

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

Ready or Not?

Grace Wynne-Jones

Prologue

THERE WERE MANY MYSTERIES that summer. One of them was why four people who had so much to share had seldom felt so alone. They were all ready for love, but they wanted it to happen in a certain way, and so they didn't notice its tender though enigmatic entreaties. They were also unwilling to admit that what they believed they wanted might have altered, that life was guiding them towards deeper and more enduring affections. Certainly Tom Armstrong's thoughts on love had radically altered since he took the photograph. And yet, when he looked at that young girl running towards her lover, the memories came flooding back to him, fresh and bright and new.

Looking back, it seems like I was waiting for her outside the National College of Art and Design, though I couldn't have known she would appear. When she ran towards him I lifted my camera and – click – the image was captured. My hands were steady but my heart was pounding, just like hers must have been. I hadn't known the force of love until that moment – how it can change and free you, set you alight with its wonderful, crazy conviction. I hadn't known that it can make a pretty face beautiful. And she is beautiful, the woman in my photograph.

I'd seen her around college, but we'd never met. She usually sat with a group of friends in the canteen. Sometimes they were serious, and sometimes they laughed so hard they almost fell off their chairs. They looked so wild and confident I wouldn't have dared to approach them. I could have spoken to her if she was alone, but she never was.

I was a photography student, and Dublin still felt new but was becoming familiar. Even the aroma of freshly ground coffee in Grafton Street no longer seemed so exotic. Capital cities creep up on you. When you first arrive, you might as well be in Marrakech; and then one day you belong, and it's the place you've left that seems strange.

I somehow feel the woman in my photograph would understand that. There's something about her – a freshness, an innocence – that seems to come from another place. I felt this about her even when she was spluttering at some joke with her

friends over coffee. I sensed that she had left somewhere so that she might know the secret longings of her heart. And she found them. You can see it in her eyes, her smile, the blur of her feet on the pavement.

The minute she stepped out of the college that evening, she started looking. Her face was tight with anxiety. Would he be there? Had they missed each other? Her cotton dress was light yellow and covered in tiny pink flowers. I'd only seen her in jeans before. She stood on tiptoe, trying to see over the crowds. She bit her lower lip and peered down the busy street. Then she started to fiddle with a silver bracelet on her arm, as if embarrassed. She lowered her head in disappointment. And then she looked up and saw him.

He was tall and still and standing at the other side of the street. Her face lit up. I didn't know a face could just light up like that, grow so luminous and certain. He must have smiled, because she smiled back and waved. Her feet danced with impatience as she waited to cross the street. He was hungry for her. You could see it in the way he stood. Then the sun burst out from behind the clouds and they were both ablaze with waiting.

She walked at first, slowly and steadily. Her eyes grew bright and excited as she began to run, headlong and sure, without a second's hesitation. Her dress billowed around her legs and her long hair flew wildly in the breeze. And suddenly there was this smile on her lips. The smile of an unexpected and huge happiness.

I knew the moment. Sensed it as the shutter clicked.

It was just before she reached him.

Chapter One

WHITE THINGS WERE FLOATING around Caddy Lavelle's bedroom. In her half-asleep state she thought they might be angels, or snow. Of course, snow didn't normally fall in one's bedroom in June. Perhaps it was just one of those things that happened when you moved house... She turned over and ignored the miracle. When you were half or fully asleep these things happened all the time. She had spent the previous hour chatting with Matisse about his collages and was keen to resume the conversation.

'Atishoo!' One of the white things was tickling her nose. She looked at it. It was a feather – and it came from her pillow. Feck it, anyway. That was what came of not bothering to put on a pillowcase. They must have been leaking all night, and now the breeze from the open window was hurling them around the room.

Caddy rubbed her eyes sleepily. Waking was never particularly easy for her. It would have helped her to know that lots of people feel like this; but, like lots of people, she believed her feelings were so odd they must surely be unique. There was a terrible and unnecessary loneliness to this belief, since it was so often completely

inaccurate. For who does not feel incomplete and not quite prepared for life's mysteries?

And who is not wary of love, once they have known its wounds?

'Feathers,' she muttered to herself. 'And they'll be all over the place now. I must get new pillows.'

She had fallen onto her futon the night before after drinking far too much wine with a friend called Roz. Their excuse for this overindulgence had been swimming. Roz had recently spent a small fortune joining a leisure centre and now felt deluged with guilt because she hardly ever went to it. So the obvious solution was to get drunk.

'We're lost causes,' Roz had declared happily.

'Not completely lost,' Caddy had corrected. 'After all, we've only had three and a half packets of crisps.'

Caddy did not wake with much of a hangover, because she'd drunk plenty of water before she went to bed. One cannot reach forty without gathering a certain amount of knowledge. For example, she also knew that she must never carry bananas in her handbag, or fall in love with anyone until she'd worked out why she was so bad at it and therefore would not repeat the same mistakes.

That was why meeting Dan MacIntyre had not caused her to jump in the air and shout, 'Yippee!' In fact, she had felt more like clutching her stomach. He was gorgeous, there was no denying that, but he had behaved like a freak. First of all, he didn't seem to think there was anything particularly wrong with her, which meant he must be spectacularly unobservant. How disappointed he would be when he found out the truth! Also, he had pursued her far too rigorously, which was unnatural. Men were the ones who were supposed to dither infuriatingly, which gave women time to make up their minds and feel a bit hurt and rejected. This was all good preparation for the inevitable imperfections of a relationship. And it was also a wonderful excuse not to have one. Caddy had been using it for ages.

Of course, some women seemed to sail through life meeting suitable men and fitting them neatly into lives that were already fulfilling. But for others, such as herself and Roz – and, frankly, nearly all her close friends – the whole man-woman thing was crazily unsatisfactory. They had tried so bloody hard. It wasn't as if they hadn't made the effort. But it was still like Mills & Boon meets that film where everyone gets chased by giant worms.

Actually, the giant-worm film had been quite fun to watch. Caddy and her teenaged daughter Jemma had chomped corn crisps and hidden behind cushions during the entire thing. They had even screamed. It was wonderful rubbish. Watching stupid television together was one of their many pleasures. But now Jemma was staying with cousins in Arizona for the summer... new house... absent daughter... feathers... it just didn't feel quite right.

At times like this Caddy was very glad she was a parallel woman. This meant that she could have two parallel trains of thought in her head at the same time. So, even when life seemed too odd, mysterious or just plain lonely, she could still summon the resolve to floss her teeth and shave her legs. It was this part of her that had moved house, and now it wanted her to get up and unpack the boxes. It was also making her dimly aware that life can open or close you and that she was at some sort of crossroads. But, as is so often the case, it was not clearly marked. And of course there was always the possibility that some eejit might have come along and moved the signpost in the middle of the night.

‘I am a wonderfully wise and balanced person... and I am going to have an adventurous summer.’

It suddenly seemed a good time to say a positive affirmation. Her cocker spaniel Chump, who adored his gentle mistress, clearly agreed with her: he licked her face in encouragement. She patted his belly in gratitude. A good dog was a great comfort.

‘I am not going to hide away and watch too much telly and think everyone is better than I am,’ she continued. ‘And I am going to appreciate myself, and I am also not going to be bossed around by my mother.’

She immediately felt a bit better, and Chump went, ‘Woof’.

‘I have worked very hard at moving house, and now I am going to pace myself. I am not going to try to do everything at once.’ It was wonderful how sane and wise one could sound even if one didn’t feel it!

Caddy happily lay back on her leaky pillow. ‘I will have firmer thighs, and I will not spend hours wondering how on earth I have ended up like I am and feeling that it was all supposed to be more straightforward.’ Her large blue eyes shone with determination. She would get better at being happy and feeling less burdened and dutiful. Now that she’d finished marking exam papers, she was a free woman. Thank God for the summer holidays!

Caddy had wanted to be an artist, but everyone had said that being something else would be far more sensible. So she had become an art history teacher. A good one. She cared about her pupils and drew things out of them – not just details about Chagall or Rembrandt, but their own stories, needs and dreams. She gave this gift passionately because it was the gift she most needed to receive. Like many people, she had reached forty without anyone ever asking her who she was and what she wanted. And now she hardly dared to ask these things herself.

It is unpleasant but not at all uncommon to reach this stage of timidity. And with it comes a terrible impatience, because one knows there is a part of oneself that isn’t timid at all. It can love fully and dance to its own music and make peace with sorrow and life’s multitudinous imperfections. But how do you reach it? Sometimes it seems so distant it might as well be in Outer Mongolia, even when it is stored carefully in your heart.

Caddy didn't like to think of hearts in the romantic sense because hers had been broken so purposefully. She had loved the young man who had become Jemma's father so fully and madly that she had almost been destroyed. She hadn't even known that love can almost obliterate you, so that had been an added shock. She had run towards it with a nice sense of annihilation, a wonderful sense of losing herself to something and someone. How much she had wanted to be bigger and brighter and something else! Even the memory made her frown.

Men liked Caddy's frown, though she assumed it was exactly the sort of thing that would put them off. It was fierce and innocent and unexpected. She was a passionate woman, and, though she had ceased to believe in passion, her features couldn't lie. She had an oval face and smooth olive skin that tanned easily, apart from the backs of her legs. And – this would have surprised her – sometimes she looked calm and peaceful and a deep gentleness shone from her eyes.

'You should be an actress,' one boyfriend had said. But another had believed that she was 'very like a cat'. This was somewhat confusing, because they were surely entirely different vocations.

Dan MacIntyre... the name floated back into her head. Why on earth had that happened? She scratched her elbow and wondered if he would be forever jumping in and out of her brain at the oddest of moments. She glared at the ceiling, then sighed deeply and dramatically. Of course: it was the 'You should be an actress' comment that had sent him scurrying back into her consciousness.

Dan was an actor. She'd had very little contact with actors before; it seemed an impossibly glamorous and distant profession, rather like being an Amazon explorer or a fashion designer. But any time that word 'actor' was used, or even thought, she'd think of him and get this same tight, sad feeling in her stomach. She would see his steady, deep brown eyes staring at her tenderly. And she would miss him, even though he'd said she 'analysed things too much' and had 'a sad closed heart'. That was such a terrible thing to say to someone! No wonder she had a sad closed heart if people like him went round saying it.

Life was difficult. Buddha himself had said it. Expecting things to be easy all the time made people dreadfully unhappy. She tried to tell this to her art history pupils and to Jemma, but they never listened. Falling in love, in particular, was arduous and strange – but it was like giving birth: so many people wanted you to do it that they glossed over its difficulties.

She reached up and gingerly touched the scars Jemma's father had punched onto her forehead. Alain had said he loved her. He had cried and wanted her to cradle him each time his fury subsided. What on earth had he meant by it? What was this love that he spoke of with such passion? And how could she have let him do these things to her? That was the worst question, the one that haunted her. How could she ever trust herself not to let that happen again?

The phone rang and broke the trance. It was a trance, though Caddy was unaware of it. There is a black-and-white part of the brain, and she had wandered into it. It made

her feel that love was all or nothing; one either lost oneself to it or built a big barricade and tried to keep it out.

The caller was one of Jemma's friends, who wanted her address in Arizona. She and Caddy had a nice chat and agreed that they missed Jemma far more than was reasonable. Jemma inspired affection. Any time she walked into a room it felt brighter and better. She could drive you mad with her stubbornness, but you had to admire her for it. Even when she was five she had been her own person and would have nothing to do with Barbie. Somehow she had been born knowing who she was and what she wanted – the very things her mother was often so unclear about.

However, on the morning on which we meet her, Caddy was absolutely clear about two things at least: she needed new pillows and pillowcases. The feather situation was getting out of hand.

An hour and a half later she was on South Anne Street in central Dublin. Pillows and pillowcases...and she also needed dusters and a new floor mop and bin-liners and... goodness, there were so many things. Why hadn't she made a list? Still, it was nice to be out of the house and not thinking about anything complicated. People who didn't think about complicated things were so much happier. If only she could be more like that colleague who devoted her whole year to getting ready for the Dublin marathon! She pounded through life so happily and was always having to take showers and change out of drenched T-shirts.

I'm just going to think about really practical things all morning, Caddy decided. My brain needs a rest. Perhaps I should cross O'Connell Bridge and find all sorts of bargains in those little side-street shops. It will make me feel really rugged and virtuous. Life suddenly seemed supremely simple.

And then she saw him.

He was sitting outside a café, reading. A white cup lay on the round chrome table. As he reached for it, she turned away and almost pressed her nose against the glass of a shop window. He would surely look up at any moment and sense she was there. With her back turned to him, she edged away in the direction of Grafton Street. Pedestrians pushed past her hurriedly. How could so many people be in a rush? Where were they all going, and why? Suddenly Caddy felt like screaming, 'Stop! Please just freeze this moment like a photograph so I can look at him without him seeing me. So that I can study his face and look into his eyes.'

She paused at another shop window and pretended to study the display. Surely the distance would shield her. She turned round and saw that he had just looked up and was now recommencing his reading.

Dear God, he seemed so alone and still in all this rush and busyness. Was he happy or sad? She could hardly bear not knowing. His high broad forehead looked so solemn as he bent his head. What thoughts were in there? She had only once seen

tears in his eyes: when he was talking about his mother, who had passed away last year. An almost unbearable tenderness assailed her as she saw he still had the same small rip just under the right knee of his jeans.

He was looking up again. Caddy looked away quickly, hurried on to Grafton Street and began to walk, in a daze, towards St Stephen's Green. She needed time to think. She ducked into Laura Ashley and stared blankly at a row of scarves. She would go over to him. She would say, 'Hi, Dan!' and tell him about her new house. The air would feel gentle between them and there would be that old wild sweetness, even if he was aloof and unwelcoming. Her heart would pound and her eyes would shine and she would just be glad that he existed.

That was what she always felt about Dan MacIntyre, even though he didn't understand her and was so impatient. She was glad that he existed and that she had met him.

She took a deep breath and was just about to leave the shop and face him when a voice shrieked, 'Caddy!' from behind a curtain of floral skirts. It was a colleague from college, Nancy. 'Caddy!' she exclaimed again. 'How are you? What have you been doing?'

Caddy felt as though she had been hit by a hurricane. She learned all about Nancy's caravanning holiday by Brittas Bay with the kids, and how her husband had come for the weekend, and how little Brian had got stung by a jellyfish, and how little Fiona had got sunstroke in the only three hours of pristine sunshine, and how Sam, who was fourteen, had got at the beer when no one was looking and vomited over the sun-lounger, but it had still been 'absolutely great'. 'Why don't you join us sometime?' Nancy asked, but Caddy was gazing out into the street. 'Caddy, are you all right?'

'What?'

'You seemed very far away.'

'Did I?'

'Yes.'

'Oh, sorry...I...I have to buy some pillowcases. For my new house.'

'Of course!' Nancy exclaimed. 'Moving is so much work, isn't it? Pop by any time you want a break. If you need any curtains altered, I know this great woman who...'

'Thank you.' Caddy was already moving away.

She almost ran back towards the café. He would still be there – he had to be... But he wasn't. Only a few minutes had passed, but the chair was empty. A waitress was removing the white cup and the tip that Dan had left. Caddy looked up and down

the street. Why was she feeling such dismay? Hadn't she already resigned herself to this? But seeing him brought back so many feelings. It hadn't ended properly. They cared too much about each other to part with such disappointment. They could be friends; she knew they could, once he got used to the idea.

She started to walk in a daze towards a large department store. Bargain-hunting was the last thing on her mind now. She would purchase the pillows and pillowcases and go home.

And then she would write him a letter.