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Evening Class

Written by Maeve Binchy

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Evening Class

Maeve Binchy



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To dear, generous Gordon,
grazie per tutto,
and with all my love

AIDAN



There was a time back in 1970 when they would love filling in a questionnaire.

Aidan might find one in a newspaper at a weekend. Are You A Thoughtful Husband? or possibly What Do You Know About Show Biz? They scored high on the answers to Are You Well Suited? and How Well Do You Treat Your Friends?

But that was long ago.

Nowadays if Nell or Aidan Dunne saw a list of questions they didn't rush eagerly to fill them in and see how they scored. It would be too painful to answer How Often Do You Make Love? a) More than four times a week? b) Twice a week on average? c) Every Saturday night? d) Less than this? Who would want to acknowledge how very much less than this, and look up what kind of interpretation the questionnaire sages had applied to this admission?

The page would be turned nowadays if either of them saw a survey asking Are You Compatible? And there had been no row, no falling out. Aidan had not been unfaithful to Nell, and he assumed that she had not strayed either. Was it arrogant to assume this? She was an attractive looking woman; other men would definitely find her worth a second glance, as they always had.

Aidan knew that a great many men who were genuinely astounded when it was proved that their wives had been having affairs, were just smug and unobservant. But not him. He knew Nell wouldn't meet anyone else, make love to another man. He knew her so well he would know if this was the case. Anyway, where would she have met anyone? And if she had met someone she fancied where would they have gone? No, it was a ludicrous idea.

Possibly everyone else felt like this. It could well be one of the things they didn't tell you about getting

older. Like having aches and pains in the backs of your legs after a long walk, like not being able to hear or understand the lyrics of pop songs any more. Maybe you just drifted apart from the person that you had thought was the centre of the world.

It was quite likely that every other man of forty-eight going on forty-nine felt the same. All over the world there could be men who wanted their wives to be eager and excited about everything. It wasn't only about lovemaking, it was about enthusiasm for other things as well.

It had been so long now since Nell had asked about his job, and his hopes and dreams in the school. There was a time when she had known the name of every teacher and many of the pupils, when she would talk about the large classes, and the posts of responsibility and the school excursions and plays, about Aidan's projects for the Third World.

But now she hardly knew what was happening. When the new Minister for Education was appointed Nell just shrugged. 'I suppose she can't be worse than the last one,' was her only comment. Nell knew nothing of the Transition Year except to call it a bloody luxury. Imagine giving children all that time to think and discuss and ... find themselves ... instead of getting down to their exams.

And Aidan didn't blame her.

He had become very dull explaining things. He could hear his own voice echoing in his ears; there was a kind of drone to it, and his daughters would raise their eyes to heaven wondering why at the ages of twenty-one and nineteen they should have to listen to any of this.

He tried not to bore them. Aidan knew it was a characteristic of teachers; they were so used to the captive audience in the classroom they could go on for far too long, approaching every subject from several

sides until they were sure that the listener had grasped the drift.

He made huge efforts to key into their lives.

But Nell never had any stories or any issues to discuss about the restaurant where she worked as a cashier. 'Ah, for heaven's sake, Aidan, it's a job. I sit there and I take their credit cards, or their cheque cards or their cash, and I give them change and a receipt. And then at the end of the day I come home and at the end of the week I get my wages. And that's the way it is for ninety per cent of the world. We don't have issues and dramas and power struggles; we're normal, that's all.'

It was not intended to wound him or put him down, but still it was a slap in the face. It was obvious that he himself must have been going on and on about confrontations and conflicts in the staff room. And the days were gone – obviously long gone – when Nell was waiting eagerly to know what had happened, always rooting for him, championing his cause and declaring that his enemies were her enemies. Aidan ached for the companionship, the solidarity and the teamwork of other times.

Perhaps when he became Principal it would return.

Or was this fooling himself? Possibly the headship would still hold little interest for his wife and two daughters. His home just ticked along easily. Recently he had felt this odd feeling that he had died some time ago, and they were all managing perfectly well. Nell went to and from the restaurant. She went to see her mother once a week; no, Aidan needn't come, she had said, it was just a nice family chat. Her mother liked to see them all regularly to know were they all right.

'And *are* you all right?' Aidan had asked anxiously.

'You're not with the Fifth Years now doing amateur philosophy,' Nell had said. 'I'm as all right as anyone, I suppose. Can't you leave it at that?'

But of course Aidan couldn't leave it. He told her it wasn't amateur philosophy it was Introduction to Philosophy, and it wasn't Fifth Years, it was Transition Years. He would never forget the look Nell had given him. She had begun to say something but then changed her mind. Her face was full of distant pity. She looked at him as she might have looked at a poor tramp sitting on the street, his coat tied with a rope and drinking the dregs of a ginger wine bottle.

He fared no better with his daughters.

Grania worked in the bank but had little to report from it, to her father at any rate. Sometimes he came across her talking to her friends, and she seemed much more animated. And it was the same with Brigid. The travel agency is fine, Dad, stop going on about it. Of course it's fine, and the free holiday twice a year, and the long lunch hours because they worked a rota.

Grania didn't want to talk about the whole system of banking and whether it was unfair to encourage people to take loans that they would find it difficult to repay. She didn't invent the rule, she told him, she had an In basket on her desk and she dealt with what was in it each day. That was it. Dead simple. Brigid didn't have any views on whether the travel trade was selling tourists some kind of dream it could never deliver. 'Dad, if they don't want a holiday nobody's twisting their arms, they don't have to come in and buy one.'

Aidan wished he were more observant. When had all this happened ... this growing apart? There was a time when the girls had sat all clean and shiny after their bath time in pink dressing gowns while he told them stories and Nell would look on pleased from across the room. But that was years back. There had been good times since then. When they were doing their exams, for example, Aidan remembered doing out revision sheets for them, planning how they should study to the best

advantage. They had been grateful then. He remembered the celebrations when Grania got her Leaving Certificate and later when she was accepted in the bank. There had been a lunch on each occasion in a big hotel, the waiter had taken photographs of them all. And it had been the same with Brigid, a lunch and a picture session. They looked a perfectly happy family in those pictures. Was it all a façade?

In a way it must have been, because here he was now only a few short years later, and he could not sit down with his wife and two daughters, the people he loved most in the world, and tell them his fears that he might not be made Principal.

He had put in so much time in that school, worked so many extra hours, involved himself in every aspect of it, and somewhere in his bones he felt that he would be passed over.

Another man, a man almost precisely his own age, might well get the post. This was Tony O'Brien, a man who had never stayed on after hours to support a school team playing a home match, a man who had not involved himself in the restructuring of the curriculum, in the fundraising for the new building project. Tony O'Brien who smoked quite openly in the corridors of a school which was meant to be a smoke-free zone, who had his lunch in a pub, letting everyone know it was a pint and a half and a cheese sandwich. A bachelor, in no sense a family man, often seen with a girl half his age on his arm, and yet he was being suggested as a very possible candidate for head of the school.

Many things had confused Aidan in the last few years, but nothing as much as this. By any standards Tony O'Brien should not be in the running at all. Aidan ran his hands through his hair, which was thinning. Tony O'Brien of course had a huge shock of thick brown hair falling into his eyes and resting on his collar. Surely the

world hadn't gone so mad that they would take this into consideration when choosing a Principal?

Lots of hair good, thinning hair bad ... Aidan grinned to himself. If he could laugh to himself at some of the worst bits of the paranoia maybe he could keep self-pity at bay. And he would have to laugh to himself. Somehow, there was no one else to laugh with these days.

There was a questionnaire in one of the Sunday papers, Are You Tense? Aidan filled in the answers truthfully. He scored over 75 on the scale, which he knew was high. He wasn't however quite prepared for the terse and dismissive verdict. If you scored over 70 you are in fact a clenched fist. Lighten up, friend, before you explode.

They had always said that these tests were just jokes really, space fillers. That's what Aidan and Nell used to say when they emerged less well than they had hoped from a questionnaire. But this time, of course, he was on his own. He told himself that newspapers had to think of something to take up half a page, otherwise the edition would appear with great white blanks.

But still it upset him. Aidan knew that he was jumpy, that was one thing. But a clenched fist? No wonder they might think twice about him as headmaster material.

He had written his answers on a separate sheet of paper lest anyone in the family should find and read his confessional of worries and anxieties and sleeplessness.

Sundays were the days that Aidan now found hardest to bear. In the past when they were a real family, a happy family, they had gone on picnics in the summer and taken healthy, bracing walks when the weather was cold. Aidan boasted that his family would never be like those Dublin families who didn't know anywhere except the area they lived themselves.

One Sunday he would take them on a train south and

they would climb Bray Head, and look into the neighbouring county of Wicklow, another Sunday they would go north to the seaside villages of Rush and Lusk and Skerries, small places each with their own character, all on the road that would eventually take them up to the Border. He had arranged day excursions to Belfast for them too, so that they would not grow up in ignorance of the other part of Ireland.

Those had been some of his happiest times, the combination of schoolteacher and father, explainer and entertainer. Daddy knew the answer to everything: where to get the bus out to Carrickfergus Castle, or the Ulster Folk Museum, and a grand place for chips before getting on the train back home.

Aidan remembered a woman on the train telling Grania and Brigid that they were lucky little girls to have a daddy who taught them so much. They had nodded solemnly to agree with her and Nell had whispered to him that the woman obviously fancied Aidan but she wasn't going to get her hands on him. And Aidan had felt twelve feet tall and the most important man on earth.

Now on a Sunday he felt increasingly that he was hardly noticed in his home.

They had never been people for the traditional Sunday lunch, roast beef or lamb or chicken and great dishes of potatoes and vegetables, like so many other families were. Because of their outings and adventures, Sunday had been a casual day in their home. Aidan wished that there were some fixed point in it. He went to Mass. Nell sometimes came with him, but usually she was going on somewhere afterwards to meet one of her sisters or a friend from work. And of course nowadays the shops were open on Sundays, so there were plenty of places to go.

The girls never went to Mass. It was useless to talk to

them. He had given up when they were seventeen. They didn't get up until lunchtime and then they made sandwiches, looked at whatever they had videoed during the week, lounged around in dressing gowns, washed their hair, their clothes, spoke on the phone to friends, asked other friends in for coffee.

They behaved as if they lived in a flat together with their mother as a pleasant, eccentric landlady who had to be humoured. Grania and Brigid contributed a very small amount of money each for bed and board, and handed it over with a bad grace as if they were being bled dry. To his knowledge they contributed nothing else to the household budget. Not a tin of biscuits, a tub of ice cream nor a carton of fabric softener ever came from their purses, but they were quick to grizzle if these things weren't readily available.

Aidan wondered how Tony O'Brien spent his Sundays.

He knew that Tony certainly didn't go to Mass, he had made that clear to the pupils when they questioned him: 'Sir, sir, do you go to Mass on Sundays?'

'Sometimes I do, when I feel in the mood for talking to God,' Tony O'Brien had said.

Aidan knew this. It had been reported gleefully by the boys and girls, who used it as ammunition against those who said they had to go every Sunday under pain of Mortal Sin.

He had been very clever; too clever, Aidan thought. He didn't deny the existence of God, instead he had made out that he was a friend of God's and friends only drop in to have a chat when they are in good form. It made Tony O'Brien have the inside track somehow while Aidan Dunne was left on the outside, no friend of the Almighty, just a time server. It was one of the many annoying and unfair things about it all.

On a Sunday Tony O'Brien probably got up late ...

he lived in what they called a 'townhouse' nowadays, which was the equivalent of a flat. Just one big room and kitchen downstairs, and one big bedroom and bathroom upstairs. The door opened straight onto the street. He had been observed leaving in the morning accompanied by young women.

There was a time when that would have ended his career, let alone his chances of promotion – back in the 1960s teachers had been sacked for having relationships outside marriage. Not, of course, that this was right. In fact, they had all protested very strongly at the time. But still, for a man who had never committed to any woman, to parade a succession of them through his townhouse, and still be considered headmaster material, a role model for the students ... that wasn't right either.

What would Tony O'Brien be doing now, at two thirty on a wet Sunday? Maybe round to lunch at one of the other teachers' houses. Aidan had never been able to ask him since they literally didn't *have* lunch, and Nell would reasonably have enquired why he should impose on them a man he had been denouncing for five years. He might still be entertaining a lady from last night. Tony O'Brien said he owed a great debt of gratitude to the people of China since there was an excellent takeaway only three doors away – lemon chicken, sesame toast and chilli prawns were always great with a bottle of Australian Chardonnay and the Sunday papers. Imagine, at his age, a man who could be a grandfather, entertaining girls and buying Chinese food on a Sunday.

But then again, why not?

Aidan Dunne was a fair man. He had to admit that people had a choice in such matters. Tony O'Brien didn't drag these women back to his townhouse by their hair. There was no law that said he should be married and bring up two distant daughters as Aidan had done.

And in a way it was to the man's credit that he wasn't a hypocrite, he didn't try to disguise his lifestyle.

It was just that things had changed so very much. Someone had moved the goalposts about what was acceptable and what was not, and they hadn't consulted Aidan first.

And how would Tony spend the rest of the day?

Surely they wouldn't go back to bed again for the afternoon? Maybe he would go for a walk or the girl would go home and Tony would play music, he often spoke of his CDs. When he had won £350 on the Match Four of the Lotto he had hired a carpenter who was working on the school extension, and paid him the money straight out to make a rack that would hold 500 CDs. Everyone had been impressed. Aidan had been jealous. Where would you get the money to buy that number of CDs? He knew for a fact that Tony O'Brien bought about three a week. When would you get the time to listen to them? And then Tony would stroll down to the pub and meet a few friends, or go to a foreign language movie with subtitles, or to a jazz club.

Maybe it was all this moving around that made him more interesting and gave him the edge on everyone else. Certainly on Aidan. Aidan's Sundays were nothing that would interest anyone.

When he came back from late Mass around one o'clock and asked would anyone like bacon and egg, there was a chorus of disgust from his daughters: 'God no, Daddy!' or 'Daddy, please don't even mention something like that, and could you keep the kitchen door closed if you're going to have it?' If Nell were at home she might raise her eyes from a novel and ask 'Why?' Her tone was never hostile, only bewildered, as if it were the most unlikely suggestion that had ever been made. Left to herself Nell might make a salad sandwich at three.

Aidan thought back wistfully to his mother's table, where the chat of the week took place and no one was excused without a very good reason. Of course, dismantling this had all been his own doing. Making them into free spirits who would discover the length and breadth of County Dublin and even the neighbouring counties on their one full day off. How could he have known it would lead to his being displaced and restless, wandering from the kitchen where everyone heated up their own food in a microwave, to the sitting room where there was some programme that he didn't want to see on television, to the bedroom where it was so long since he had made love with his wife he could barely endure looking at it until it was time to go to sleep.

There was of course the dining room. The room with the heavy dark furniture that they had hardly used since they bought the house. Even if they had been people who entertained, it was too small and poky. Once or twice recently Nell had suggested casually that Aidan should make it into a study for himself. But he had resisted. He felt that if he turned it into a copy of his room at the school he might somehow lose his identity as head of this house, as father, provider and man who once believed that this was the centre of the world.

He also feared that if he made himself too much at home there then the next step would be that he should sleep there too. After all, there was a downstairs cloakroom. It would be perfectly feasible to leave the three women to roam the upstairs area.

He must never do that, he must fight to keep his place in the family as he was fighting to keep his presence in the minds of the Board of Management, the men and women who would choose the next Principal of Mountainview College.

His mother had never understood why the school wasn't called Saint something college. That's what all

schools were called. It was hard to explain to her that things were different now, a changed set-up, but he kept reassuring her that there were both a priest and a nun on the Board of Management. They didn't make all the decisions but they were there to give a voice to the role the religious had played in Irish education over the years.

Aidan's mother had sniffed. Things had come to a strange state when priests and nuns were meant to be pleased that they had a place on the Board instead of running it like God intended. In vain Aidan had tried to explain about the fall in vocations. Even secondary schools ostensibly run by religious orders had in the nineties only a very few religious in teaching positions. The numbers just weren't there.

Nell had heard him arguing the situation with his mother once and had suggested that he save his breath. 'Tell her they still run it, Aidan. It makes for an easier life. And of course in a way they do. People are afraid of them.' It irritated him greatly when Nell spoke like this. Nell had no reason to fear the power of the Catholic Church. She had attended its services for as long as it had suited her, had abandoned confession and any of the Pope's teachings on contraception at an early stage. Why should she pretend that it had been a burden that lay heavily on her? But he didn't fight her on this. He was calm and accepting as in so many things. She had no time for his mother; no hostility, but no interest in her at all.

Sometimes his mother wondered when she would get invited for dinner and Aidan had to say that the way things were they were in a state of flux, but once they got organised ...

He had been saying this for over two decades and as an excuse it had worn thin. And it wasn't fair to fault Nell over this. It wasn't as if she was constantly inviting

her own mother around or anything. His mother had been asked to any family celebration in hotels, of course. But it wasn't the same. And it had been so long since there was anything to celebrate. Except, of course, the hope that he would be made Principal.

'Did you have a good weekend?' Tony O'Brien asked him in the staffroom.

Aidan looked at him, surprised. It was so long since anyone had enquired. 'Quiet, you know,' Aidan said.

'Oh well, lucky you. I was at a party last night and I'm suffering after it. Still, only three and a half hours till the good old rehydrating lunchtime pint,' Tony groaned.

'Aren't you marvellous, the stamina I mean.' Aidan hoped the bitterness and criticism were not too obvious in his voice.

'Not at all, I'm far too long in the tooth for this, but I don't have the consolations of wife and family like all the rest of you do.' Tony's smile was warm. If you didn't know him and his lifestyle you'd have believed that he was genuinely wistful, Aidan thought to himself.

They walked together along the corridors of Mountainview College, the place his mother would like to have been called Saint Kevin's or even more particularly Saint Anthony's. Anthony was the saint who found lost things, and his mother had increasing calls on him as she got older. He found her glasses a dozen times a day. The least that people could do was thank him by naming the local school after him. Still, when her son was Principal ... she lived in hope.

The children ran past them, some of them chorusing 'good morning', others looking sullenly away. Aidan Dunne knew them all, and their parents. And remembered many of their elder brothers and sisters. Tony O'Brien knew hardly any of them. It was so unfair.

'I met someone who knew you last night,' Tony O'Brien said suddenly.

'At a party? I doubt that,' Aidan smiled.

'No, definitely she did. When I told her I taught here she asked did I know you.'

'And who was she?' Aidan was interested in spite of himself.

'I never got her name. Nice girl.'

'An ex-pupil possibly?'

'No, then she'd have known me.'

'A mystery indeed,' Aidan said, and watched as Tony O'Brien went into Fifth Year.

The silence that fell immediately was beyond explanation. Why did they respect him so much, fear to be caught talking, behaving badly? Tony O'Brien didn't remember their names, for heaven's sake. He barely marked their work, he lost not an hour's sleep over their examination results. Basically he didn't care about them very much. And yet they sought his approval. Aidan couldn't understand it. In sixteen-year-old boys and girls.

You always heard that women were meant to like men who treated them hard. He felt a flicker of relief that Nell had never crossed Tony O'Brien's path. Then it was followed by another flicker, a sense of recognition that somehow Nell had left him long ago.

Aidan Dunne went into the Fourth Years and stood at the door for three minutes until they gradually came to a sort of silence for him.

He thought that Mr Walsh, the old Principal, may have passed by behind him in the corridor. But he may have imagined it. You always imagined that the Principal was passing by when your class was in disorder. It was something every single teacher he ever met admitted to. Aidan knew that it was a trivial worry. The Principal admired him far too much to care if the Fourth Years

were a bit noisier than usual. Aidan was the most responsible teacher in Mountainview. Everyone knew that.

That was the afternoon that Mr Walsh called him into the Principal's office. He was a man whose retirement could not come quickly enough. Today for the first time there was no small talk.

'You and I feel the same about a lot of things, Aidan.'

'I hope so, Mr Walsh.'

'Yes, we look at the world from the same viewpoint. But it's not enough.'

'I don't know exactly what you mean?' And Aidan spoke only the truth. Was this a philosophical discussion? Was it a warning? A reprimand?

'It's the system, you see. The way they run things. The Principal doesn't have a vote. Sits there like a bloody eunuch, that's what it amounts to.'

'A vote?' Aidan thought he knew where this was going, but decided to pretend not to.

It had been a wrong calculation. It only annoyed the Principal. 'Come on, man, you know what I'm talking about. The job, the job, man.'

'Well, yes.' Aidan now felt foolish.

'I'm a non-voting member of the Board of Management. I don't have a say. If I did you'd be in this job in September. I'd give you a few bits of advice about taking no nonsense from those louts in Fourth Year. But I still think you're the man with the values, and the sense of what's right for a school.'

'Thank you, Mr Walsh, that's very good to know.'

'Man, will you listen to me before you mouth these things ... there's nothing to thank me for. I can't *do* anything for you, that's what I'm trying to tell you, Aidan.' The elder man looked at him despairingly as if Aidan were some very slow-learning child in First Year.

The look was not unlike the way Nell looked at him sometimes, Aidan realised with a great feeling of sadness. He had been teaching other people's children since he was twenty-two years of age, over twenty-six years now, yet he did not know how to respond to a man who was trying hard to help him; he had only managed to annoy him.

The Principal was looking at him intently. For all that Aidan knew Mr Walsh might be able to read his thoughts, recognise the realisation that had just sunk into Aidan's brain. 'Come on now, pull yourself together. Don't look so stricken. I might be wrong, I could have it all wrong. I'm an old horse going out to grass, and I suppose I just wanted to cover myself in case it didn't go in your favour.'

Aidan could see that the Principal deeply regretted having spoken at all. 'No, no. I greatly appreciate it, I mean you are very good to tell me where you stand in all this ... I mean ...' Aidan's voice trickled away.

'It wouldn't be the end of the world you know ... suppose you didn't get it.'

'No no, absolutely not.'

'I mean, you're a family man, many compensations. Lots of life going on at home, not wedded to this place like I was for so long.' Mr Walsh had been a widower for many years, his only son visited him but rarely.

'Utterly right, just as you say,' Aidan said.

'But?' the older man looked kind, approachable.

Aidan spoke slowly. 'You're right, it's not the end of the world, but I suppose I thought ... I hoped that it might be a new beginning, liven everything up in my own life. I wouldn't mind the extra hours, I never did. I spend a lot of hours here already. In a way I am a bit like you, you know, wedded to Mountainview.'

'I know you are.' Mr Walsh was gentle.

'I never found any of it a chore. I like my classes and

particularly the Transition Year when you can bring them out of themselves a bit, get to know them, let them think. And I even like the parent teacher evenings which everyone else hates, because I can remember all the kids and ... I suppose I like it all except for the politics of it, the sort of jostling for position bit.' Aidan stopped suddenly. He was afraid there would be a break in his voice, and also he realised that *his* jostling hadn't worked.

Mr Walsh was silent.

Outside the room were the noises of a school at four thirty in the afternoon. In the distance the sounds of bicycle bells shrilling, doors banging, voices shouting as they ran for the buses in each direction. Soon the sound of the cleaners with their buckets and mops, and the hum of the electric polisher, would be heard. It was so familiar, so safe. And until this moment Aidan had thought that there was a very sporting chance that this would be his.

'I suppose it's Tony O'Brien,' he said in a defeated tone.

'He seems to be the one they want. Nothing definite yet, not till next week, but that's where their thinking lies.'

'I wonder why?' Aidan felt almost dizzy with jealousy and confusion.

'Oh search me, Aidan. The man's not even a practising Catholic. He has the morals of a tom cat. He doesn't love the place, care about it like we do, but they think he's the man for the times that are in it. Tough ways of dealing with tough problems.'

'Like beating an eighteen-year-old boy nearly senseless,' Aidan said.

'Well, they all think that the boy was a drug dealer, and he certainly didn't come anywhere near the school again.'

'You can't run a place like that,' Aidan said.

'You wouldn't and I wouldn't, but our day is over.'

'You're sixty-five, with respect, Mr Walsh. I am only forty-eight, I didn't think my day was over.'

'And it needn't be, Aidan. That's what I'm telling you. You've got a lovely wife and daughters, a life out there. You should build on all that. Don't let Mountainview become like a mistress to you.'

'You're very kind and I appreciate what you say. No, I'm not just mouthing words. Truly I do appreciate being warned in advance, makes me look less foolish.' And he left the room with a very straight back.

At home he found Nell in her black dress and yellow scarf, the uniform she wore for work in the restaurant.

'But you don't work Monday night,' he cried in dismay.

'They were short-handed, and I thought why not, there's nothing on television,' she said. Then possibly she saw his face. 'There's a nice bit of steak in the fridge,' she said. 'And some of Saturday's potatoes ... they'd be grand fried up with an onion. Right?'

'Right,' he said. He wouldn't have told her anyway. Maybe it was better that Nell was going out. 'Are the girls home?' he asked.

'Grania's taken possession of the bathroom. Heavy date tonight, apparently.'

'Anyone we know?' He didn't know why he said it. He could see her irritation.

'How would it be anyone we know?'

'Remember when they were toddlers and we knew all their friends?' Aidan said.

'Yes, and remember too when they kept us awake all night roaring and bawling. I'll be off now.'

'Fine, take care.' His voice was flat.

'Are you all right, Aidan?'