're joking!

NEIL (shaking his head):

I'm afraid not. There are no screws in the top that I can unscrew. It's stuck fast.

LORETTA:

What about the bottom?

NEIL:

The bottom?

LORETTA:

Yes. Are there any screws there?

NEIL (looking under the box):

Yes, there are.

LORETTA:

Well, just undo them. They'll do.

NEIL:

Are you sure?

LORETTA:

Why not? He came into this world arse-first; he might as well leave it the same way. (*MARY and NEIL both stare at her in disbelief.*) Well, he did. He was born upside down - the wrong way round - so he might as well stay that way at the end.

NEIL:

OK...if you're quite sure.

LORETTA (nodding):

I'm *absolutely* sure, thank you.

NEIL turns the box upside down and begins unscrewing the bottom.

NEIL:

I thought for a moment there you said, "Last First", as in, "The first shall be last and the last shall be first..." (*THE TWO WOMEN both stare at him.*) In this job, you hear a *lot* of Bible readings. They get stuck in your head.

LORETTA:

Oh. Right. Got you.

He unscrews the last screw and hands the box back to LORETTA.

NEIL:

Now, you'll have to be *very* careful. As I said before, don't take off the top - sorry, the *bottom* - until you've lifted the whole box over the side of the boat, so that the ashes go in the water, as planned. OK?

LORETTA (nodding):

OK.

MARY:

Thank you.

NEIL:

It's no problem. Now I'll just go back and wait in the cabin. And again - if you need me for *anything*, just give me a call.

LORETTA:

Thanks, dear. You're a life-saver!

MARY and NEIL look surprised by this remark, but LORETTA turns away to lift the box back over the side of the boat. NEIL smiles at MARY, she smiles back and he exits. Once he is gone, MARY slides over to sit beside LORETTA.

MARY:

Are you ready, Mum?

LORETTA (nodding):

As ready as I'll ever be.

She removes the bottom of the box and tips the box over so that the ashes inside fall into the water.

They stare at the water for a moment, then LORETTA stands up.

LORETTA:

I'm going with him!

MARY:

WHAT?!

LORETTA puts one leg over the side of the boat but MARY pulls her back in.

MARY:

What are you doing? You can't swim!

LORETTA:

That's the *point!* I want to go with him. I was there at his beginning, so I should be there at his end.

MARY:

You are, Mum! We both are! That's why we're here.

LORETTA:

No, I mean *really* with him. (Pause.) I can't go on without him.

MARY:

Yes, you can.

LORETTA:

I can't! Not knowing how he went.

MARY:

That was *his* decision, Mum. Remember?

LORETTA:

Of course I remember! I'll never forget!

She bursts into tears and MARY puts her arms around her.

LORETTA:

How could he do it? He might as well have killed me too when he took his own life.

MARY:

I know, Mum. I know how hard this is for you. It's bad enough losing a *sibling*, but a *child*... Well, I just can't imagine. But as I've said to you a *million* times before, it's *not* your fault.

LORETTA:

It is. It *must* be!

MARY (shaking her head):

No, it's not. How could it be? We're *twins*; you raised us *exactly* the same way; and John chose to take his own life, while I - well, even after all this, I want to *live* mine. (Pause.) Who knows? Maybe *I'm* to blame.

LORETTA:

What?!

MARY:

Well, I was always the "happy-go-lucky" one, wasn't I? I was always the one who could *survive* things. John couldn't.

LORETTA:

That's not your fault.

MARY:

Once, I wondered whether I'd stolen his serotonin.

LORETTA:

Stolen what?

MARY:

Serotonin. It's the chemical that makes you *happy* and I used to wonder if somehow, in the womb, I'd *taken* his, so I had double the amount I should have had and he had none.

LORETTA (staring at her):

Now who's talking shite?

MARY (laughing):

I know. It must run in the family.

They both laugh.

MARY:

Mum, it's time to let him go.

LORETTA:

I know.

Gently, carefully, she puts the box back down on the deck.

LORETTA:

What do we do now?

MARY:

We just sit here, for as long as we want - well, until our time's up.

LORETTA:

OK. Then will you do one thing for me?

MARY:

Of course. What is it?

LORETTA:

Will you sing it?

MARY:

What? *Here?*

LORETTA:

Well, you never got to sing it in *church*, did you?

MARY:

He didn't want any music at the funeral: he didn't even really want a funeral.

LORETTA:

But he never said anything about music on the *boat*, did he?

MARY (sighing):

No, I suppose not.

LORETTA:

Good. Then sing it for me now, please. Sing it for *him*.

MARY:

Alright, then.

She takes a deep breath, then sings.

MARY:

"Amazing grace, how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me
I once was lost, but now am found
T'was blind but now I see.
T'was grace that taught my heart to fear
And grace, my fears relieved,
How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believed.
Through many dangers, toils and snares
We have already come.

T'was grace that brought us safe thus far
And grace will lead us home."

She finishes singing and looks at LORETTA, who takes her hand.

They continue to hold hands as the lights come down.

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS:

LAST FIRST was inspired by a real-life event. I actually undertook such a boat journey with my mother, my sister and my brother-in-law after the death – by suicide – of my beloved younger brother, John, and just as in the play the box containing my brother's ashes (after his cremation) would only open from the bottom, not the top. I did not realise that this event could be the basis for a play until I told the story to a dear friend, Paul Scott, who immediately said, "Write THAT!" It was a turning-point in my writing, as I realised that I could write about my own personal experiences but without actually including myself: I wrote myself out of the play, as it were, so that I could concentrate on what really mattered to me, which was an examination of the relationship between the two women (one old, Irish and extremely Catholic; the other younger, English and sceptical at best about the merits of Catholicism or any other religion) and how they could both survive such a tragedy. I remain indebted to Paul for simply saying, "Write THAT!" And I also remain indebted to my most important literary and other creative influences and inspirations, who, in descending order, are: William Shakespeare; David Simon; Woody Allen; Oscar Wilde; and Jane Austen. I have tried (and obviously not always succeeded) to learn not just from the greats, but the greatest.

AUTHOR BIO:

Martin Keady is an award-winning dramatist, journalist, poet and lyricist. As a dramatist, his major credits include: **Man of Colour**, a biopic of Walter Tull, one of Britain's first black professional footballers who subsequently became a hero of WWI, which won the inaugural BIFFA (Bristol Independent Film Festival Award) for Screenwriting 2018; **All The Dreams: The Gil Scott-Heron Story**, a play for the award-winning Nouveau Riché theatre company (Nouveau Riché @infonvrch); **Moon The Loon**, a play about Keith Moon, the legendary Who drummer, which premiered at The Edinburgh Festival; **The Final**, a short film about the famous ending of the 1979 FA Cup Final, which was broadcast on Channel Four; and an award-winning play for children, **Three Tragedies**, about some of Shakespeare's minor characters, which is published online at: dramanotebook.com/plays-for-kids/three-tragedies.

As a journalist, he writes extensively for a number of print and online publications, including on screenwriting and television writing for *The Script Lab* thescriptlab.com/author/mkeady, on tennis for *Last Word On Tennis* lastwordontennis.com/author/martin-keady and on the Olympics and politics for *C4News.com*.

As a poet, he has written **Shards**, a collection of short poems, extracts from which have been broadcast on BBC Radio Four and published in the inaugural "Poets Issue" of KollideZine magazine. And as a lyricist, he co-wrote a WWI lament, **Dreaming of England**, with the composer Barnaby Robson - [Dreaming of England on Spotify](https://open.spotify.com/album/1234567890).

Martin has Masters Degrees in English Literature from Cambridge University, in Shakespeare Studies from The Shakespeare Institute in Stratford on Avon, and in Playwriting from The Central School of Speech and Drama in London. Having lived in Los Angeles and in Ireland, he now lives in London with his wife and three children.