

# 1

You died and I didn't know.

At one forty-two, yesterday, Wednesday. Where was I just then, that moment as you breathed your last? I'd had lunch, yes, an apple and cheese, had left for a brisk walk along the seafront, part of the 'move more, eat less' regime you'd endlessly advocated for me. Does it matter much now that I might lose half a stone, now, in the face of this?

Drove the car to Sandycove harbour to walk from there. Were you still alive as I parked on that, just another day, pleased to have found a space, smugly pleased too to have found one free of double-yellow lines. How could such trivia have mattered so and how distant that all seems now.

I weaved my way through the tourists that streamed towards Joyce's tower; did you still breathe then? The tide was out, yes I remember that; the news of your death might have obliterated all recall, but no, the large rocks were seaweed-draped and beyond them the sea a glassy blue. I waved to Joe Lydon as he threw stones for his dogs, heard their loud splash, then saw a nearby heron spread its wide wings and soar. Farther down the promenade visitors queued at Teddy's for ices, how many times as schoolgirls had we queued together there? Walked past the remains of the Victorian bathhouse – remember glancing at my watch with satisfaction then, and assured I walked briskly, for strolling is useless for losing weight. Yet the first of the summer strawberries for sale at the top of the pier tempted with their promise of thick, fresh cream.

You were still alive as I approached the bandstand, for I recall glancing at my watch again then, just then, one ten,

so I'd time to walk to the lighthouse and back, as you battled to live on. That's what I can't stand, the fact that you died alone. We, who used to giggle together in girlish terror at tales of death knocks and ghosts, why did neither bother to haunt me just then at all? A band played at the Victorian stand, Verdi's *Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves* – (*Speed Your Journey*). Might I have sensed your passing from that?

The harbour to my left was filled with small boats as I passed it, and the children within them circled and sailed as I climbed down the narrow steps to the lower pier to view them. Most wore bright orange life jackets, a few yellow tops, as they fought to steer and remain afloat. Two boats overturned and the youngsters floundered in the water, but not for long, while three were carried out beyond the lighthouses towards the open sea. I watched as the two larger boats that followed corralled them back inside.

I walked on swiftly again, paused briefly at the plaque to Beckett, stood on the spot where the great genius claimed that all, all had at last been revealed to him there. Well, good for our Sam, our Mr B. No mystery left?

A nurse found you dead, one for whom I expect that final rite of passage is as commonplace as this summer walk is for me.

'Ms Leahy, please.'

'Speaking.'

'Close friend of Grace Donovan's, I believe.'

'Yes, we've known each other from childhood.'

'Sad news, I'm afraid. She's died.'

Silence

'Hello? ... Hello? You still there?'

'Yes. I believed she'd recover. Thank you. Thank you for calling.'

‘Only child. Single. Parents deceased. No next of kin. Could you inform those close to her, the people to whom she mattered, before you hit the papers?’

‘Yes. Yes. I’ll see what I can do.’

I’d so believed you’d get well, and if my field of science had nothing further to offer I’d even have pleaded with the god I no longer believe in for your survival. Had conned myself into believing that you would definitely do so. But inform those who were close to you? However can I do that?

Juan? How could I get to tell him? Where is he now? With a plump Spanish wife and a hoard of olive-skinned kids? You loved him once, when he was just nineteen. You even boasted triumphantly to my still-maidenly self that you’d lost your virginity to him wearing only your pearls, just like Dotty in *The Group*. Did his Mediterranean soul, unlike mine, sense your passing, recall you suddenly, unexpectedly, as you left life, and unlike me, somehow know?

You’d a priest lover too. Why wasn’t he with you at the end, when Catholics do death so well? All those secretive years he played Abelard to your Heloise and he not with you either. He may even still fumble furtively beneath his celibate sheets to your memory – God forgive him, for I never will. Do you still live on as some erotic holy spirit in his tortured soul? I can’t contact him, how could I when his demands for secrecy were such that you refused to even tell me his name, when I knew him only as your Father Y.

Yes, I will phone Brendan. Shocking to have him learn of your death in tomorrow’s paper, couldn’t be so cruel as to allow that. Know him from work anyway; he consultant to my pharmacist, how different he was in his treatment of

patients as opposed to staff. ‘And how are we today, Mrs Connors?’ Fangs cheesily bared, the control freak you loved. Tamed you, I fear, at least for a time, when all prior to him had failed. I will phone him tonight, hope his wife doesn’t answer, that’s all. Your flamboyant self’s replacement, Ms Prissy Prim. No, better phone his office; maybe even upset one of his megabucks medical deals. Or I could allow him read it in the newspaper, be as uncaring as he was to you. No, I wouldn’t do that.

I will chase up Andy too, he’s still in New Zealand, has a brother in the city somewhere who’ll have a contact phone number, I expect. Went there, it was rumoured on the city grapevine, to escape your clutches, to nurse his broken heart, perhaps even both. I know he offered to marry you, you once told me that. Marriage ... he respected the institution, felt he’d paid you the ultimate compliment, but you were determined to remain free to follow your heart right ’til the end.

And Paul, less difficult to contact him, though he may well be abroad on business or at some race meeting. The married Paul, last of your five loves. You were thirty-four by then and didn’t much care how some labelled you as his ‘bit on the side’. Had a wife when you met, but triangles gave you a buzz, added a spice that you richly savoured. I recall that night you first met. Your fingers curled around a brandy glass, fingernails long and red as those that peeped out from the toe of your high-heeled sandal. The third nail on your right hand was chipped; that imperfection irritated you for you glanced at it several times then attempted to cover it with your left hand. I doubt if he noticed, or, if he had, that it would have mattered much to him. I saw his gaze scan the guests then halt at you. Pause again at your

Carmen lips, at the hint of cleavage by your neckline, then down past the flow of your red dress to your tanned legs.

You gazed back at him, some might say brazenly, and then the mysterious moment you so yearned for happened, his gaze met yours, locked and held, and, in the midst of that crowded, noisy party, all others faded; only you two were there. I saw you nod, and then he nodded too, heard you excuse yourself and leave, and then watched as he followed you outside.

How long ago all that seems now, but then we, Grace, my soul sister, we first became friends, even further back. Until ... no, I'll not think of that ... that violence ... not now ... for what happened then changed me, changed you too. And, yet again, around that fear that seems to underpin all fears, yes, that same one, the fear of death.

'You're crying. What's wrong?'

Rose Leahy continued to weep softly as she looked up from the church pew and saw Grace Donovan. She didn't know her well, for although they both wore the same school uniform, the grey gymslip, cream blouse and grey and yellow striped tie of Saint Martha's, Grace was in sixth class, and a year ahead of her. Rose knew her as daring, some said even brazen, one who had been named publicly at assembly for wearing her hats thrown to the back of her head and secured with a hat pin (chin band invisible), her black hair flowing loose behind it rather than secured neatly, all strictly forbidden.

'I'm dying.' Rose's voice came as a quiet sob in the empty church.

Grace looked at her curiously, noting the young girl's blotched cheeks and swollen eyes, yet she seemed healthy