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Ladies and gentlemen, family and friends, thank you for gathering to honour the life of Katherine Louise O’Neill — Kate to almost everyone who knew and loved her.

We meet in grief, yes, but also in deep gratitude.
Gratitude for a life lived with purpose, with gentleness, and with a clarity of moral compass that steadied so many of us when the weather turned rough.

I speak today as her friend — her closest friend since we were university flatmates in Edinburgh.
For nearly three decades, Kate was my north star.
When the path ahead looked tangled or dim, I would think, “What would Kate do?” and suddenly there would be a little more light, a better question to ask, a kinder way forward.

She was born in Glasgow on 5 November 1978, and left us on 10 February this year, at the age of only 47.
It strikes me that even the dates say something about her.
Bonfire Night for a beginning — a spark, a gathering, warmth in the cold — and a winter’s day for her departure, when light can feel far off and we learn again how to keep each other warm.

Kate arrived in Edinburgh to study law with the brisk confidence of someone who knew the difference between fuss and substance.
In our first week as flatmates, while the rest of us were negotiating who’d hidden whose teaspoons, she had already located the library stacks for human rights law and left a neatly written timetable blu-tacked to the kitchen door.
It featured two reliable fixtures: early mornings and proper tea.

We revised on the floor with casebooks spread like maps, and she found joy in

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the precise turn of a legal principle the way some people react to a perfect chord.
She wasn’t dazzled by cleverness for its own sake.
Even then, she was animated by what the law might do for dignity, how it might be worked, carefully and persistently, to hold open a door for someone who had been shut out.

After graduation, she moved to London to practise as a human rights solicitor.
She learned the city by its bus routes to advice centres and by the long corridors of courts where, frankly, she looked too young to be the one carrying the file that mattered.
But she was never overawed by institutions.
She prepared meticulously, listened harder than anyone else in the room, and spoke when she had something to add, not merely something to say.

In time, Kate became a charity director, focusing on refugee support.
She built partnerships — not just memoranda and logos, but real working bridges between legal teams and community organisations.
She ran pro bono clinics where the coffee was strong, the waiting area was calm, and the noticeboard had exactly the information people genuinely needed.
She didn’t invent grand programmes for their own glory.
She made the systems work better for people when the stakes could not be higher.

She did all this with a character that was, to those who knew her, unmistakable.
Principled, yes, but not brittle.
Meticulous, but never pedantic.
Warm, with a quiet wit that lifted a heavy afternoon by a few degrees.
And in a crisis — truly unflappable.
There was a particular expression she had, an almost imperceptible narrowing of the eyes, when something was tangled and urgent.
You could see the gears engage.
The rest of us would be flapping papers and refreshing emails; Kate would

already be on the phone to the person who could actually help.

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She married Thomas Reed, and together they built a home that was both a refuge and a launchpad.
Thomas, the partnership you shared was tender and sturdy, not without its muddy knees, and all the better for it.
Aoife and James, your mum spoke of you with a proud delight that never needed embellishment.
She loved the sound of your laughter down the hallway, the debris of school projects on the table, and those meandering conversations on long walks by the Thames where the big questions slipped in as naturally as the river turns.
And to Moira and Seamus, her beloved parents, she carried your Glasgow humour and your sense of right and wrong into every room she entered.

Outside of work, Kate had a way of choosing pursuits that sounded quiet until you noticed how much life they generated.
She played the cello in a community orchestra, not to be centre stage, but to be part of a sound larger than herself.
I can still see her, bow poised, that half-smile when the counting-in began — a look that said, “Listen, then join in.”
She loved Scottish folk songs, knew the verses you think no one remembers, and would hum them under her breath when a meeting had run long and the biscuits had gone.
She tended an allotment with a patience that surprised even her: crooked carrots, prevailing slugs, triumphal courgettes.
And she walked — miles along the Thames — where she would think through tangled problems until they were not so tangled after all.

The memory I keep closest sits inside a particular dawn.
It was just before our finals, and we climbed Arthur’s Seat before sunrise.
She brought tea in a dented thermos that had belonged to her dad.
We sat with our feet going numb and watched the city switch itself on, one light at a time.
We talked about the lives we wanted — not the titles, but the kind of days we

hoped to have; the sort of people we hoped to be when no one was watching.
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Even then, Kate’s plans were never about impressing a room.
They were about service, about fidelity to the small and exacting tasks that, over time, change a life.

That is what she did.
Patiently, precisely, consistently — she put justice and dignity to work in the ordinary.
She listened carefully, especially when listening was difficult.
She did the right thing even when it was hard, and often when no one would ever know she had done it.

We will each miss her in our own register, but themes recur when we speak of her.
We will miss her wise counsel — that steadying phone call in which she wouldn’t tell you what to do, but would ask three questions that somehow made the decision surface as if it had been waiting there all along.
We will miss her handwritten notes — the ones that arrived on real paper, in ink that never smudged, with a line from a poem or a tune she knew you loved tucked into the margin.
And we will miss her reassuring presence — the way she could stand beside you at the edge of something daunting and make you feel not smaller, but more capable.

In the last months, Kate spoke very little about endings.
She was more interested in continuities.
She knew that good work deserves a future.
And so I am grateful — and I know many of you share this gratitude — that a foundation now bears her name, supporting refugee families with legal aid and housing advice.
It is already doing what she did best: making help real, respectful, and reachable.
It gives us a way to answer the question we all ask at times like these: “What can we do?”

We can do what she did — with care, with humility, and with follow-through.

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I am conscious that memorial words can lean too easily into abstraction.
So allow me a few particulars, the small signatures of Kate's days.

The cello case by the door, with a pencil tucked in the handle for urgent annotations that she never erased.
A jar of string on the allotment shed shelf, labelled, naturally, "useful".
The precise way she folded a scarf before a windy walk, then inevitably shared it when someone else had underestimated the weather.
The calm in her voice at 2am when a client's housing had fallen through and the system had failed again — calm not because she was unfeeling, but because panic was of no use to anyone.
The text after a long week: "Tea? I'll bring the good biscuits."
And the way she sang the harmony line, never the showy part, holding the tune together so everyone else could find their place.

There is comfort, I think, in remembering that Kate's influence was never a bolt of lightning.
It was morning light — consistent, gentle, illuminating what needed doing.
She has not vanished.
She continues in the habits she taught us, in the choices we will make because she helped us think more clearly and feel more deeply.
She continues in Aoife and James, in their courage, their curiosity, and in the jokes she would deliver deadpan and then ruin with her own smile.
She continues in Thomas's steadfast love, and in the quiet strength of Moira and Seamus.
And she continues in those families whose names we may never know, who sleep tonight a little more safely because a door opened, because someone listened, because the right letter was written and sent on time.

To those who mourn most closely — Thomas, Aoife, James, Moira, and Seamus — may you be held by the vastness of the love that surrounds you.
May you find, in the music she loved and the paths she walked, a way to be near

her.

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And may you feel, in the kind actions of this community, the echo of the kindness she so often set in motion.

When we rose from Arthur’s Seat that morning, Kate shook the last drops from the dented thermos and said, “Right then — work to do.”
It was not a battle cry.
It was a simple acknowledgement that the day asks things of us, and that we are capable of answering.

Today, in honour of Kate, we can answer in the ways she taught us.
Listen carefully.
Act justly.
Hold your nerve when others lose theirs.
Write the note.
Walk the long way if it helps you think.
And when the task is heavy, share the load, and bring the good biscuits.

Farewell, dear Kate.
Thank you for your steadiness, your exacting kindness, your brave, exact love.
We will carry your light — not as an idea, but as a practice — into the places where it is most needed.

Right then.
Work to do.

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