

Prologue

The snow is coming down out there like I don't *know* what? And we're all freezing our nuts off in the church here. I'll say this for the old fart – he picked some time of the year to die.

Erika is in ribbons, we're talking literally bawling. Which is weird, in a way. I don't want to come across as, like, horsh, but she didn't actually *know* him that long? Except maybe that *is* horsh. She's got regrets, I suppose. Same as we've all got regrets.

I hand her a tissue from the wad she asked me to stick in my pocket. She dabs at her eyes where the mascara is spilling out, then she looks at me sort of, like, side-on and asks me if her face is okay and I tell her it's fine, roysh, even though it actually looks like a focking tanker disaster.

'If you need to step out,' I go. 'You know – if you're upset and blah blah blah . . .' but she just shakes her head, determined, like everyone else, to just get through it.

The thing I can't stop staring at is the actual coffin. It just seems so, I don't know, *small*? So then I stort having one of my famous deep thoughts, about how it doesn't matter how big any of us is in, like, life – our bodies, personalities, whatever – we're all going to end up in a box pretty much that size.

'Ross,' Erika goes, then I suddenly snap out of it and realize that the organ music has stopped and I'm the only one still standing. So I sit down.

There's, like, a whole line of people waiting to step up to the, I suppose, pulpit to pay tribute to him.

One dude goes, 'The Horseshoe Bar on Christmas Eve will never be the same again without his highly vocal drunkenness,' and of course everyone laughs, 'and his hysterical jeremiads on subjects as diverse as the saintliness of Michael Fingleton, the unsightliness of modern kick-and-rush rugby, the folly of energy-efficient lightbulbs and the national scandal that was the failure to exempt a seasonal *Romeo y Julieta* from the smoking ban.'

There's, like, more laughter.

The next speaker – who, again, I don't know – goes, 'He wouldn't

have claimed to be the perfect husband and he wouldn't have claimed to be the perfect father,' and I suddenly feel Erika's hand tighten in mine. 'He could be terribly self-absorbed. Terribly opinionated, as we've heard. But he was what he was. A man. One with an enormous capacity for life, for love, for happiness. But human, with human failings. But who among us, gathered here this morning, can say we loved him any less for those?'

When they've finished, no one knows whether to clap or not. It's, like, *awkward*? In the end, some do, some don't. The priest mentions the name of the cemetery where he'll be laid to rest but I don't catch it. He says the family would like to thank everyone for the wonderful kindness they've been shown since their loss and extend an invitation to everyone to come back to the house afterwards for basically refreshments.

Then a tenor appears at the top of the church and while the coffin is carried down the aisle, he sings what was his favourite song, the one he asked for in his will.

*I remember that summer in Dublin,
And the Liffey as it stank like hell,
And the young people walking on Grafton Street,
Everyone looking so well.
I was singing a song I heard somewhere,
Called 'Rock and Roll Never Forgets',
When my humming was smothered by a 46A,
And the scream of a low-flying jet.
So I jumped on a bus to Dun Laoghaire,
Stopping off to pick up my guitar,
And a drunk on the bus told me how to get rich,
I was glad we weren't going too far.*

I know the song but it's, like, so random to hear it *sung* like that?

Erika peels out of her seat like she's determined to be the first out of the church. She *is* actually the first. When I manage to get to the corpork – twice nearly slipping on my orse – she's already sat in the cor, staring at nothing. She doesn't say a word during the drive to the cemetery, except when we drive through the actual gates. That's when she goes, 'I wish we'd had more time.'

'More time?' I go. 'Time for what?' except she doesn't answer.

Father Fehily used to tell us not to waste our lives away thinking about all the things we might have done but didn't. 'What *did* you do?' he'd say. 'Is *that* not the point of life? Is that not the *only* point?'

But then I feel like I've suddenly burst her bubble, so I end up going, 'He loved you,' I suppose for the want of something else to say.

She's there, 'I don't know that he did. And *you* certainly don't,' and what can I say to that? I couldn't exactly claim that I knew him.

We get out of the cor. The path is like a basic icerink and I link her arm to stop either of us slipping. We ask this, I presume, gravedigger for, like, directions. We end up being the first there. There's, like, a hole in the ground and a big mound of earth beside it. I look at Erika, to see if she's okay, but she's got this look of what you'd have to call determination on her face. That'd be the Mount Anville thing again. There's a reason they've won . . . well, *all* they've won.

The headstone's already been engraved. It's like, '12 March 1940 – 31 December 2009 – Toddy Rathfriland', and that's the first time I cop that it happened on, like, New Year's Eve. A time for taking stock – is that the expression?

There's, like, a quote underneath from, I don't know, Shakespeare or one of that crew and it's like, 'Food to one man is but bitter poison to another', which is, like, seriously dark, it has to be said.

On the news they said it was a legally held shotgun. He supposedly put both barrels in his mouth before pulling the trigger and there was literally nothing left of him above the shoulders. But then you don't know if that's, like, horseshit.

He supposedly left a note for his wife, apologizing for everything – for doing the dirt, basically – but nothing for Erika, who he, like, supposedly *loved*? At least that's what he said that night in the Galloping Green and I heard it with my own ears – asking her to run away with him.

So I go, 'Maybe we shouldn't be here when the actual hearse arrives. Should we maybe watch it from, like, a safe distance?' a not unreasonable thing to say, I would have thought, given the circs. Except she looks at me like I'm a cat in a focking food blender. I'm like, 'All I'm saying is that sitting at the back of the church is one thing. But you do not want to be here when the old grieving fam shows up.'

She doesn't even bother responding – like it's *beneath* her? – and I'm

there thinking, yeah, where's your actual boyfriend? At least *I'm* here – came running as soon as I got the call, when Fionn decided he wasn't focking man enough to handle seeing her at her ex's funeral. I said she was way out of his league and, not for the first time in my life, I've been proven spectacularly right, even though it gives me very little pleasure to say it.

She takes a couple of steps forward, then drops the rose into the hole in the ground. I don't know if I've already mentioned that she actually *looks* really well? Black always suited her. I'm on the record as saying that.

She stands there with, like, her head bowed, staring into the empty grave and I wonder what kind of thoughts are going through her mind. There'd be, like, a fair bit of guilt, you'd have to think. The shit she said to him. Just as an example, that she was only ever interested in him for the moo and that having sex with him was like being trapped under rubble with no hope of the Red Cross coming. Again, I heard all of this, the night he tried to get her to come away with him to Val-d'Isère.

The dude knew what he was doing, wanting to hop on a plane and fock off out of the country. He's supposed to have lost a fortune in Anglo shares and it's a well-known fact that his restaurant business – he had, like, fifteen or sixteen of them at the height of the whole Celtic Tiger thing? – was pretty much focked.

In the end, though, it's like my old man and Helen and Hennessy and everyone else has tried to tell her – he had, like, loads of reasons to want to actually kill himself. See, I heard a thing on the news – it was the day they found his body, in his cor on Bissets Strand – that the whole current economic thing is thought to be responsible for up to ten suicides every week in Ireland. But I suppose Erika is always going to wonder was it something she basically said.

I hear a cor approach, then the crunch of gravel, then voices coming closer.

'Erika,' I go, 'I really think we should make like shepherds and get the flock out of here. Either that or watch it from behind one of those trees over there,' and she looks at me like she's realized that I'm actually talking sense for once in my crazy life.

But it's suddenly too late.

There's a girl – eighteen, maybe nineteen, and an absolute ringer

for Summer Glau – and she’s, like, walking towards us at speed. And from the look on her boat, she’s definitely not happy in her nappy.

‘It is her,’ she goes. ‘I fucking said it was her,’ and there’s, like, four or five people I recognize from the church following her, trying to calm her down, except having to run to match her stride.

Erika seems a bit, I don’t know, in shock – like a rabbit about to take a bull-bar full in the face.

‘Hedda,’ they’re all giving it, ‘this isn’t the time *or* the place,’ and then I remember hearing that Toddy and his wife had a daughter – late in life, as well. He must have been in, like, his fifties?

She walks straight up to Erika and hits her *the* most unbelievable slap across the boat – even the sound of it is like the perfect fucking tee shot.

Of course I’m immediately between the two of them, going, ‘Okay, that’s *one* – some would say you’re entitled to it – but that’s it. You heard them. It’s hardly the time *or* the place.’

The rest of the, I suppose you’d call them, mourners arrive and stort to gather around us.

Hedda – it’s *such* a random name – just looks me up and down like I’m a big sack of nothing. ‘Oh my God,’ she goes, ‘don’t tell me *you’re* the latest.’

I’m like, ‘Hey, we’re actually brother and sister. Although I don’t think either of us would deny there was a definite attraction there before we found out that fact.’

There’s a few shocked faces at that one, it has to be said, as if no one here has anything better to do than stand around judging *me*. In the distance, I can see the pallbearer dudes lifting the coffin out of the back of the hearse. ‘Let’s not forget,’ I go, nodding in their general postcode, ‘that this is *supposed* to be an actual funeral?’

Erika, if you can believe this, is pretty much hiding behind me, using my body as a human shield to keep this girl beyond reach. That’s when this woman steps forward and lays, like, a hand on Hedda’s shoulder. I straight away recognize her from her photograph in the paper – Regina Rathfriland, in other words, the grieving widow.

She’s obviously a few years younger than Toddy – think maybe Catherine Deneuve.

She says something to her daughter, which I don’t quite catch, but Hedda is not going to be – I think it’s a word – *dissuaded*? She’s got shit to say and she’s going to say it. It’s me she actually aims it at.

‘Your sister is an actual whore,’ she goes, practically spitting out the words.

I stick my bottom lip out and pull a face, as if to say, ‘Okay, that’s an opinion,’ my intention being to try to keep the peace here.

‘Don’t call her that,’ I suddenly hear this voice – a man’s voice – behind me go. I spin around, roysh, and who is it – speak of the devil – only Fionn McFocking Spectagoggles himself, suddenly determined to be the hero of the hour.

‘Erika,’ he just goes, ‘I’m sorry.’

This is in response to the major borney they had last night over him refusing to come today. The old Erika, I don’t need to tell you, would send him on his way with a couple of achers. Except this time she doesn’t. She practically swoons into his orms, then *he* goes, ‘Come on, let’s get out of here,’ and he – get this – leads her off, leaving me there on my Tobler, surrounded by all these angry friends and rellys.

And weirdly, it’s, like, *I’m* suddenly their focus?

‘He was happy until *she* came into his life,’ someone goes. Then someone else is there, ‘*She* killed him – that’s the fact of the matter.’

Which is bang out of order, even though she’s already out of ear-shot. And I suppose it’s in response to that, roysh, that I end up going, ‘Hey, it takes two to tango,’ and suddenly, roysh, everyone is immediately on my case.

‘I beg your pardon,’ it’s Hedda – the daughter – who goes.

I just, like, shrug my shoulders.

‘Yeah,’ people are suddenly shouting at me. ‘What *do* you mean by that?’

In the background, I can hear an engine starting up – Fionn’s Honda Accord, from the sound of it – then disappearing down the road, leaving me to face this hostile crowd alone. It’s nothing new for me, of course.

‘I’m just saying,’ I go, ‘there was a pair of them in it.’

‘He was going through a hard time with the business,’ Hedda tries to go. ‘And she took advantage of that.’

I actually laugh. I’m there, ‘Took advantage? I’m sorry, no offence, but I’d say your old man couldn’t believe his luck.’

There’s, like, a collective intake of breath. Which is understandable, I suppose. They haven’t put him in the ground yet. I look at the widow, Regina, wiping away fresh tears and I feel instantly bad.

‘Look,’ I go, ‘all I’m saying, I suppose, is that it’s easy to blame Erika for everything. But Toddy was no saint.’

Hedda makes a sudden lunge for me with her focking claws primed but her mother holds her back.

‘You bastard,’ Hedda goes – top of her voice.

‘Hey,’ I go, not knowing, as usual, when to shut the fock up, ‘you didn’t hear him that night in the Galloping Green. He said he’d his private jet at Dublin Airport – they could go anywhere in the world she wanted. She’s the one who said no dice.’

‘You’re a liar,’ Hedda practically screams.

‘Hey, that’s the only reason he went back to your mother.’

Some huge dude steps forward then – think of a Subaru Forester in a black Members Only jacket – and, without saying a single word, he punches me full in the face.

It honestly feels like I’ve run head-first into a train.

For a second, roysh, I’m just, like, stunned. Then I feel myself suddenly falling backwards, like I’m falling through space. I seem to be falling forever. It’s only about ten seconds after I hit the ground with a thud that I realize that I’ve fallen backwards into the grave.

‘The bastard,’ I hear someone go and somehow I know it’s the dude who decked me.

I’m, like, lying there, looking up at this hole in the sky, with twenty or thirty angry faces just staring down at me.

Someone starts kicking earth down on top of me.

‘Let’s just bury him,’ I hear – I’m pretty sure – Hedda go. ‘I doubt if anyone will miss him.’





