



1: THE BENCH MOMENT

It's a Tuesday. I'm standing in a hospital on my way to see my mother. The corridor smells of pharmaceuticals and over-boiled vegetables – I'm guessing Brussels sprouts. It's a nose-wrinkling, stomach-flipping cocktail.

I've always been fond of a carefully handled Brussels sprout, thanks to my mother's way with them which involves chestnuts and bacon. She has never overcooked a sprout in her life. If she can smell these sprouts from her hospital bed, I'd say they are momentarily distracting her from the recent diagnosis of lupus, which was handed over to her by Dr Kavanagh.

Ah. Yes. Lupus. What an idiotic name for an illness that causes havoc to the immune system. It sounds so harmless and about as terrifying as a crocus or a snowdrop or any other spring flower you care to mention. But it's that same lupus that has me standing here in front of a lift on my way to Room 41. My mother has it. We just found out. She just found out. Which makes me think that, on balance, she's probably not thinking about Brussels sprouts. I push the button for the lift that seems to be stuck somewhere, above or below. It's in lift limbo. I know how it feels.

Eventually the lift arrives. I get in and a few moments later I get out on the seventh floor. I look left and right in search of Room





41. I am forty-one. I feel more like a two-year-old right now. I was a clingy child. I spent most of the years nought to five attached limpet-like to my mother's legs. I have a flashback to a supermarket in Galway – my mother is trying to reach for a can of beans and I won't let her because it will mean she is detached from me for several milliseconds. It must have been desperately annoying. But she never let on. I can see her smiling at me now while I threaten to topple a display of tins in my determination to Never Let Go Of Her For As Long As I Draw Breath.

Room 41: is this the one? No, not this one, there's a frail-looking old man in it watching *Countdown*. My mother is not frail. I wouldn't even have called my mother old, although I suppose at sixty-nine other people would. I like the word Older much better than plain old Old. Because everyone is older than someone else. The teenagers are older than the toddlers, the octogenarians are older than the fifty-somethings. Old, on the other hand, suggests an ending. You have arrived at Oldstown, your final destination: please make sure you have your luggage and surprising facial hair before departing the bus. Enough. I don't want to think of final destinations at the moment, especially not in terms of my mother.

And now here I am. Room 41. I go in, walking past the woman who tightens her dressing gown around her when she spots me, towards the furthest cubicle on the right by the window. I lean in close to the pink fabric curtain. I take a breath.

'A Mhamáí,' I whisper. 'It's me. Tasha.'

No response.

'A Mhamáí,' I try again. 'It's me.'

Parting the curtain, I see a grey and white head of hair resting against a pile of pillows. She has a tube stuck up her nose and



there's an inhaler lying on the bedside locker beside a bottle of water. The oxygen machine on the floor next to the bed is puffing away. Her eyes are shut and her face seems bloated. Her chest moves up and down with every assisted breath. In this unfamiliar scenario, I take comfort in the familiarity of her yellow nightdress, the favourite nightie of my mother, Mary Troy.

I can do nothing except stand there staring, afraid to move in case I wake her although, at the same time, I desperately want her to wake up. I tiptoe to the chair by the locker, put down my bag and the spare nightclothes I brought for her. I sit down on the chair, my eyes fixed on her. She is so still. I look out the window. I am not ready for this.

In my head I tell this woman, the person I love more than any other, what I can't yet say out loud: *This can't be happening. You, Mary Troy, are going nowhere. You have only just stopped working. You're supposed to stay with me this weekend. You said you'd help me pick the tiles for my bathroom and I know that sounds inconsequential in the grand scheme of things, but nobody else I know has your eye for a mosaic tile. We have booked our trip to Egypt and, if I'm not mistaken, you want to see the ice-mountains in the Antarctic one day. Don't you dare even think of leaving. I want to do so much more with you. I need you. We all need you. This is not your time.*

Feeling guilty for giving out to her even in my head, I lean over and stroke her bare arm. Her skin feels soft and loose beneath my fingers. She stirs in the bed and tilts her head towards me, her eyes heavy with sleep. Then she takes the tube from her nose and whispers: 'Oh, hi, love. You're so good to come.'

So good to come? Her politeness is more than I can bear. We talk for a while, neither of us saying anything about how we actually feel. As though by unspoken agreement we keep the conversation

on neutral territory. There is talk about a court case in the paper and the mush that passes for hospital food. She confirms that some sprouts did indeed die in vain to create part of the midday meal. There is no reference to the rapid decline of her health or to the sudden shock of her being here or the confusion and helplessness I know we both feel. But we can see it all in each other's eyes, which is one of the reasons I don't hold her gaze for too long.

She doesn't say anything but I can see that she is tired again. I say goodbye, reluctantly, and stumble back down the corridor the way I came, jabbing at the elevator button. 'Oh, bring me down,' I think. 'Let me out of here.' The lift finally arrives. I press G for the ground floor. Where is H for Help? I reach the ground and head for the exit, pushing open doors, moving further away from her as I pass through each one.

I'm outside now. I steady myself on a wall taking greedy gulps of sprout-free air before making my way to a nearby bench. I've never been here before but I suddenly recognise this unremarkable piece of outdoor furniture. This is it. The Bench that marks the first stop on the road to losing someone. A place where we pause before daring to contemplate whatever awfulness might come next. I take a seat, inwardly screaming at all the other people who have done time here before me. Can you all shift over and leave this one to me? Move along please. My turn now. But they are just ghosts and I am alone.

I rummage in my bag for a bottle of water. When I find it, I knock it back as though the liquid holds some kind of cure. I drink too fast and the water splutters back into the bottle. No graces here today. No mercy either. My body bends forward. I clasp my arm across my stomach and I do what I've wanted to do since I first parted that pale pink curtain in Room 41. I cry. I cry



THE BENCH MOMENT

5

and, not for the first time today, I think: *My mother might leave me. But she can't leave me. She's my mother.*

I will never forget that hour outside the hospital. My Bench Moment, I call it. Just thinking about it I can taste the overwhelming panic I felt as I sat there with all those thoughts of what might be to come swirling through my head. I am normally good in a crisis. A fixer by nature. But not this time. Sitting on The Bench I felt inadequate and helpless and out of my depth.

On the one hand I am worried sick about my mother's illness for her sake but, even as I consider the possibility of her being on an oxygen machine for the rest of her life, I am consumed with the prospect of her dying and how her loss will affect me. Me. When I think of my mother dying the tears I cry are two parts grief to one part self-pity. And along with those self-indulgent tears a tidal wave of self-scrutiny crashes in:

Have I been a good enough daughter? Have I told her how much I love her? Does she know how grateful I am for everything she has done for me? In my forty-one years what have I done for her? Is she aware of how I respect and admire her as a woman and as a mother? And, if she doesn't, is there still time left to let her know?

That moment on The Bench was my moment of reckoning. It marks the day I began asking questions about the nature of my relationship with my mother and started looking for ways to cherish what we have. Until that hour outside the hospital, I'd never grappled with the concept that my mother was going to die and that I would be left behind. But there I was on The Bench





and that is where this book really begins. It is the place where I first realised the loss I am facing and contemplated how I'm going to deal with that loss. At that point, though, on that dismal Tuesday as I contemplated my first cigarette in twelve months, I didn't have a notion where to start.

My mother contracted lupus five years ago. I first realised something was wrong when we were on holiday in Morocco. One day she noticed her skin was covered in ugly blemishes, which we both assumed were caused by the intense sun. But what we thought were heat rashes turned out to be lupus. It is a disease in which the body's immune system becomes hyperactive and attacks normal, healthy tissue. It comes with a whole range of symptoms including inflammation, swelling and damage to joints, skin, kidneys, blood, the heart and lungs. To complicate things even further, she was diagnosed with pulmonary hypertension and has been on and off oxygen ever since.

Our relationship changed in the early stages of her diagnosis. Suddenly the vivacious and fearless mother I knew was reduced to relying on oxygen and on her children for care when home from hospital. As a family we took it in turns to make sure there was always someone with her and when I couldn't be in Galway, I talked to her on the phone several times a day. I couldn't shake the feeling that compared to what she was going through, my work and everything else in my life was irrelevant. Living and working two and half hours from her in Dublin, where I run a communications consultancy with my brother Cilian, meant I felt constantly guilty about not being around for her when she needed me most.

While I was being educated on the finer points of lupus and the





array of medication my mother needed to take each day something else happened.

In an entirely separate and shocking development I started to realise I was sliding into stereotypical middle age.

At the monthly dinner parties I have held for years with my close female friends, a familiar pattern was emerging. We were all getting older and, having left our twenties and thirties behind, at times the conversation would turn to the subject of newly discovered aches and pains. We had started to talk about Our Ailments. As the corks popped, we'd catalogue how somebody's knees had begun to ache when they went upstairs. Somebody else had a weird twinge in their ankle and wondered could they be overdoing it in Pilates. My friend Moira was going through early menopause and we got the blow by blow details of the symptoms over vegetable tempura one memorable night. As she grappled with the awfulness of her first hot flush, I had a flashback to a time when our conversations were exclusively concerned with the latest hot men in our lives.

On top of our various physical complaints, another topic kept creeping across the dinner table: our mothers. The question came as sure as main course followed starter. 'And how is your mother doing?' We'd take it in turns to deliver our mother-related news bulletins. I'd describe in minute detail the latest update on my mother's condition like an expert – I wasn't one – giving a breakdown of the various treatments she was receiving. I talked about her funny illness-related sayings: her oxygen machine was attached to a long tube we kept tripping over – 'Just follow the lead and you'll find me,' she told visitors. I talked about the guilt of kissing her goodbye and taking the train back to my life in Dublin on Sunday evenings.





My friend Nora's father had died a year ago and now her mother had been diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis so she knew what I was talking about. She was an only child and had to make a four-hour round trip to her mother's house every weekend.

'I'm not sure what's worse. The hassle of the trip or the guilt about how much I resent having to make it,' she said.

Jennifer's mother was in great health and had recently made out a list of Christmas presents she wanted to buy for her grandchildren.

'It's flipping June!' she seethed, the sun splitting the lime green walls in my backyard.

Nora reckoned she could do one better. Her mother was hosting a book club and was insisting on getting the room painted for the occasion. 'I told her nobody was coming to the book club for the paintwork but she has four shades of green on the walls and wants me to choose one,' she groaned. Moaning and laughing about our mothers was what passed for scintillating conversation at my dinner parties these days.

What we were discussing was serious but we always managed to have a good laugh. We couldn't believe how much of our evening was taken up with 'mother talk'. I enjoyed these conversations because, quite simply, I adore my mother. She's an intelligent, warm and wise woman with just the right dose of cynicism. Luckily, we've a lot in common. We are the kind of people who will obsess for weeks over something as inconsequential as the perfect G&T glasses, or chat for hours about a Brian Friel play at the Abbey Theatre. I've always felt lucky to have such a close relationship with my mother but until I started writing this book, I didn't realise exactly how lucky I was.





During one of these dinner parties, I listened as a friend despaired of her mother who, despite having cancer, was insisting on retaining her forty-a-day fag habit. And another who needed to offload about a recent visit by her mother who had spent the entire time criticising her parenting. ‘Everything from Sam’s hair being too long to the fact that I hadn’t started Sarah on music lessons. She just can’t help herself.’

As my own mother’s health became more of a worry, I looked at the anguish in the faces of my friends and realised our relationships with our mothers were on our minds now more than ever before. We needed to talk about them. We needed to make some kind of sense of our relationships with them before it was too late.

I had an epiphany during one of these dinners: if my friends and I were feeling this way, it seemed likely that most other forty-something women were, for better or worse, spending more time thinking about their own mothers.

This marked the start of my Interrogation Phase – I began asking every woman I met two simple questions:

Firstly – ‘Do you have a mother?’ And if the nonplussed person I was interrogating answered yes, I then asked, ‘Are you worried about her dying?’

At a very basic level I was asking because I wanted to feel less alone in my panic. But I had also become curious about whether other people had ever thought about their mother’s death and considered how they would feel when she died. But, even if I didn’t realise it then, I know now that it was a curiosity born of self-interest. I needed to know how other people were dealing with this so that I could deal with it better myself.

So, if you were a woman and we were introduced socially, you





got asked these questions. I asked them at dinner parties. Art exhibitions. The beauticians. On trains. The reaction was instant. Colour drained from the faces of the person I was asking. Or they rolled their eyes before they could help themselves. Even if they started saying the subject was too personal to discuss, they always ended up telling me about their relationships with their mothers. The good, the bad and the guilt. Always the guilt. Just mentioning the word mother and dying caused an emotional earthquake in the faces of the women I spoke to. In one case I had a memorable conversation on a plane from New York to Dublin with a woman who answered my question about her mother by saying:

‘I can’t bear to be in the same room with her, if you must know. We fight most of the time. And yet, even when we’re fighting, I have this quiet dread about when she is gone. It comes over me at the oddest moments. I don’t even want to think about it.’ She was still talking two hours later.

These conversations showed me that whatever their relationship, women my age had an awful lot to say about their mothers.

Other questions I started asking were: Do you think you are a good daughter? Could you be a better daughter than the one you are now? When I look back now, this was the beginning of my preparation. I could see a treacherous cliff edge looming in front of me. I wanted to be ready when life came up and pushed me off. I wanted to prepare for the time when my mother wouldn’t be around any more.

But how to prepare? Well, for me it was about casting a forensic eye over my relationship with my mother. For the past five years the dread of losing her has been occupying my thoughts so much that I decided to write this book. It is a book not just





about my fears and my relationship with my mother, but about daughters in general and our attempts to negotiate the most complex, infuriating, joyous, messy, enduring relationship of our lives.

The shelves and online bookstores are heaving with baby manuals but there are hardly any about making life with your mother as rewarding and life enhancing as it can be. The more I thought about it, the more I felt there was a need for a book to help daughters reflect on the relationship they have with their mothers and to help them consciously work to make that relationship the best it could be, particularly in those final years. A book to help them navigate the last years of their relationship. A book about the person many of us will always yearn for and turn to when times are hard – the woman with the ability to nurture, comfort and annoy you more than any other on the planet. One woman. For better or for worse. Your mother.

Ever since *The Bench* I've been on a mission and by reading this book this mission is also yours, should you choose to accept it. Imagine if you could stand at your mother's graveside and have no regrets. Well, let's be realistic, hardly any regrets. Imagine if when you stood there you could be confident, even in the midst of grief, that you had done the best you could, particularly in the final chapter of your lives together.

That is what this book is about. It's about doing things with and for our mothers that will enhance our time and our relationship with them as they age. It's about bringing pleasure to our mothers, whether you think they deserve it or not. This will come naturally to some of us and be more challenging for others. It is also about acknowledging that there might not be anything to do, apart from accepting that the relationship is as far away from the Hollywood version of mother-daughter relationships as





it's possible to be. The Hallmark crowd don't make Mother's Day cards for daughters who don't get on with their mothers. But daughters who don't like their mothers still send them. It's just that they are usually blank inside, with no flowery message.

Here's what I found from talking to daughters: we are mad about our mothers. Mad with our mothers. And in many cases we are driven mad by the guilt that our mother-daughter relationships just aren't good enough. We need to get to grips with all of this before it's too late.

The original title for this book, the one I knew probably wouldn't end up on the cover, was *Ten Things to Do with Your Mother Before She Dies*. It had a macabre sense of urgency about it because what we are trying to do here is urgent in every sense. There is no nice way to put this – your mother is going to die. Most likely she is going to pop her clogs, or in my mother's case her round-toed, leather slip-ons, well before you do. If you felt the need to buy this book or if someone gave it to you as a gift, I am making an educated guess that the longest, most complex relationship of your life is now in its twilight years. In footballing terms, we are in the dwindling moments of extra time.

Parts of this book may not be easy to read, especially if your relationship with your mother isn't in good shape. Some of the ideas may seem unthinkable. One of my suggestions is that you help your mother plan her funeral. For many people that might be hard to consider. The things we are going to explore in this book are simple, straightforward and, in most cases, blindingly obvious. But that doesn't mean they are easy.

If you are one of the lucky ones whose relationship with their mother is in need of nothing more than a daughterly MOT, then





this book is your chance to make something already really positive even better. For others, reading this book might just be about finding ways to make a bad relationship bearable. Or finding ways to accept that the bad relationship, the kind not generally described on Mother's Day cards, will never change. Or finding ways to forgive. Most of all, though, this book is about asking questions. Questions like:

How do we make sure that when she goes we are at peace with the way we behaved towards her when she was here?

And:

How will we feel when she dies if we leave things exactly as they are?

The answers will be different for everyone. The fact that you are reading this book suggests that, whatever your circumstances, we are all in the same boat, scanning a similar horizon. The scenery may be different but the destination is the same. One day we will be standing at a grave or in front of a crematorium curtain or reading a eulogy at the mother of all funerals. And we are going to have regrets. What we're trying to do is minimise those regrets. Not tomorrow, not next week, but now. While we still can.

