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Family, friends, colleagues, and all who loved Catherine Mae O’Leary—our Cate—thank you for being here today.

We gather in Halifax to remember a life that began on November 15, 1963 in Saint John, New Brunswick,
and that concluded, too soon and yet completed with grace, on March 29, 2026 here in Halifax,
at the age of 62.

We gather as her people—her husband, Thomas O’Leary, speaking with a heart that is both heavy and grateful,
her children, Fiona and Brendan,
her sisters, Moira and Eileen,
and in memory of her parents, Patrick and Nora, whose names she spoke with respect and a soft smile.

We gather as the family Cate made, and the wider family she chose.

Cate and I were married for thirty-four years.
We were partners in faith, in family, and in the quiet perseverance it takes to build a life.
Nothing about that perseverance was flashy.
It looked like early mornings and late nights,
like stacked library books and a steaming kettle,
like the calm voice at the end of a fraught day saying, “Let’s think this through.”
That tone—measured, wise, never a performance—was one of her gifts.
She did not shout.
She did not rush to be right.
She listened.
And when it mattered, there was a steel spine beneath all that gentleness.

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Cate was the first in her family to attend university.
She never treated that fact as a medal.
She treated it as a responsibility.
Education had opened a door for her,
and she spent her career making sure it stayed open for others.

At Dalhousie, where she earned her PhD in literature,
she fell in love with the cadences of our place—our coastlines, our voices, our histories—
and she gave her working life to Canadian literature with a Maritime sensibility at its core.
She was a beloved professor not because she coddled,
but because she respected her students enough to expect their best,
and then stood beside them while they found it.
Her scholarship was accessible without being simple;
it invited rather than excluded.
She mentored with intention.
She curated a local reading series that brought poets and novelists into the same room as newcomers and neighbours,
and she invested herself, again and again, in small presses,
knowing that the health of a culture is measured as much by its quiet publications as by its bestsellers.

There are dozens of people in this room
who could tell you about a hallway conversation that changed their path,
a carefully written comment on a draft that opened their thinking,
a phone call that came when they needed courage.
Cate had a way of leaving notes in the margins—of manuscripts, yes,
but also in the margins of life.
Little annotations of care and clarity:
a recipe clipped and passed along with your name at the top,
a postcard from Saint John with a single line underlined,
a printout of a poem folded into a pocket with “for later” written in her tidy

hand.

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Our life together was never grand in the tourist sense, but it was rich with texture.
We raised two children, Fiona and Brendan,
and we watched them become themselves—curious, principled, and brave.
She was proud of you both in a way that resisted spectacle.
If someone praised you, she would say,
“They worked at it. That’s what I admire.”
And then later, when the kitchen was quiet,
she might hum a bar of a tune and put the second-best mug aside because she knew you liked it better.

Cate’s roots ran deep in this community.
She sang in a Gaelic choir where the harmonies felt like home.
She spent evenings at folk music sessions where the leaders always made room for a new voice.
She grew herbs out back—parsley first, then thyme, mint that tried to take over, and, improbably, rosemary that survived three winters.
She knit Aran sweaters that fit like history—intricate, patient, beautiful.
She hosted book clubs that were half about the book and half about how to live.
If the conversation strayed to gossip, she would raise an eyebrow and steer it back:
“What does the story ask of us?”
That was Cate—curious, yes, but always with a moral compass.

She was wise, principled, and quietly humorous.
Not the kind of humour that grabs a room, but the kind that warms it.
Her students will remember the precision of her lectures
and the way she could loosen a knot with a single, wry sentence.
Her colleagues will remember the way she insisted that meeting agendas match their minutes.
Our family will remember her counsel—a steadying presence that moved us from agitation to action.

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A favourite memory of mine—one I return to now—comes from a nor’easter on the Halifax boardwalk.
It was foolish to be out.
We went anyway.
The wind turned our umbrellas inside out and our shoes, despite all claims to waterproofing, gave up early.
We tumbled into a small place for chowder, cheeks red, hair wet, boots squeaking.
She laughed—not a performance, just a release—and between spoonfuls we traded lines from Alistair MacLeod,
both of us a little too pleased when we landed on the same sentence at the same time.
Leaving, we had to wade a puddle that might have been a bay by then.
She looked at me, rolled her eyes as if to say, “Well, this is what we’ve chosen,” and stepped in.
I think now that this is a fair picture of our marriage and of her character:
face the weather, keep the words close, laugh when the shoes are soaked, and carry on.

Cate’s values were plain to see.
Integrity in work.
Dignity for every person.
Stewardship of community and place.
And education as a path—never a ladder to be pulled up, but a path to be widened.
When the university grew noisier, she grew clearer.
When a student stumbled, she was patient but firm:
“You can do this,” she would say. “We will get there. But we will do it properly.”
There was kindness in that sentence, and also standards.
And it made people rise.

To Moira and Eileen,
you were her first friends and fiercest protectors.

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Her stories of childhood were full of your names,
told with the fond exasperation only sisters can manage.
She would want me to say thank you—for the calls, the meals, the jokes that survived hard news,
and for the way you loved her without conditions.

To Fiona and Brendan,
your mother left you letters to open at future milestones.
This was not an attempt to fix the future.
It was her way of keeping faith with you.
She trusted that words, chosen carefully, could accompany you across time.
She has done what she always did—offered guidance without insisting on control,
presence without pressure.
When the day comes to open each envelope, know that she wrote them with joy and with confidence in who you are.

Cate asked that, in lieu of flowers, donations be made to a student bursary.
It is typical of her that the last request she made of us turns outward.
Even in absence, she is widening the path.

What will we miss most?
Her counsel that steadied our family.
Her margin notes that told us we had been seen.
The grace she brought to ordinary days.
The way a Tuesday supper could become a small ceremony because she set the table with intention
and asked a question worth more than its answer.
The way she could shift a conversation from complaint to care in three sentences,
never scolding, always inviting.

I want to speak, too, to the community Cate cherished.
To her students, past and present:

she believed in your capacity, not as a slogan but as a working assumption.
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She respected your ideas enough to argue with them, and your lives enough to urge you toward dignity.
Carry that forward.
Read generously, write honestly, and make space for others at the table.

To our friends and neighbours:
thank you for bringing music to the house when silence felt too heavy,
for tending the garden when we could not,
for the casseroles that were kinder than they had any right to be,
and for standing, as you do now, shoulder to shoulder.
Cate believed that belonging is a verb.
You have proven her right.

Grief, in our home these last days, has been quieter than I expected.
It does not come as a single storm and pass.
It arrives in small, specific ways—
reaching for a mug that is now too still,
finding a line in a book she marked and hearing, suddenly, her voice.
And yet alongside it, there is gratitude so steady it feels like a tide.
Gratitude for thirty-four years of partnership.
For children we adore.
For work that mattered and community that held.
For a life lived with coherence between what was said and what was done.

Cate did not seek applause.
She sought alignment—between values and actions, between care and courage.
She taught us that steadiness is not the absence of struggle but the way we meet it.
That a steel spine can be cloaked in a soft sweater and a patient tone.
That joy is not spectacle, but attention.

So how shall we honour her?
We will keep faith.

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We will hold to integrity when it is inconvenient.
We will guard the dignity of others, especially when the world forgets to.
We will tend our small gardens and our shared places.
We will give the benefit of the doubt, and when doubt is not warranted, we will give the gift of truth spoken kindly.
We will read our own lives with the care we bring to a good novel.
And we will leave notes in the margins for those who come after.

Cate, my love,
you have been the compass in our house—true, steady, quietly sure.
You showed me how to persevere without hardening,
how to believe without shouting,
how to love without keeping score.

On that stormy day at the boardwalk, after the laughter and the chowder,
you said, almost to yourself,
“Isn’t it something, how the ordinary refuses to be small?”
You made the ordinary spacious.
You made it sing.

On behalf of our family—on behalf of Moira and Eileen, of Fiona and Brendan, and of me—
thank you for walking with us so well.
We will miss you in ways that words can only gesture toward.
But we will carry you, as you have carried us,
in our work, in our humour, in our care for this place and its people.

Rest, Cate, in the peace you lived toward,
and know that your story continues—
in the bursary that bears your hope,
in the students who speak your questions aloud,
in the choir that finds its harmony,
and in the home where your notes in the margins have become a way of life.

Thank you all for being here to remember her, and to help us keep that way alive.

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