

# Star Sullivan

Maeve Binchy

Published by Orion

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.  
Please print off and read at your leisure.

---

An Orion paperback  
First published in Great Britain in 2006  
by Orion Books Ltd  
Orion House, 5 Upper St Martin's Lane,  
London WC2H 9EA

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Copyright © Maeve Binchy 2006

The right of Maeve Binchy to be identified as the author of  
this work has been asserted by her in accordance with the  
Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be  
reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted,  
in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical,  
photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior  
permission of the copyright owner.

A CIP catalogue record for this book  
is available from the British Library.

ISBN-13: 978-0-75287-954-3  
ISBN-10: 0-75287-954-5

Typeset by SX Composing DTP, Rayleigh, Essex

Printed and bound in Great Britain by  
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

[www.orionbooks.co.uk](http://www.orionbooks.co.uk)

# CHAPTER ONE

MOLLY SULLIVAN SAID THAT the new baby was a little star. She was no trouble at all and she was always smiling.

Shay Sullivan said the new baby was a star picker of winners, it pointed its little fist at the horse on the list that was going to win.

So she became known as Star and everyone forgot that her real name was Oona. Star forgot it herself. At school when they read out the roll-call they always said, 'Star Sullivan?' On the street where she lived people would shout over to her, 'Star, would you do us a favour and mind the baby for me?' or run to the corner shop, or help to fold a big tablecloth, or find a puppy that had gone missing. Star Sullivan had a head of shiny copper hair, a ready smile and a good nature, and she did everything that she was asked to.

There were three older than Star in the family and none of them had her easy, happy ways.

There was Kevin, he was the eldest. He said he was going to work in a gym, eventually own his own sports club, and he fought with his father about everything.

There was Lilly, who was going to be a model one day and had no interest in anyone except herself.

There was Michael, who spent more time in the head teacher's office than he did in the classroom. He was always in trouble over something.

And then there was Star.

Often Star asked her mother, would there be another baby coming? Someone she could push in a pram up and down Chestnut Street. But her mother said no, definitely not. The angel who brought babies had brought enough to number 24. It would be greedy to ask for more.

So Star pushed other people's babies and played with their cats. On her own.

Chestnut Street was a lovely place to play, because it was shaped like a horseshoe and there was a big bit of grass in the middle beside some chestnut trees.

Some of the people who lived there went to great trouble to keep it looking nice. Others just

sat there at night and drank lager and left the cans.

There were other children around but Star was shy. She was afraid to go up to a group playing in case they told her to go away. Everyone else looked as if they were having a good time already so she hung about on the edges and never joined them.

Molly Sullivan was glad that her youngest child was so little trouble. There was too much else to think about. Like Shay's gambling, for instance. He said he was doing it for them all, for the family. He was going to have a big win and take them all on a holiday. Foolish decent Shay, who worked in the kitchens of a big hotel and dreamed of becoming the kind of man who could stay there as a guest. As if any of them except little Star would ever want to go on a family holiday, were he ever to afford it!

And Molly Sullivan worried about her work. She worked shifts in a supermarket where they were very busy and she was run off her feet. She had to keep a big smile on her face and be very quick lest they think she was too old and let her go.

She worried about Kevin. He was grumbling

because he was still picking up towels and taking the bookings at the Sports Club. He thought he should have been made a trainee manager by now.

Molly worried about Lilly, too. She worked far too hard, endless hours at a telesales centre, so that she could pay for further model training courses. She was thinner than ever and ate practically nothing at home. Of course she said they had *huge* lunches in the office, which was odd, as Molly didn't think they had a kitchen there. But then Lilly wouldn't say it unless it was true.

And as for Michael! Well, he was a worry from dawn till dusk. His teachers said that he would barely be able to read by the time he left school. He had no interest in any subject. His future looked very bleak indeed.

So it was always consoling to think about little Star with her eager face. Star who had never caused any trouble to anyone. Star wore Lilly's old clothes with pleasure, and even the T-shirts of the two boys. She didn't ask for anything new.

At school they said she didn't find the work easy and was always very anxious if asked to

read or recite a poem. She was a kind child, they said, and if anyone else fell in the playground or got sick, Star Sullivan was always there to help. Maybe she might be a nurse one day, suggested Miss Casey, one of the teachers. Molly was pleased. It would be lovely to have a nurse in the family after the two dreamers who thought they were going to run a sports club or parade down a catwalk, and Michael who might well end up in gaol.

Shay said that Star would make some man a terrific wife, because she was so interested in things instead of just sighing and shrugging her shoulders like the rest of the family. He would explain the odds to her and the difference it made if the going was hard or soft, and the weights the jockeys had added, and how to do an Accumulator or a Yankee. She would ask bright questions, too, and once or twice had prevented him from doing something foolish.

‘Only once or twice?’ Molly had said, wearily.

‘That’s what I mean,’ Shay said. ‘She doesn’t make bitter, harsh remarks like you do, like everyone else does. She’s a little treasure, Star is.’

And Kevin never said a word against her. She

helped him clean his shoes and asked all about the people who came to use the fitness machines in the gym. And she never took any of Lilly's things, just admired them. She never told her mother that Lilly stuffed uneaten food in the back of the dressing-table drawers in the room they shared.

Even Michael had a soft spot for Star. She didn't carry horrible news back from school about him. In fact, she told her parents that he was getting on much better than he actually was and sometimes she tried to help him with his homework, even though she was two years younger.

So Star got to the grown-up age of thirteen full of hope and dreams and sure that the world could be all right if you just believed that it was. They didn't realise at home that this was the way she felt, because number 24 Chestnut Street was not a house where there was time for people to sit and think about the Meaning of Life.

And there was always a drama, like when Molly had the money saved for a new washing machine, and Shay put it all on a greyhound that was still hopping on three legs around Shelbourne Park.



Or the time when Lilly had fainted at her telesales office and had been sent home with advice from a doctor that she take greater care of herself, as she was starting to show signs of an eating disorder.

Or Kevin's latest row with his father about not having had enough money to send him to a proper private school where he could have learned PE. And Michael was suspended from school for a whole term and was only taken back because Molly went to the head teacher and pleaded with him.

At Star's school they were just relieved that Star had a smile instead of the constant sulk and sneer that so many of the girls wore all day. Star did not have a pierced nose or lip, saving endless hours of argument. If someone was needed to help clean up the classroom, or put out the chairs, or change the water in the flower vases, Star would do it without a seven-minute protest, which the teachers would get from the rest of the class.

When Molly came in on the parent-teacher days they told her that Star was a great girl, no trouble at all, which Molly knew already. Star wanted to be a nurse, and the teachers would

say, sure she would be a wonderful nurse, and with a little extra help there was no reason why she couldn't do that. Was there a chance she could have private teaching? Sadly Molly shook her head. Not a chance in the world, the money they had barely covered things as they were.

Could the older children help possibly, Miss Casey wondered. Molly thought glumly about the three older children and said, not really, to be honest.

Miss Casey didn't even go down the path of asking if the parents would help. A neighbour maybe? They all led very busy lives of course but there *was* a nice neighbour called Miss Mack in Chestnut Street. She was blind, people did go to visit her and read to her, and it was said that she helped and encouraged them, so maybe it might work for Star.

'Tell Star she'd be doing the old lady a kindness, that will make her go to see her,' Miss Casey said.

Star found that Miss Mack was very interested in Star's school books.

'Could you read me again the bit about the French Revolution that you read last week? It's very exciting, isn't it?'

'Is it, Miss Mack?'

'Oh yes, we have to think about why those lords and ladies around the court of the king were so stupid that they didn't see what was going on in the country and how poor the great mass of the people were. Or *did* they see and not care? That's what I want to know.'

'I think they were just blind, Miss Mack,' Star said, trying to excuse people as usual.

Then she realised what she had said. 'I mean . . . I'm so sorry, Miss Mack.'

'Child, it doesn't matter at all. I *am* blind, I wasn't always blind, it's only a word, and in my case it has to do with muscles and things in my eyes wearing out. I recall perfectly what you looked like when you were a little baby. But in the case of the nobles, that was a different kind of blindness, where they wouldn't see what would disturb them.'

Star was so relieved that her blunder had not caused a scene or an upset that she rushed to speak. 'I suppose we all do that, Miss Mack, try not to think about bad things, don't we? You know, try to stop fights and rows and things. I mean, if I had been alive at the French Revolution, I'd have tried to stop them fighting.'

I wouldn't have let them have the thing that chopped people's heads off. And the heads falling into baskets.'

'The guillotine, Star. Say it now, say it slowly several times and you'll never forget it.'

Star said it obediently.

'Did you want to stop people fighting, Miss Mack?'

'Yes, I did, but I learned that people only do what they want to do. In the end that's how it is. I think we are stronger if we sort of accept that. It lets us get on with our own lives.'

'But aren't other people our own lives, Miss Mack?'

'They are, child. They are of course.'

Miss Mack sighed. Star didn't have to tell her of all the problems there were at Number 24. Everyone knew. Shay, who would gamble his last euro on anything that was offered. Molly, who was worn out from working and saving. Young Kevin, moody and unhappy, kicking stones around the road. Lilly, who had starved herself to become a model and now had an eating disorder. Michael, who was as near to a criminal as a fifteen-year-old could be. Thoughtful little Star, with the pensive eyes and

the long shiny hair, who worried about them all from morning to night.

It was Star's fourteenth birthday and a lot of things happened that day. The Hale family moved in next door into number 23. It had been empty for six months because the Kelly family, who had never visited poor old Mr Kelly who used to live there, had fought over what should be done about it. In the end they sold it quickly to the Hales. Star watched them arrive as the removal van was being unpacked, hoping there might be a girl her age. She didn't have many friends at school, as the other girls thought she was a bit boring.

But no sign of a schoolgirl. A man, his wife, who looked a lot younger than him, a greyhound and finally, last out of the van, a boy – well, a man nearly . . . Someone about eighteen or nineteen. Star watched in amazement as he took out of the van his guitar and his racing bike. She saw how he pushed his damp hair away from his face. She saw the sweat on his dark grey T-shirt as he helped to carry in the furniture. Could he be part of the removal company or was he part of the family? As the

minutes went by, she found herself hoping that he was part of the family. Imagine having a boy next door. A boy who looked like that!

Soon she could bear it no longer and went down to stand at her front door.

‘Hallo,’ she said as he passed by, carrying a table.

‘Hallo there.’ He had a great smile.

‘I’m Star Sullivan,’ she said. Her heart was beating fast. Never had she found the courage to talk to a good-looking boy like this. Somehow this was different.

‘Well, hallo, Star Sullivan. I’m Laddy Hale,’ he said.

Laddy Hale. She said the words with wonder. It was such a great name. She had better go now before she said something stupid and made him lose that big smile.

Star was in love.