**Can We Talk About Death?**

***LFX: General Wash***

Sheila (singing)

Of all the money that e'er I had  
I spent it in good company  
And all the harm I've ever done  
Alas it was to none but me  
And all I've done for want of wit  
To mem'ry now I can't recall  
So fill to me the parting glass  
Good night and joy be to you all  
  
  
Of all the comrades that e'er I had  
They're sorry for my going away  
And all the sweethearts that e'er I had  
They'd wish me one more day to stay  
But since it falls unto my lot  
That I should rise and you should not  
I gently rise and softly call  
Good night and joy be to you all  
  
Come fill to me the parting glass  
Good night and joy be with you all

***LFX: Blackout***

***LFX: Spotlight Stage Right***

***Hospital plinth is in place. Sheila wheels on the bed side table and bed table. She puts the breaks on, goes to get pillows/ linen which she places on the bed, over this the following audio recording plays…***

***SFX Audio Clip 1 (Sheila)***

*Heiddeger says that rather than trying to postpone death one should recognise what is truly peculiar about it, namely, ‘that it is possible in every moment’ (2010, p52 Heidegger’s italics). To talk about death then is to recognise its existence and conversely the existence of life. If death is inevitable and arbitrary so too is it integral to as May argues ‘a fullness of life that would not exist without it’ (2009, 4). While it is possible that Heidegger is correct, that death is the one thing that cannot be shared ‘death in mine and mine alone’ (2010 p53) our concerns about death are universal and sharing them may be something we can do together. As May continues, ‘thinking about death, leads us to think fruitfully about life’ (2004:4).*

Sheila

People have birthing plans? They imagine their child’s birth. They read books and talk to friends who’ve been through it. They watch videos scaring themselves ridged in the process. They consider what medical intervention they want, what strategies they will use, who will be involved, who will be present at the precise moment their baby comes into the world. Water birth, natural delivery, no pain relief, lots of pain relief… These options are all considered, and a plan put in place for the moment new life arrives.

I imagine my mother and father talked to each other, planned and thought about what they wanted to happen when I came into the world. I wonder if I should do the same for myself in preparation for when I leave.

***LFX: spotlight stage left fades***

***LFX: general wash centre stage***

***PowerPoint Slide 1: ‘First Encounter’***

***PowerPoint Slide 2: image of Niki as a child***

Sheila

My friend Niki’s first experience of death was in 1977 when Elvis died. Upon hearing the news, she went to her room, lay on her bed, crossed her arms over her chest, closed her eyes and tried with all her might to ‘die’... Niki was seven years old. She wanted to feel what it was like to die and as she tells it, was more than a little frustrated when it didn’t work. To make matters worse, her efforts were interrupted by her mother who was not at all impressed by the game. ‘Death is nothing to play at’ she said and the game was over.

A few years ago, I asked my nieces, Maeve (then 6) and Ellen (then 4) what happens when you die. Ellen was a bit obsessed with death at the time, regularly reminding me, in case I’d forgotten, that both of my parents were dead.

***PowerPoint Slide 3: Image of my Mum and Dad***

‘My parents were in heaven’ she’d tell me along with my brother’s delightfully gentle border collie Flossy

***PowerPoint Slide 4: Image of clouds moving (if possible)***

Maeve was a little more pensive than her sister. When asked the same question she was quiet for a moment or two.

Ellen, on the other hand, (always ready for an existential debate) blurted ‘you go to heaven’ and when I asked what heaven was like explained loudly ‘it has beds and clouds’. Maeve then added her thoughts, ‘it’s your soul that goes to heaven’ she said, ‘we all go to mass and then your body goes into the ground’ When I asked her what a soul is she said it’s ‘inside you’ and importantly, that it’s ‘the color blue’.

Several things struck me about this exchange:

* how comfortable these two little people both were discussing death.
* how familiar if abstract the concept was to them, and how they both knew something already about the ritual and practices that surround death in my native island
* and finally, how all of this will change as they experience death throughout their lives.

My first experience of death was a little less glamorous than Niki’s. It happened when I was 6 years old,

***PowerPoint Slide 5: Me as a child***

when my mother’s sister (my aunt Mary) died suddenly at the age of 56. My mother was the youngest of six.

***PowerPoint Slide 6: My mother as a child***

Her own mother with whom she was very close died when she was a teenager and her father, which whom she was not close, as a newly married thirty something. There was ten years between the first three siblings and the last which meant by the time my mother was born, her oldest sisters were already in the working world having children of their own.

I tell you this to explain that by the time Mary died, my mother was familiar with death. She had already lost both her parents and another sister Sheila, and this is my memory, however disjointed, of her second sister’s wake and funeral.

***LFX: fade wash***

***LFX: spotlight stage left on microphone and stand***

***PowerPoint Slide 7: My mum and I***

**Sheila moves stage left to the mic**

Sheila

We’re all bunched up. It’s a small pew but we want to sit together, to be close to you. I’m beside you. You are quiet, distracted. You are here with us but not. It’s mass, I’m familiar... the pews are tight and the knee rests hard like Renmore Church, like the Garrison Church, like the Cathedral. Like every church I’ve been in, in fact. I’ve kneeled on a hard rest every Sunday since I learnt to stand but never for this, never for a funeral. This is my first.

I’m enjoying the incense, how the smoke bellows from the censer, the exotic smell making everything seem just that little bit more dramatic. I steal a sideways glance at you and am suddenly aware of the heaviness. Your face is pale, and you are crying. Slowly at first, controlled or at least trying, then deeper, your shoulders engaged. You are here with us, but you are not. I try to remember if I’ve seen you cry before. You have tissues, you’re prepared, but you are inconsolable, distant in your grief. You are not a mother (and yet still a mother). In this moment you are a sister, a daughter and you cry for your sister Mary and for the others, your mother, father, sister Sheila. And more than that, you cry for the loss of the life you lived decades before us, before the McCormick’s, when you lived in a three-story town house in Lurgan so cold in winter you moved coals from one room to another and in summer ran shoeless in Donegal eating fresh raspberries without running water. When you were a McCreanor and the youngest of six.

**LFX: Spotlight fades**

**LFX: General wash comes back up**

**Sheila moves from mic, back center stage**

Sheila

There are few moments from our childhoods that we remember viscerally as adults. These memories are in our muscles, our bones. We feel them in our grown body just as we did in our little one. They are faded, a little curled at the edges perhaps but they are still there.

I had never seen my mother cry and would like to think what upset me most that day was seeing her upset. That it was empathy that arrested and unsettled me. But it wasn’t. It was something else, well two things really.

Firstly, it was the realisation that my mother had had another life, one before me and my siblings, one full of experiences and relationships beyond our family bubble and that this life, her other life, was equally as important to her as the life she now had with us.

Secondly, that my mother’s distress came from her understanding that she would never experience that life again, that those people were gone forever and that at some point in my life, I would experience exactly the same thing. I was not unsettled by the fact that I would die, I think the narcissism of my youth spared me that for a little while at lease, more that in my future lay similar grief. Other people would leave me. I would be the one weeping in a pew mourning the death of my family and with it my childhood. And this, much more than my Aunt’s wake, is what comes to mind when I think about my first experience of death.

This is the moment I began to understand the **impact** of death that shaped my understanding.

***LFX: Fade general wash***

***PowerPoint Slide 8:* ‘*At this moment’***

***LFX: Spotlight stage right***

***SFX: Audio Clip 2: Ali Jefferd***

***SFX: Audio Clip 3: Niki Woods***

***SFX: Audio Clip 4: Ali Jeffers and Deb***

***Over this audio and the following clip Sheila begins the makes the bed, using hospital corners etc,***

***SFX Audio Clip 5 (Sheila)***

*Why is it difficult to consider death, to plan for its inevitability so as to make it our own; to have dominion over perhaps the most profound moment in our life, its ending? Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, she suggests our inability to integrate the expectation of death into our understanding of life might come from the fact that death has become unfamiliar. Death happens all the time, we just never see it. In hospital, when a person dies they are whisked away. A magical disappearing act clears away with the evidence before it can upset anyone. But being part of the dying process, the death and the burial, seeing and perhaps even interacting with the body, these are all important steps to coming to grips with death - that of the person who has died and indeed that of our own (Death the Final Stages of Growth, 5)*

Sheila

I have had the privilege to be present at the moment of death; to see the shift in energy as life leaves the body. I have touched a dead body, washed a dead body, dressed a dead body all with the knowledge and respect that this shell was one once a person, someone’s loved one. I have done this with care and after my parents died hoped someone would do the same for them. I wasn’t allowed to lay my parents out; they both died in hospital and were whisked away and tidied up in that magical disappearing act. But how I wish I could have had that privilege. To have cared for them in that most personal of moments. Because when you get down to it, that’s all that’s important isn’t it; that we take care of each other? Even if taking care means having difficult conversations so that a loved one’s have the chance to have their wishes heard. And might it have been even a little easier for me to accept my parent’s passing had I’d had the opportunity to spend time with them after they were gone.

***LFX: spotlight fades stage right bed***

***LFX: spotlight stage left on microphone and stand***

***Sheila moves stage left to microphone and stand***

Sheila

It’s late and my legs are restless. I can’t get comfortable. It’s a moment of quiet, so rather than shuffle around in the arm chair I quietly pace the room.

3am, mid-way but still the hardest part of the night, another five hours together before I make my way home, in the frost, to bed. It’s winter so it will be dark when at home I drift off and dark when I wake up again.

The lap top is open, I have an article to read but I can’t concentrate. The room is warm. They’ve been kind enough to leave the heating on but now I’m worried they’re sweltering upstairs under duvets.

The air is punctuated with breathing, not chain stokes or a ‘death rattle’ but shallow none the less and irregular. I’ve measured it as I held his wrist gently in my hands, inspected pressure areas, checked butterfly needle sites, and the medication pump – all the while with soft tones, explaining every action to a person I will never properly meet or know.

Around the room family pictures adorn the walls. At the bedside, next to an oral hygiene pack sits an image of a couple. Slightly yellowed by the passage of time, it reminds me of my parent’s black and white wedding album.

I stop for a moment, jarred by something that invades the corner of my eye. It’s a child’s toy, one that belongs to the infant I met earlier, the one with yellow hair who gurgled and crawled about the room happily in her mother’s company. Her picture accompanies the couple on the bedside table. Other than from stories, she will never know the man sleeping with shallow breath, in the bed, in this makeshift bedroom that was once the family sitting room of the home he made.

And for a moment everything stops. I catch my breath and my eyes sting. I am overwhelmed by something, not sadness, not fear, something else…

These pictures dotted around the room. Portraits of graduations, holiday snaps, group pictures of son’s and daughter’s weddings, they all tell a story. They are a map with roads that all point to the man sleeping with shallow breath, in the bed, in this makeshift bedroom that was once the family sitting room of the home he made. They are the stuff of a life, a full life… and in that moment, my own life, with all its uncertainty is pulled sharply into focus.

Beside the child’s toy sits a tray of medication:

Diamorphine for pain

Metoclopramideforsickness

Midazolam for sedation

Hyoscine for secretions

I look them and, in that instant, they seem bizarre. They are out of place and their position moves things even further into strangeness…

My body is mortal

My time fleeting

I feel connected to the now. A desperation to have as full a life when I leave. A family upstairs catching fleeting hours of sleep between precious hours of farewell.

And I am jealous, jealous of the time, the space, this opportunity to plan, to talk, to sit next to. I’m jealous, for you, of the peace….

I remember the noise of ICU. The florescent lights. The drips and tubes that pumped and pulled and which for you, were all inevitably futile.

And I wonder what I would have said, what objects I would have placed around you and who would have kept watch in a makeshift bedroom that once was **and is somehow still** the family sitting room of the home you made.

And all of this is in an instant because a child’s toy sits beside a try of medication. Because this space if neither home nor hospice… but something else, something sacred.

The uncanniness of this coupling shifts me from my restless state.

Course work can wait, no interest in the book I’ve brought for distraction.

It is 3am and I sit alert, present, listening to the breathing of a man I will never meet and contemplate my place in it all.

And now another question. What does death mean to you at this moment in time?

***LFX: spot fades stage left (mic and stand)***

***LFX: spot light up on place stage right***

***SFX: Audio Clip 6: Monologue 2, Deb 5.51-6.23***

***SFX: Audio Clip 7: Monologue 2, Ali M 15.06-16.33***

***SFX: Audio Clip 8: Monologue 2, Niki 12.37-12.58***

***As the clips above (and below SFX Audio Clip 9) play, Sheila retrieves medical items (oral hygiene tray, mouth was, jug of water/ glass etc and places them on the table. She then places personal items, wooden crocodile, picture of family, postcard from Galway on bed side locker***

***SFX Audio Clip 9 (Sheila)***

*I’ve seen life begin and, for the most part, births are all pretty similar. There is fear excitement, joy or once on a bright spring morning, there was sadness. I have seen life end too and, in my experience, deaths are rarely similar. They are different because of a combination of things: the person, the circumstance and the people involved. This simple equation creates the outcome for every individual death, and these are things I think we should all consider.*

*When I think about my own death, I am immediately struck by how little I care about dying and how much I care about what I have left behind. Who will come to my funeral? Will anyone be there to organise it? Will anyone care that I have died? So much about my death is actually about my life and how I have lived it.*

*I can control how much I eat, how much I exercise, how much I drink. These things are important. But I can also be mindful of other things... How much I love, how much I understand, how much I prepare. I can plan what my death will be like in an ideal situation, what medical intervention I would like, what strategies I want used, who I want to be involved, who will be there with me at the end. And I can talk to my loved ones about that plan. It may be the ideal of course but why not. I might not have say in what ends my life but perhaps I can put my oar in and suggest how that ending happens.*

*So here goes…*

***LFX: spotlight stage left on mic and stand***

***Projection: slide entitled ‘My Good Death’***

***Sheila moves stage left to mic***

Sheila

It will be a bright Spring morning. I will be pain free thanks to the whizzing sound of my syringe driver. I will know and like my palliative care nurse and will have availed of all the comfort that palliative care provides. I will have spent time with my girls, and they will know that being their mum has been a most precious occupation. I will have spent time with my siblings, travelled home to the West of Ireland and felt the rough bash of the Atlantic one last time. I will be held by my husband with whom I will have had time to come to terms with our parting. Hearing is the last sense to go before a person dies, so I will die hearing his voice reassuring me to it is ok to go.

**LFX: Spotlight fades**

**LFX: general wash**

**Sheila packs up all the items and removes them from the stage as the Audio Recording plays.**

***SFX Audio Clip 10 (Sheila)***

*Elizabeth Kubler Ross said, ‘It is hard to die, and it will always be so, even when we have learned to accept death as an integral part of life, because dying means giving up life on this earth. But if we can learn to view death from a different perspective, to reintroduce it into our lives so that it comes not as a dreaded stranger but as an expected companion to our life, then we can also learn to live our lives with meaning- with full appreciation of our finiteness, of the limits on our time here’.*

*So I have a question.... Is there such a thing as a good death and if so, what would it look like for you?*

***SFX: Audio Clip 11: Monologue 1 Francis, 38.00-39.31***

***SFX: Audio Clip 12: Monologue 1, Frances 40.40-41.05,***

***SFX: Audio Clip 13: Monologue 3 Tim, Leo and Ali 18.10-19.36,***

***SFX: Audio Clip 14: Monologue 3 Francis 21.32-21.45,***

***SFX: Audio Clip 15: Monologue 3 Michaela 13.25-13.56,***

***SFX and VFX: Clip Monologue 16: Sheila, Francis, Wilkie, Richard, Rob and Tracy 22.10-22.0***

**LFX: Lights fade**

**SFX: The parting glass audio**

**LFX: house lights up**

**Ques: lighting, projection, video**

*Lighting*

*LFX: General Wash*

*LFX: Spotlight stage right*

*LFX: Spotlight down stage left*

*LFX: Blackout*

*Properties*

*Mic and sic stand down stage left*

*Hospital plinth*

*Hospital bedside table and bed table*

*Various medical properties that will go on the bedside table*

*Projection (all on PowerPoint*

*Slide 1: ‘First Encounter’*

*Slide 2: Image Niki as a child*

*Slide 3: Image my* Mum and Dad

*Slide 4: Image of* clouds

*Slide 5: Image me as a child*

*Slide 6: Image my mother*

*Slide 7: Image me and my mother*

*Slide 8:* ‘*At this moment’*

*Slide 9: ‘My Good Death’*

*Sound Cues*

*SFX Audio Clip 1 (Sheila 1)*

*Group A (already recorded, may need to be a little longer to fade in and out)*

*SFX: Audio Clip 2: Monologue 1 Ali Jeffers 12.07-12.53*

*SFX: Audio Clip 3: Monologue 1 Niki Woods 12.56-13.21*

*SFX: Audio Clip 4: Monologue 1 Ali Jeffers and Deb 15.50-16.35*

*SFX Audio Clip 5 (Sheila 2)*

*Group B*

*SFX: Audio Clip 6: Monologue 2, Deb 5.51-6.26*

*SFX: Audio Clip 7: Monologue 2, Ali M 15.05-15.48*

*SFX: Audio Clip 8: Monologue 2, Niki 12.35-12.53*

*SFX Audio Clip 9 (Sheila 3)*

*SFX Audio Clip 10 (Sheila 4)*

*Group C*

*SFX: Audio Clip 11: Monologue 1 Francis, 38.54-39.11*

*SFX: Audio Clip 12: Monologue 1, Frances 40.40-41.06*

*SFX: Audio Clip 13: Monologue 3 Tim, Leo and Ali 18.10-19.37*

*SFX: Audio Clip 14: Monologue 3 Francis 21.32-21.47,*

*SFX: Audio Clip 15: Monologue 3 Michaela 13.25-13.59,*

*SFX and VFX: Clip 16: Monologue 3 Sheila, Francis, Wilkie, Richard, Rob and Tracy 22.07-23.01*