

SHRINE

Her friends plagued her with advice. It wasn't the end of the world, they said, however much it seemed like it. Life must go on. Think of the children, they said. The grandchildren. She should pull herself together. Michael wouldn't have wanted her to fall apart like this.

The clichés made her want to scream but she knew they meant well. And they were right, of course, but knowing it made no difference. There was this aching void inside her all the time. Sometimes she just started howling, a primitive wail that came from deep within. It could happen anywhere, often at home alone but sometimes in public places too. In the café where she had gone with Ruth, who believed fervently in the healing power of cake. Lottie had tried to control herself but the sobs burst out of her anyway and Ruth had been mortified.

Everything had been so quick. No time to prepare. From the diagnosis to Michael's death—his agonising final pain blanked out at least by the mercies of the morphine drip—was just six weeks. Before that a few aches and twinges you might well have thought were just the usual symptoms of ageing. At fifty-seven you expected the machine to start to wear down, as Michael used to say. But the cancer was in his lungs and his bones and the doctors shook their heads and told them it was very far advanced, very aggressive.

They had given him chemo anyway, huge blasts of the stuff that bloated him up and made him sick, made all his lovely black hair fall out. Lottie secretly vowed to herself that if, God forbid, she were to be similarly diagnosed she would say no thank you to the chemo and take her chances.

She sat by him for hours while they pumped it into him. Holding his pale hand and stroking the dark little tufts of hair on his fingers, wondering how this could possibly have happened to them. She would creep out when he fell asleep and sit in the hospital canteen drinking tea and staring into space, or, if the weather was good, go for a walk in a nearby park and look at the elderly couples shuffling along happily, holding each others arms.

That was supposed to be us, she thought.

The children were great but they didn't understand either. They grieved for their father but their lives had moved on. Sara had her two small children to distract her and was pregnant again. Joe and his girlfriend Helena were planning to get married the next spring. Timmy, at twenty the baby of the family, was the most affected but even he had got over it and thrown himself back into his studies, hoping to get an Erasmus scholarship to Sweden in the autumn.

Lottie was glad for them all but as for herself, she couldn't see beyond the moment. She couldn't imagine a time when her life would retrieve its colour, when she would look forward again instead of back. It was only now that he was gone she realised how much of her life had been bound up with Michael's. They had done everything together, shared interests. Since they had got married very young—childhood sweethearts almost—she hadn't worked outside the home. Apart from a couple of girls from her schooldays—Ruth and Margaret—his friends had become hers.

"I wish now," she said to Ruth, "I'd had more independent a life. It's like there's nothing left for me. Nothing to do."

Ruth, a single woman the same age as Lottie—mid-fifties—didn't get it.

"You're still young enough to start again." She squashed into the eclair with her fork. "You might even meet someone else. In time, of course."

Ruth forked the chocolatey pastry into her mouth, licking the cream off her lips. Lottie watched, thinking she didn't want to meet anyone else ever. She just wanted Michael back.

Ruth attended tea dances, where serious professional men occasionally invited her to dinner or a film or play. Maybe there was more to it: Lottie had never asked. But none of these relationships seemed to last.

Margaret, their other old friend, was married like Lottie with grown-up children. Brisk and practical, she ran her home like a military operation.

"I'll come over and help you sort through his stuff," she told Lottie. "Vincent de Paul will be glad of it."

Lottie was shocked. "I'm not throwing anything out."

"You can't keep it. What for?"

Lottie said nothing. Not how much it comforted her to see Michael's coat hanging in the hall. How she buried her face in it sometimes to try and get his scent. How she washed his shirts from time to time to freshen them up. Even ironed them and hung them in the press. Sobbed into them.

She had been invited to Sara's for Christmas but said she would prefer to stay home. So all the family came to her bearing various food items to save her the trouble, although she would have preferred to be busy. They were clearly taken aback to find that she had laid a place at the table for Michael.

"That's too weird," said Timmy.

"That's granddad's place," Sara told three-year-old Cian when he tried to climb up to sit there and the boy looked around with big eyes to see where granddad was hiding. Throughout the meal everyone glanced uneasily at the empty chair and Cian was shh'ed when he asked.

For her present they had clubbed together to pay for a weekend away in a luxury hotel near Westport. A weekend for two. She looked at them aghast.

"You could take Ruth," they suggested hastily. "Or Margaret."

In the end, she went by herself.

The first night she sat having dinner in the hotel restaurant, surrounded by couples and families, wondering what the hell she was doing there. She drank two glasses of wine with the beef stroganoff and a brandy with the coffee and then went up to her room, stretching out on the chintz bedcover and gazing at the hunting scene on the wall. She felt that she was disappearing.

The next day it rained so she drove to the Museum of Country Life. A leaflet in the hotel had extolled its delights and, without any great expectations, she reckoned it would put down a few hours. Perhaps the rain would clear after and she could go for a tramp through the countryside.

The museum engaged her more than she had expected it would. It was both soothing and fascinating to see the way people had lived over the centuries, to look at the artefacts, the woven baskets, the shoes, bowls, necklaces, made with care and skill by unknown hands.

The display that caught her attention in particular was a strange contrivance that looked like a belt, but seemed far too rigid and heavy to fit around anyone's waist. A belt shrine, she read on the inscription, discovered in a Sligo bog in the 1940s by a man cutting turf. It was exquisite, hinged bronze inset with small silver panels beaten into elaborate Celtic designs and studded with coloured glass and enamel. Made to house the leather belt of an unknown saint.

As she looked at this sacred object, Lottie was overwhelmed with a sudden sense of connectedness. She felt it radiate out of her, a chain of light linking her to John Towe now dead but aged eighteen when he had dug the relic up and left it on a sod of turf all the rest of the working day because he didn't know what it was; to the restorers who had cleaned off the muck of centuries, wondering to see its intricacies emerge under their soft brushes; to the craftsman who had fashioned it so lovingly so very long ago. And finally to the long forgotten saint who had once tied round his waist the strip of leather encased in the shrine. Such belts, she read further, were thought to have miraculous powers to cure illness.

What a pity, Lottie thought, it's come too late for us.

Leaving the museum at last she found the sun had indeed come out into a clear blue sky. She took deep breaths of sharp February air and walked into hills rusty with last year's shrubs, showing the first signs of new shoots. As she went her mind buzzed with thoughts of the belt shrine and the other artefacts on display. One thing had always puzzled her: that there weren't more around. Considering the millions of folk who had passed over the surface of the earth for hundreds of thousands of years, living, loving, making, you would think you'd forever be stumbling over their pots and their tools and their jewellery, the relics of their lives. So many hopes and dreams gone without trace.

Back in Westport she went exploring. In a little side street she found the sort of junk shop she and Michael had loved to visit, picking up all manner of what his mother dismissed as "clutter" to furnish their first little house. So much of that had gone too, she thought sadly, in the clearout when they moved. She picked up a small and battered metal box. Running her fingers over it, she had a sudden idea and laughed aloud, causing the shop assistant to glance up at her.

"How much?" she asked.

It was for nothing.

Once home she searched out Timmy's box of enamel paints that he'd got as a boy to colour his model soldiers. Some were dried up but others were still fine. First she painted the box all over in shiny black and let it dry. Then she started decorating the box with a Celtic bird design copied from an old coin. It looked good, the long beak, the swirling tail. She had always been artistic that way. Michael had encouraged her but somehow she'd never had the time.

When it was completely dry she fetched Michael's leather belt, the one she had bought him when they were on honeymoon in Barcelona. They had tried to dance a flamenco that night in their hotel room but soon collapsed on the bed laughing. She remembered the difficulty she'd had in unbuckling the belt and how Michael had said it was his chastity belt. He'd always called it that after. "Where's my chastity belt, Lottie?" he'd shout out.

"Don't mind him," she'd tell the astonished children.

Now she rolled it up and placed it in the box, together with a note: *This belt was the property of Michael Gallagher, 1951-2008. He was no saint but I loved him.* Then she signed her name: *Charlotte Gallagher.*

She took the box and went out to the back garden. There she dug a hole under the cherry tree Michael had planted when they moved in nearly twenty years before. The tree would be flowering again soon, its buds now tight as a baby's fist. She buried the box quite deep and patted the soil firm over the top of it. Maybe one day someone would dig it up and read her message and feel the same connections she had felt in the museum.

Sara rang her that evening to find how the weekend had gone.

"Grand, love," she said. "Thanks so much for making me go. It did me the world of good. Actually I'm thinking of going back there. They run painting courses and I'd love to take that up again. Take it more seriously. Your dad always said I had a gift."

Later that evening she propped a postcard of the belt shrine up on the mantelpiece. The power to heal, they said. To heal heart sickness too maybe, she thought. Or at least to comfort and soothe. She looked at the photograph of Michael beside it, fit and smiling and full of love, and she smiled back.