

The Brightest Star in the Sky

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Extract

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by
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Day 61

June the first, a bright summer's evening, a Monday. I've been flying over the streets and houses of Dublin and now, finally, I'm here. I enter through the roof. Via a skylight I slide into a living room and right away I know it's a woman who lives here. There's a femininity to the furnishings – pastel-coloured throws on the sofa, that sort of thing. Two plants. Both alive. A television of modest size.

I appear to have arrived in the middle of some event. Several people are standing in an awkward circle, sipping from glasses of champagne and pretending to laugh at what the others are saying. A variety of ages and sexes suggests that this is a family occasion.

Birthday cards abound. Discarded wrapping paper. Presents. Talk of leaving for the restaurant. Hungry for information I read the cards. They're addressed to someone called Katie and she appears to be celebrating her fortieth birthday. I wouldn't have thought that that called for much celebration but it takes all sorts, I'm told.

I locate Katie. She looks a good deal younger than forty, but forty is the new twenty, according to my information. She's tallish and dark-haired and bosomy and gamely doing her best to stay upright in a pair of spike-heeled knee-boots. Her force field is a pleasant one; she vibrates with level-headed warmth, like a slightly sexy primary-school teacher. (Although that's not actually her job. I know this because I know an awful lot.)

The man next to Katie, glowing with dark pride – the pride

is in large part to do with the new platinum watch on Katie's wrist – is her boyfriend, partner, loved one, whatever you want to call it.

An interesting man, with a compelling life force, his vibrations are so powerful they're almost visible. I'll be honest: I'm intrigued.

Conall, they're calling this man. The more polite members of the group, at least. A few other names are hovering in the ether – Show-off; Flash bastard – but remain unuttered. *Fascinating*. The men don't like him *at all*. I've identified Katie's father, brother and brother-in-law and not one of them is keen. However, the women – Katie's mother, sister and best friend – don't seem to mind him as much.

I'll tell you something else: this Conall doesn't live here. A man on a frequency as potent as his wouldn't stand for a television of such modest size. Or plant-watering.

I waft past Katie and she puts a hand up to the nape of her neck and shivers.

'What?' Conall looks ready to do battle.

'Nothing. Someone just walked over my grave.'

Oh come now! Hardly!

'Hey!' Naomi – older sister of Katie – is pointing at a mirror that's propped on the floor against a cupboard. 'Is your new mirror not up yet?'

'Not yet,' Katie says, sudden tension leaking from between her teeth.

'But you've had it for ages! I thought Conall was going to do it for you.'

'Conall *is* going to do it,' Katie says very firmly. 'Tomorrow morning, before he goes to Helsinki. Aren't you, Conall?'

Friction! Zinging around the room, rebounding off the walls. Conall, Katie and Naomi volleying waves of tension against each other in a fast-moving taut triangle, the repercus-

sions expanding ever outwards to include everyone else there. *Entre nous*, I'm *dying* to find out what's going on but, to my alarm, I'm being overtaken by some sort of force. Something bigger or better than me is moving me downwards. Through the 100 per cent wool rug, past some dodgy joists, which are frankly *riddled* with woodworm – someone should be told – and into another place: the flat below Katie's. I'm in a kitchen. An astonishingly dirty kitchen. Pots and pans and plates are piled higgledy-piggledy in the sink, soaking in stagnant water, the lino floor hasn't been washed in an age, and the stove top sports many elaborate splashes of old food as if a gang of action painters has recently paid a visit. Two muscular young men are leaning on the kitchen table, talking in Polish. Their faces are close together and the conversation is urgent, almost panicked. They're both pulsing with angst, so much so that their vibrations have become entangled and I can't get a handle on either of them. Luckily, I discover I am fluent in Polish, and here's a rude translation of what they're saying:

'Jan, you tell her.'

'No, Andrei, you tell her.'

'I tried the last time.'

'Andrei, she respects you more.'

'No, Jan. Hard as it is for me, a Polish man, to understand, she doesn't respect either of us. Irish women are beyond me.'

'Andrei, you tell her and I'll give you three stuffed cabbages.'

'Four and you're on.'

(I'm afraid I made up those last two sentences.)

Into the kitchen comes the object of their earnest discussion and I can't see what they're so afraid of, two fine big lads like them, with their tattoos and slightly menacing buzz cuts. This little creature – Irish, unlike the two boys – is *lovely*. A pretty little minx with mischievous eyes and spiky eyelashes and a

head of charming jack-in-the-box curls that spring all the way down past her shoulders. Mid-twenties, by the look of her, and exuding vibrations so zesty they zigzag through the air.

In her hand she's carrying a pre-prepared dinner. A wretched-looking repast. (Greyish roast beef, in case you're interested.)

'Go on,' Jan hisses at Andrei.

'Lydia.' Andrei gestures at the, quite frankly, filthy kitchen. Speaking English, he says, 'You clean sometime.'

'Sometime,' she agrees, scooping up a fork from the draining board. 'But sadly not in this lifetime. Now move.'

With alacrity Andrei clears a path for her to access the microwave. Viciously, she jabs her fork into the cellophane covering her dinner. Four times, each puncture making a noise like a small explosion, loud enough to make Jan's left eye twitch, then she slams the carton into the microwave. I take this opportunity to drift up behind her to introduce myself, but to my surprise she swats me away as though I were a pesky fly.

Me!

Don't you know who I am?

Andrei is giving it another go. 'Lydia, pliz . . . Jan and I, we clean menny, menny times.'

'Good for you.' Breezy delivery from Lydia as she locates the least dirty-looking knife in the murk of the sink and runs it under the tap for half a second.

'We hev made rota.' Feebly Andrei waves a piece of paper at her.

'Good for you *again*.' Oh how white her teeth are, how dazzling her smile!

'You are livingk here three weeks. You hev not cleaned. You must clean.'

An unexpected pulse of emotion radiates from Lydia, black

and bitter. Apparently, she *does* clean. But not here? Where, then?

‘Andrei, my little Polish cabbage, and you too, Jan, my other little Polish cabbage, let’s imagine things were the other way round.’ She waves her (still soiled) knife to emphasize her point. In fact, I know that there are 273 different bacteria thriving and flourishing on that knife. However, I also know by now that it would take the bravest and most heroic of bacteria to get the better of this Lydia.

‘The other way round?’ Andrei asks anxiously.

‘Say it was two women and one man living in this flat. The man would never do anything. The women would do it all. Wouldn’t they?’

The microwave beeps. She whisks her unappetizing dinner from it and, with a charming smile, leaves the room to look up something on the internet.

What a peppy little madam! A most fascinating little fire-brand!

‘She called us cabbages,’ Jan said stonily. ‘I hate when she calls us cabbages.’

But, eager as I am to see what transpires next – tears from Jan, perhaps? – I’m being moved again. Onwards, downwards, through the health-hazard lino, through more porous timber-work, and I find myself in yet another flat. This one is darker. Full of heavy furniture too big and brown for the room. It features several rugs of conflicting patterns, and net curtains so dense they appear to be crocheted. Seated on a sturdy arm-chair is a dour-looking elderly woman. Knees apart, slippered feet planted firmly on the floor. She must be at least a hundred and sixteen. She’s watching a gardening programme and, from the furrow-browed expression on her face, you’d swear she’s never heard such outrageous idiocy in her life. Hardy perennials? No such thing, you stupid, stupid man! Everything dies!

I float past her and into a small gloomy bedroom, then into a slightly bigger but just as gloomy, second bedroom, where I'm surprised to meet a large, long-eared dog so big and grey that momentarily I think he's a donkey. He's slumped in a corner, his head on his paws, sulking – then he senses my presence and instantly he's alert. You can't get away with it, with animals. Different frequencies, see. It's all about the frequencies.

Frozen with awe and fear, his long donkey-ears cocked, he growls softly, then changes his mind, poor confused fool. Am I friend or foe? He hasn't a notion.

And the name of this creature? Well, oddly enough it would appear to be 'Grudge'. But that can't be right, that's not a name. The problem is, there's too much *stuff* in this flat and it's slowing the vibrations down, messing with their patterns.

Leaving the donkey dog behind, I flit back into the sitting room, where there's a mahogany roll-top desk as dense and weighty as a fully grown elephant. A modest pile of opened mail tells me that the crone's name is Jemima.

Beside the mail is a silver-framed photo of a young man, and with a flash of insight I know his name is Fionn. It means 'Fair One'. So who is he? Jemima's betrothed who was killed in the Boer War? Or was he carried off in the flu epidemic of 1918? But the photo-style is wrong for a First World War type. Those men, in their narrow-cut uniforms, are always so rigid and four-square to the camera you could believe their own rifle had been shoved up their back passage. Invariably, they wear a scrubbing brush on their upper lip and, from the lifeless, glassy-eyed way they face the viewer, they look as if they've died and been stuffed. Fionn, by contrast, looks like a prince from a child's storybook. It's all in the hair – which is fairish and longish and wavyish – and the jaw, which is square. He's wearing a leather jacket and faded jeans and is

crouching down in what appears to be a flower bed, and he has a handful of soil, which he's proffering to me with a cheeky smile, *saucy* almost, like he's offering a lot more than –! God Almighty! He's just winked at me! Yes, he winked! His photograph winked! And a silver star pinged from his smile! I can scarcely believe it.

'I can feel your presence!' Jemima suddenly barks, scaring the living daylight out of me. I'd forgotten about her, I was so engrossed in Fionn the Prince and his winking and twinkling.

'I know you're here,' she says. 'And you don't frighten me!'

She's on to me! And I haven't gone near her. More sensitive than she looks.

'Show yourself,' she commands.

I will, missus, oh I will. But not just yet. Your time will have to be bided. Anyway, I appear to be off again, being pulled and stretched ever downwards. I'm in the ground-floor flat now. I can see the street through the living-room window. I'm sensing a lot of love here. And something else . . .

On a sofa, washed by the flickering light of the television (32 inch) is . . . is . . . well, it's a man and a woman, but they're clinging so tightly to each other that for a moment I think they are one and the same, some strange mythological, two-headed, three-legged thing, which is all I need right now. (The fourth leg is there, simply hidden beneath their bodies.)

On the floor are two plates, on which the remains of a hearty dinner can be discerned: potatoes, red meat, gravy, carrots – a mite heavy for June, I would have thought, but what do I know?

The woman – Maeve – now that I can make her out, is blonde and rosy-cheeked, like an angel from a painting. There's a chubby, cheruby freshness about her because she was once a farm girl. She might be living in Dublin now, but the sweet clean air of the countryside still clings to her. This

woman has no fear of mud. Or cow's udders. Or hens going into labour. (Somehow I sense that I've got that slightly wrong.) But this woman fears other things . . .

It's hard to get a look at the man – Matt – because they're interwoven so tightly; his face is almost entirely hidden. Funny enough, they're watching the same gardening programme as Jemima one floor above them. But unlike Jemima, they appear to think it's a marvellous piece of televisual entertainment.

Unexpectedly, I sense the presence of another man here. It's faint but it's enough to send me scooting round the place to check it out. Like the other three flats in the building, there are two bedrooms, but here only one functions as an actual bedroom. The other, the smaller of the two rooms, has been turned into a home-office-cum-skip – a desk and a computer and abandoned sporting goods (walking poles, badminton racquets, riding boots, that type of thing), but nothing on which a person could sleep.

I sniff around a bit more. Two matching Podge and Rodge cups in the kitchen, two matching Tigger cereal bowls, two matching everythinges. Whatever this extra male presence is, he doesn't live here. And from the wild, overgrown state of the back garden that you can see from the bedroom window, he doesn't cut the grass either. Back in the living room, I move up close to the angelic Maeve, to introduce myself – being *friendly* – but she starts flapping her arms, like someone swimming on dry land, disentangling herself from Matt. She breaks free of him and sits bolt upright. The blood has drained from her face and her mouth has opened into a big silent O.

Matt, struggling from the couch's saggy embrace to a seated position, is equally distressed. 'Maeve! Maeve. It's only about gardening! Did they say something?' Alarm is written

all over him. Now that I get a better look, I see he's got a young, likeable, confident face, and I suspect that, when he isn't so concerned, he's one of life's smilers.

'No, nothing . . .' Maeve says. 'Sorry, Matt, I just felt . . . no, it's okay, I'm okay.'

They settle – a little uneasily – back into their clinging positions. But I've upset her. I've upset them both and I don't want to do that. I've taken a liking to them; I'm touched by the uncommon tenderness they share.

'All right,' I said (although of course they couldn't hear me), 'I'm going.'

I sit outside on the front step, a little disconsolate. One more time I check the address: 66 Star Street, Dublin 8. A red-bricked Georgian house with a blue front door and a knocker in the shape of a banana. (One of the previous occupants was a fun-loving metal-worker. Everyone hated him.) Yes, the house is definitely red-bricked. Yes, Georgian. Yes, a blue front door. Yes, a knocker in the shape of a banana. I'm in the right place. But I hadn't been warned that so many people live here.

Expect the unexpected, I'd been advised. But this isn't the type of unexpected I'd expected. This is the *wrong* unexpected.

And there's no one I can ask. I've been cut loose, like an agent in deep cover. I'll just have to work it out for myself.

Day 61 . . .

I spent my first evening in 66 Star Street rattling from flat to flat, wondering anxiously which one was mine. Katie's flat was empty. Shortly after my arrival her crew had departed, in a cloud of tension, to some expensive restaurant. In the flat below, while Andrei and Jan cleaned the kitchen, Lydia parked herself at the little desk wedged into a corner of their living room and spent long intense minutes surfing the net. When she went to her bedroom for a snooze and Jan and Andrei retired to their twin-bedded room to study their business management books – such good boys – I descended yet another floor, to Jemima's. I took care to keep myself well clear of her; I didn't want her shouting abuse at me again. But I must admit that I got great entertainment out of toying with the dog, Grudge – if that really is the creature's name. I shimmered before him and he stared in rapt, paralysed amazement. On the spur of the moment I decided to do a little dance and – all credit to him – his big grey head moved in perfect time with me. I undulated faster and faster and twirled above his head, and he did his best to keep up, poor eejit, until he'd mesmerized himself so much he collapsed in a giddy heap, snickering and dog-laughing away to himself. At that point, regretfully, I stopped. It wouldn't do if he vomited.

Then, finally, I returned to Matt and Maeve. It's where I'd wanted to be all along but, professional that I was, I'd thought I'd better explore every avenue. Well, they were explored for the moment at least so, with a clear conscience, I could rejoin the loved-up pair on their sofa.

Whatever show they'd been watching had just ended and Maeve automatically opened her arms to free Matt from her

embrace. He rolled off the couch and on to the floor, then sprang to his feet, like an SAS person entering an enemy embassy. A smooth, slick routine, obviously a frequent one, and luckily the dinner plates that had been there earlier had been removed or else Matt's nice T-shirt would have been stained with gravy.

'Tea?' Matt asked.

'Tea,' Maeve confirmed.

In the little kitchen, Matt put the kettle on and opened a cupboard and was almost brained by the avalanche of biscuits and buns that poured out. He selected two packets – chocolate mini-rolls and chocolate ginger nuts, the mini-rolls were Maeve's favourites, the ginger nuts were his – then he used both his hands to cram the remaining packets back into the cupboard and slammed the door shut very quickly before they could fall out again.

While he was waiting for the kettle to boil, he tore open the ginger nuts and absent-mindedly ate two, barely tasting them. Such a casual attitude to trans-fat and refined sugar led me to suspect that he consumed a fair amount of them, and on closer inspection I noted that he had a hint, the merest . . . oh . . . *whiff* of a suggestion of a tinge of tubbiness. His entire body was padded with a surplus of – honestly – no more than a millimetre of fat. I must insist that this is not a cowardly attempt to break the news that he was a fatso. His stomach was not bursting its way out of his T-shirt, and he only had the one chin and a nice strong one it was too. Yes, perhaps he could have lost a little weight, but it suited him, the way he was. If he were half a stone lighter, he might shrink into someone a little less charming; he might seem too ambitious, too efficacious, his haircut a tad too sharp.

Two spoons of sugar each in their tea and back in to Maeve. A new programme had begun, another favourite of

theirs from what I could gather. A cookery one this time, presented by a personable young man called Neven Maguire. They curled up next to each other and watched scallops being sautéed and drank their tea and made serious inroads into the biscuits. In a spirit of inclusivity, Maeve ate one of Matt's ginger nuts even though they were dark chocolate ones, which she didn't like, and Matt ate one of Maeve's mini-rolls even though they were so sweet they made the hinge of his jaws hurt. They were very, very kind to each other and, in my discombobulated state, this was soothing.

A cynical type might suggest that it was all a little too perfect. But a cynical type would be wrong. Matt and Maeve weren't just acting the part of people who are Very Much In Love. It was the real thing because their heart vibrations were in perfect harmony.

Not everyone knows this but each human heart gives off an electric current that extends outwards from the body to a distance of ten feet. People wonder why they take instant likes or dislikes to people. They assume it's to do with associations: if they meet a short, mono-browed woman, they remember the time that another short, mono-browed woman had helped them get their hairdryer unstuck from a hedge and cannot help but feel warmly to this new, entirely unconnected, short, mono-browed woman. Or the first man who short-changed them was called Carl and from that day forth all Carls were regarded as suspect. But instant likes or dislikes are also the result of the harmony (or disharmony) of heart currents and Matt's and Maeve's hearts Beat As One.

The moment that Matt fell in love with Maeve . . .

That moment had been coming for quite a while, to be honest, and it finally arrived on a bone-cold March morning, roughly four and a quarter years ago, when Maeve was twenty-six and

Matt was twenty-eight. They were on the Dart, and they weren't alone – they were with three others, two girls and a young man, all of them on their way to a one-day training course. The five of them worked at Goliath, a software multinational, where Matt headed up one of the sales teams. Matt was actually Maeve's boss (in fact, he was also the boss of the other three people present), although he never behaved in a particularly bossy way – his style of management was to encourage and praise and he got the best out of his team because they were all – male and female – half in love with him.

The thing was that Matt wasn't even meant to be there. He had a company car so he usually drove to his appointments (he always offered lifts to those less fortunate than him), but on this particular day his car had refused to start, so he had to bundle himself up against the elements and go on the Dart with the rest of them. Often, in the agonizing times that followed, he wondered whether, if his car hadn't been banjaxed, he would have crossed the line from being fond of Maeve to actually being in love with her. But the answer was, of course, yes. He and Maeve were destined for each other, *something* would have happened.

Matt was a city boy, born and bred in Dublin. He'd never been within a hundred yards of a cow. But Maeve had lived on a farm in Galway for the first eighteen years of her life – in fact, her nickname among her co-workers was Farmgirl. She'd recently been 'down home' to help out with the calving and she was full of a life-and-death saga of a calf called Bessie who was born prematurely, then rejected by her mother. Although Matt had less than zero interest in farm stuff, he was drawn in by the story of Bessie's struggle for survival. When Maeve got to the end of the tale and confirmed that Bessie was now 'thriving', he was surprised by how relieved he felt.

‘It’s a mistake to get too attached to any of the animals?’ he asked.

‘A mistake is right.’ Maeve sighed. ‘I’d a pet pig for a while. Poor Winifred. They took her away to make rashers of her. I won’t make that mistake again. Now I’ve a drake and at least the only thing he’ll die of is natural causes.’

‘A drake?’ Matt asked.

‘A male duck.’

‘I knew that.’ At least, now that she’d said it, he did.

She laughed at his bluster. ‘Oh! You’re *such* a blagger.’

The three other team members stiffened slightly. Easy-going as he was, Matt was still their boss. Was it okay to call him a blagger? But Maeve’s laughter was full of affection for Matt and Matt certainly didn’t seem offended. He and Maeve were twinkling and smiling at each other. In fact, they twinkled and smiled at each other a lot . . .

‘Here, I’ve a photo of him in my wallet,’ Maeve said. ‘Roger. He’s a beauty.’

‘A photo of a duck?’ Matt didn’t know what to make of this; he thought it was very odd but also very funny. ‘This gets better and better. And he’s called Roger? Like, why *Roger?*’

‘He looks like a Roger. No, he really does. I’ll show you.’ Maeve pulled her wallet from her satchel, looking for the photo. But, in her enthusiasm, she accidentally opened her purse and, with an ominous flash of metal, a waterfall of change roared towards the floor of the Dart, coins cracking and bouncing and rolling the full length of the carriage.

All the other passengers tried to pretend that nothing had happened. Those that were hit on the foot by a coin kicked it away or flicked a quick look down just to check that it wasn’t a mouse chewing their shoe, then returned to their texting or their magazine or their grumpy introspection.

‘Oh cripes!’ Maeve stood up and laughed helplessly. ‘There goes my change for the laundrette.’ As if she had a magnetic draw, all thirteen passengers raised their heads, and suddenly Matt saw the power she possessed. Not a swaggery, arrogant power, not the power granted by expensive clothes or glossy make-up – because Maeve’s jeans and Uggs and tangled curls would hardly have bouncers in nightclubs rushing to remove the red rope and usher her forward. What made Maeve so potent was that she expected the best from other people.

She never considered that the strangers around her wouldn’t want to help – and her faith was repaid. Matt watched, transfixed, as nearly everyone in the carriage dropped automatically to their knees, as if they were in the presence of an awe-inspiring deity, scrambling for any coins that they could see. Matt and the others were in there, helping, but so were Lithuanian naturopaths and Syrian kitchen porters and Filipino nurses and Irish schoolboys. They were all on the floor, gathering and walking in a low crouch, like slow-motion Cossacks. ‘Thank you,’ Maeve said, over and over, receiving the returned coins. ‘Thank you, oh thank you, you’re so decent, more power to you, fair play, outstanding, God bless, thanks.’

This is the person I want to be with, Matt found himself thinking. Then he revised it. No, he thought, this is the person I want to *be*.

Two stops later, when Matt and his team got off, Maeve called out, ‘Thanks again, you were very decent,’ and you could have roasted potatoes in the warmth of the glow that she left in her slipstream. Matt knew that everyone would go home that evening and relate the story. ‘A two-euro coin hit me on the foot and I thought, feck it, missus, you dropped the purse, you get to pick up the money, I mean, I’ve had a hard week, but she seemed like a very nice person so I *did*

help to pick up the money, and you know what, I'm happy that I did, I feel good about myself –'

My trip down Matt and Maeve's memory lane is interrupted by sudden activity from two floors above and I scoot up to check it out.