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MARIAN KEYES

The Brightest Star in the Sky

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The Brightest Star in the Sky
by
Marian Keyes

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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 menmy, menmy 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 everything's. 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 swagger, 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.

Day 61 . . .

Andrei and Jan had put their textbooks away neatly and were emerging into the hall, casting fearful looks for Lydia. I was still finding it hard to tell them apart – they existed in such a fug of Lydia-fear that their vibrations were quite corrupted. I noted this much: Andrei had astonishing blue eyes which burned with the intensity of a religious zealot's, but he was *not* a religious zealot. Jan also had blue eyes, but his did not burn with the intensity of a religious zealot's. However . . . yes, however . . . he had a prayer-book which he read frequently with some – yes! – *zeal*.

So true what they say: one really cannot judge on appearances.

They equipped themselves with beer and Pringles and took their seats in the living room for *Entourage*. They were mad for *Entourage*. It was their favourite show, one of the high points of their week. They longed to go to America and live an *Entourage* life, with sunshine and cars and, of course, beautiful women, but, above all else, the unbreachable walls of male solidarity.

Silent and worshipful before the television, they didn't hear Lydia enter the room. They only knew she was there when she broke the *Entourage* spell by saying, 'Boys, boys, why so glum?'

'What is glum?' Jan asked anxiously. Instantly, he was sorry he had spoken. Andrei's constant advice was: Do not engage with her.

'What is glum?' Lydia considered. 'Glum is unhappy, sad, downcast, low, gloomy, of little cheer.' She gazed at them with an expression that was intended to seem fond. 'Home-sick, that's what Dr Lydia has diagnosed.' In a voice dripping

with insincere sympathy she asked gently, 'My little dump-lings, are you missing Minsk?'

Neither boy spoke. Over the past three miserable weeks, they had become familiar with this routine in which Lydia threw about city names ending in 'sk'.

'Minnssskkkk!' Lydia savoured the sound. 'Sssskkk? Miss-ing it?'

When she got no response, she said in fake surprise, 'Not missing it? But how unpatriotic you are.'

This was too much for Jan, who, every waking moment he was in Ireland, yearned with desperate passion to be back home. 'Irishgirl, we are not from Minsk! We are from Gdansk! Poles, not Belarussians!'

As soon as the words were uttered, Jan wanted to cut out his tongue. Lydia had broken him! Once again he had betrayed the resistance!

Deeply ashamed, he looked at Andrei. *I'm sorry. I'm not as strong as you.*

It's okay, Andrei replied silently. You must not blame yourself. She could destroy even the bravest man.

(Okay, their separate identities are coming into focus for me now. Andrei – older, smarter, stronger. Jan – younger, sweeter, dafter.)

Lydia left, and after a lengthy silence Jan admitted, 'I am glum.'

Several seconds elapsed before Andrei spoke. 'I too am glum.'

Day 61 . . .

Back on the ground floor, it seemed that Matt and Maeve were planning to pop out for a late-night jog. In their bedroom – an Ikean wonderland, the bedside cabinets slightly off-kilter because the assembly instructions in the boxes had been in Czech and Matt said that if he had to go back to Ikea to get the English ones, he'd drive himself at high speed into a wall – they undressed, Maeve turning away from Matt as she removed her bra. Immediately, they proceeded to get dressed again, seeming to put on even more clothes than they had already been wearing. Maeve was now covered neck to ankle in grey sweats and Matt was kitted out in jocks, baggy jogging pants and a long-sleeved T-shirt. Then . . . bafflingly! . . . they got into bed! Why so swaddled? It was a warm night out there.

It suddenly occurred to me that perhaps they were about to play a sexy undressing game. But what was wrong with removing the clothes they'd already been wearing?

I was far from happy at the thought of witnessing whatever strange jiggy-pokery they were about to unleash but I forced myself to linger. I had no choice! It was important to get the lie of the land. Propped up on his pillow, Matt flicked his way through a car magazine, snapping the pages, hungry to see what the next contained, meanwhile on her side of the bed, Maeve read *Pride and Prejudice* . . . and that's all that happened. I lingered some more, noting the hefty little pile of other Jane Austens on Maeve's nightstand – clearly a fan. And I lingered still more, until it became clear that no sexy undressing game was about to kick off.

I must admit to a little relief.

*

The only problem with Matt falling in love with Maeve four and a quarter years ago was that Matt already had a girlfriend . . .

Yes, the lovely Natalie. And she really was lovely. Of all the beautiful, brainy girls at Goliath – and there were more than two hundred youthful employees so there were many to choose from – Natalie was the most beautiful, the most brainy of all: smooth brown skin; long, lean thighs; a defiant question mark in her eye; a great facility for her job. (A Belgian national, she was a wonderful advertisement for her famously dull country.)

Matt – smiling, lovable Matt, with the widely acknowledged conviction that he would Go Far – was a partner worthy of the lovely Natalie.

Matt and Nat each headed up a sales team and, lovers though they were, they were also rivals. They competed against each other, gloating (with great good humour, of course) every time they closed a sale of one of Goliath's software packages. 'One less for you, bud.'

So when Maeve joined as a trainee, it was no surprise that Matt, with his glossy girlfriend and his demanding job, barely noticed her. Mind you, Goliath being what it was (a company enjoying exponential growth), new people were appearing round the clock – on the same day that Maeve had started, so had Tarik from Pakistan and Yen-way from Taiwan – so there were always fresh faces enjoying a brainstorming game of ping-pong in the chill room or queueing to partake of the free breakfast granola. It was hard to keep up.

Maeve, friendly and positive, with a musical, rounded accent, was popular among her colleagues, but she still hadn't registered as a meaningful presence on Matt's radar until one night when Matt and Nat were leaving work. They clicked quickly down the shiny marble hallway, black leather foot-

wear flashing, serious tailoring flying, the storm troopers of Sales. Moving in harmony, they powered through Goliath's massive double doors – taking a door each – passing Maeve who was crouched low, unlocking her bike.

‘Goodnight, lads,’ she said.

With perfect synchronicity, Matt and Nat swung their smooth, perfectly shaped heads to see who had spoken and – as one – exploded into uncontrollable laughter.

‘What?’ Maeve asked. Realization dawned and a smile spread across her face. ‘Is it my hat?’

‘Yes!’

Maeve's hat was an orange and pink Inca-patterned knitted helmet. A triangle of yarn covered each ear, woollen plaits fell to her chest and the top came to a sharp point, on which an orange pompom was perched.

‘Is it very bad?’ Maeve was still smiling.

‘Very bad,’ Nat said.

‘But it's all the rage on the Machu Picchu trail and it keeps my ears warm.’ This made all three of them laugh even harder. Then, with a rough rush of metal, Maeve liberated her bike from its chain, hopped on to the saddle and, moving fluidly, freewheeled out into the traffic.

‘She's so sweet.’ Nat sighed. ‘What do you think about her and David? Is it the real thing?’

Matt hadn't a clue. He'd barely noticed Maeve until five minutes ago, much less known that she was going out with David.

‘So much in common.’ Nat smiled fondly. ‘Seeing as they're both Galwegians.’

(David was actually from Manchester – it wasn't necessary to come from Galway to qualify for Galwegian status. It was an umbrella term that implied fondness for falafels, frizzy jumpers and festivals – music, obviously, but comedy, poetry, beer . . . anything would do. If it involved mud and pints, it

was perfect. If the festival could be combined with a protest march, then so much the better. Indeed, the ideal weekend, a veritable *utopia* for a Galwegian, was to get caught up in an anti-globalism riot, cracked on the skull with a truncheon and thrown into a police cell for twenty-four hours with a trio of hard-core protesters from Genoa. Galwegians were hardy; they slept like babies on their friends' cold hard floors. Galwegians were proud of being Irish – even when they weren't actually Irish – and they dropped many Irish words into conversation. Much of Goliath's multicultural staff spoke basic Galwegian. A popular phrase was 'Egg choct egg oal?' It meant 'Coming for a drink?')

The funny thing was that at the time, Matt coveted David far more than he coveted Maeve.

'I'd love to get David on my team,' he said wistfully.

'You and me both,' Natalie replied.

David was on Godric's team and was Godric's most valuable asset. He was super-brainy, a mathematics whizz, and he could disentangle the knottiest implementation problems. He just kept plugging away, trying things this way, trying things that way, until he'd unlocked and ordered things into a way that worked.

'David could be a team leader himself if he wanted to,' Matt said.

David was probably older than almost everyone else in Goliath, only by a few years, but enough to make him a natural leader. Nevertheless, he resisted all attempts to be steered in the direction of management.

'What do you think the story is?' Matt asked Nat.

'Doesn't want to be pigeon-holed, he said.'

David had packed an awful lot already into his thirty years. He'd travelled all over and done an impressive variety of jobs from teaching physics in Guyana to being a nanny for

three children in a progressive-thinking family in Vancouver.

‘Doesn’t want a “career path”, he told me.’ Nat shook her head and laughed. She couldn’t understand people who didn’t have the same ambition that she did.

‘Very noble of him.’

‘Maybe he’s a little too noble?’

‘Mmmm.’

They were both remembering the incident the previous week when David – always passionate about injustice – became so enraged by pro-Russian coverage of the ongoing war in Chechnya that he printed out the offending article from the Reuters’ site and gathered several acolytes around his desk while he ceremoniously burned the page. It had set off all the smoke alarms.

‘And lucky the sprinklers didn’t start,’ Matt said.

‘He could have destroyed all our machines,’ Nat said.

‘And he didn’t care. Said the principle was more important.’

‘Principle.’ Nat rolled her eyes. ‘For God’s sake.’

After the laughing-at-the-hat incident, Matt knew who Maeve was and a week or so later, when he was driving to work and saw an orange pompom bobbing above the traffic, he was able to say to himself: It’s that Maeve girl, the one with the hat.

On her bike, she wove in and out of lanes until she disappeared from view, then the lights changed and Matt took off and caught up with her. While he was once again stalled in a sea of cars, she was diligently working her way away from him and into the distance, then the lights changed and he lurched forward, closing the gap. It became a pattern. She’d get ahead of him, he’d chase after her, searching for the jaunty orange pompom, then she’d put some distance between them while he clenched his hands on the steering wheel, waiting for the chance to move.

Although she knew nothing about it, he felt they were in a race. His journey to work had never been more fun.

As he approached the busy intersection of Hanlon's Corner he was in the lead. The lights were green, but anxiety that he'd get too far ahead of Maeve made him slow down and the lights obliged by changing to amber. Just as the lights turned red, Maeve whizzed up the inside lane to the head of the traffic and stopped for the briefest moment while making a series of high-speed calculations. Matt could actually feel her judging her speed, the length of time available to her and the distance of the drivers who were gunning their engines, ready for their green light, now that the opposite lights had gone red. Then she shot out into the empty space, looking small and astonishingly brave, like a student squaring up to an army tank. All eyes were on the orange pompom as she raced through the danger zone, and when she reached the safety of the other side Matt was buoyed up with relief and admiration.

The episode made such an impression that when he got in to work he made a special visit to the crowded pod she shared with the other trainees.

'Morning, Miss Maeve. Has anyone ever told you you're an excellent breaker of red lights? So calm, so daring?'

She looked up from her screen, her eyes dancing with amusement. 'Has anyone ever told you you're full of guff?'

'Guff?'

'You know, chat, blather, blarney.'

'Right.' Some Galwegian word, obviously. 'I saw you on the way to work. Crossing Hanlon's Corner when the lights were against you. Nerves of steel.'

'I believe in taking my chances.'

'You're lucky you weren't killed.'

'Fortune favours the bold.'

'You wouldn't catch me cycling in this city.'

‘You should try it. It ennobles the soul.’

‘My soul is noble enough.’

‘Is it now?’ she asked, looking at him, her expression amused.

‘Stop it!’

‘What?’

‘Looking at me like you know something about me that I don’t.’

‘Me?’ She laughed. ‘I know nothing.’

Matt didn’t tell Natalie about the morning he’d raced Maeve to work. There was no need, it was no biggie. The funny thing was that Natalie was just as fond of Maeve as he was and together they’d claimed a sort of ownership of her the way you would an adorable, harmless puppy. At Friday-night drinks in the pub, they made sure they were sitting near her, listening to her melodic accent and the strange words she used. ‘Ganzey’ when she meant sweater – that type of thing.

One Friday evening, Nat swung by Matt’s desk. ‘You ready?’

‘Ten minutes.’

‘See you in the pub. Make sure Maeve’s there.’ And she was gone.

Matt knew better than to ask Nat to wait for him. Nat never wasted time.

When he’d finished, he made his way to Maeve’s pod. ‘Coming for a drink?’

‘A drink?’ Maeve gazed at nothing as she considered. She seemed to disappear inside her head. After a short pause she smiled and said, ‘No, not tonight, Matt.’

‘Why not, Farmgirl?’ He felt, well, he felt quite . . . *rejected*. ‘Off out with your boyfriend?’

‘And what if I am?’ Her tone was light-hearted.

‘Nothing,’ Matt was assailed by a sudden stab of intense dislike for David. He was so right-on and decent, always supporting causes and organizing charity things and being so *caring*.

‘I’m on the bike,’ Maeve said.

Matt looked blank.

‘I can’t have more than one drink if I’m on the bike,’ she explained. ‘I’d rather have none than one.’

Instantly, Matt shifted his dislike from David to Maeve’s bike, like it was a chaperone keeping him from her.

‘Well, *I’m* going for a drink,’ Matt said, with defiance that he didn’t really understand.

‘More power to you.’

‘*Yes*, more power to me.’

In the pub, Nat asked, ‘Where’s Maeve?’

‘Not coming.’

‘She’s not?’ Nat seemed disproportionately disappointed.

Matt looked at her warily. ‘What’s up?’

‘Maeve’s finishing her training next week.’

‘Already?’

‘Two weeks early. It’s a secret. She’s done really well. I want her on my team.’

But I want her.

‘And she wants to be on Team Nat?’

‘I haven’t asked her. I was going to float it tonight.’

‘So she doesn’t know anything about it yet?’

‘No.’

I’ll get to her first.

When Matt persuaded Pong from Thailand to leave his team for Nat’s and took Maeve for himself, Nat seemed a little shaken by Matt’s treachery. Nevertheless, she raised a glass and declared him ‘a worthy adversary’.

In the following weeks, Matt started saying ‘guff’ and ‘more power to you’ and sometimes ‘more power to your elbow’.

‘More power to my elbow?’ Nat laughed. ‘My little Galwegian boy.’

It was her joke. As if she, the lovely Natalie, would ever go out with a Galwegian.