



TIME FOR A  
CHANGE

*Faith Hogan*

‘Dear Lord Almighty,’ Maura Mc Nulty nearly choked on her cup of tea. It was the last thing she expected, to see Evelyn Quigley sitting there on her favourite afternoon programme, chatting to the host as if they’d known each other for years. It was definitely her. It took a minute to fully recognise her, beneath the bright pink hair, the slinky dress and sparkly gold ankle boots that she probably needed a crane to lift her into. For goodness sake, Maura thought for a moment, the woman is my age. She’s seventy-two if she’s a day.

Seventy-two years – where had it gone? Maura knew exactly where it had gone, first school and then straight into the local post office, where she’d spent every day until she retired at the ripe old age of sixty-five. There had been a husband and two sons along the way. None of them here now.

Paddy had divorced her as soon as it was legal to do so. He hitched his wagon to Sarah Divine and now they were as po-faced as each other. Maura never liked the woman. Long before the divorce, they had fallen out when Sarah had called her frumpy and lumpy after Cormac was born.

Her boys had high tailed it out of Ballycove as soon as they could too, off to college first and now she had one in San Francisco and the other in Toronto. She was on her own for years and if it had been a little lonely when she first retired, she felt it suited her well enough now.

Evelyn Quigley though? She found herself thinking of the girl she used to know many times over the next few days. At school, they'd called her the mouse.

Well, there was nothing mousey about her now. She was getting her own afternoon show, once a week on the telly, a fashion stylist – that was what she called herself. Maura wrote down the time of the show on a little pad she kept near the kettle, just in case.

Not that there was anything wrong with her memory, she was still as quick as any youngster hanging about Ballycove, but wasn't that the thing? You never knew when it began to slip and who wanted to end up in some home for the bewildered, stocking up on apples when you no longer had the teeth to do much more than stew them?

The first Thursday almost felt like an occasion. Maura had made herself a lovely instant cappuccino, set it on that funny little off-centre saucer that they'd given her as part of a set when she'd retired. She popped a digestive biscuit on the side to nibble. Her appetite wasn't what it used to be, but she couldn't resist an occasional treat.

The programme was just half an hour long. Evelyn was undoubtedly the star of the show. Today she was wearing a pretty white blouse with a necklace easily large enough to moor a steam ship; it must weigh a tonne, Maura thought. And beneath? Leather trousers. Leather trousers? Seriously, at their age? Maura shook her head at first, tutting and rolling her eyes, but as she followed the

progress of the dowdy woman Evelyn was set to transform, the leather trousers actually grew on her. By the end of the show, she was wondering if it wasn't too late to think of updating her trousers selection to perhaps include something a little more casual; more modern.

In week two, the old-fashioned woman of the first programme was replaced by a woman even plainer. This time, they were dolling her up for a wedding. A wedding indeed – the woman was as old as Methuselah and twice as wide.

The thing about the show was though, that quite aside from Evelyn, all of the women were just like Maura. They were... she hated to admit, but yes, they were frumpy, dumpy and maybe even a little lumpy! And somehow, through every trick in a book that Maura had never read, Evelyn managed to transform them. They were positively glamorous at the end, and more than that they glowed. That really was the only word for it – Glowed.

As the programme progressed Evelyn shared more about her own life with viewers. Like Maura, she was divorced; she had three daughters, although you never got to see any of them. All the way through the programme, she talked about her social media – her Instagram if you don't mind. Of course, being a naturally curious person, it all got the better of Maura in the end and she found herself sitting down in week three and downloading the app onto the iPod her boys had bought her the previous Christmas. She was not entirely unused to

technology; after all, even in Ballycove the post office had to move with the times over the years.

Even so, Instagram was quite the revelation. She set up her own account – a thing she'd never have considered doing at the local computer group. Oh, it was nothing like Evelyn's account of course, where every day the world seemed to be an opportunity to walk down her own personal catwalk.

Maura had never been much interested in fashion. Especially after Paddy had left her; it seemed almost crass to go doing herself up too much, as if she was on the lookout, when she knew than any decent man in the village was already spoken for. Of course, over the last decade that tide was turning. There had been too many funerals, school friends who left holes far more gaping than just a grieving husband.

And probably, she knew, she'd just fallen out of the habit of taking care of herself in that way. So, for the last twenty years, she'd pulled on a variation of the same trousers and either blouse or jumper, depending on the weather. She had a warm winter coat – circa 1995 – it was probably considered vintage at this point and she had a light anorak for summer. Anything else had long ago been consigned to the furthest reaches of the boys' wardrobes.

It was as Style for All Ages was on its final show that Maura realised, she would really miss having Evelyn in her kitchen every week. As it finished up,

she reminded viewers that ‘style is not a question of fashion, but a choice for life.’ Maura felt almost emotional as the final credits ran down the screen, but then, she switched off the telly and told herself she needed to cop on.

The following morning dawned bright and breezy. It was the sort of day that could blow you away, but it was too nice not to be outside. Cormac, her youngest rang her before she’d even finished her breakfast. He was on Canada time, God alone knew what time it was there, so she knew it had to be something big, or being an Irish mother – she expected it to be something bad.

‘I’m getting married.’ He thrilled down the phone.

‘You’re what?’ Maura wasn’t sure she heard him correctly.

‘Married, Mum, I’m getting married to Alex.’ He prattled on for a few minutes. She wasn’t even sure what he was saying, but then she heard four weeks and Ballycove, a civil ceremony and then there was a flurry of have to go, have to go... and then the line was empty and Maura was left to digest this information.

There was a lot to digest. Cormac had never exactly been the marrying type. He was almost fifty and as far she knew, he’d never even had a girlfriend. At one point, she’d wondered if he might be... well, considering the priesthood or...

It was late afternoon when the penny dropped. Alex. He was marrying Alex. They’d shared a house for over a decade, but Maura had never met this

mysterious creature. Now, as she walked along the pier it hit her like a bolt from the blue. Alex was a boy – well, to be fair, probably a man. Cormac and Alex. As it settled on her, somehow, the niggling feeling of earlier dissipated. Everything was going to be alright. Cormac was marrying Alex and he never sounded happier and she was delighted for him – a wedding. Even better, a gay wedding, right here in Ballycove.

And then, she stood for a moment, looked out across the Atlantic, choppy and cold and nothing more in the distance than water and sky and she began to laugh. Paddy and Sarah would have a joint conniption at the idea of it all.

A wedding. She sat in her kitchen later that day and let the idea take root in her. She would be the mother of the groom – well, one of the mothers of the grooms. It deserved a new outfit. She pulled down her iPad and opened the little Instagram icon. Tentatively, in her head, she began to compose a message to Evelyn Quigley.

Dear Evelyn.

You might not remember me, but we were in school together. I've enjoyed your television show so much and now my son is getting married and I need help to find something to wear. Let me know if you can meet up with me and help me jazz things up a bit.

Best wishes, Maura Duffy.

P.S. I should warn you; I will be a challenge for you – my wardrobe is in need of complete overhaul!

Five minutes later, she heard a message ping into her account. It took a bit of over and back, but they agreed to meet the following Saturday in Galway. It would be a full day of shopping, a catch up and then a bit of advice around makeup and hair if she needed it. *If she needed it?* Hah! Maura decided to go all out and booked into a hotel on Eyre Square for the night, with the free travel she could hop on the bus at any time the following day.

Evelyn was even more glamorous in real life than she was on the telly. She arrived in a haze of heavy perfume, impossibly glossy hair and a smart suit that looked as if it might have been loaned to her by Coco Chanel. Of course, she was very thin, no shortage of wrinkles, but when she laughed, which she did often, Maura could see in her that same *joie de vivre* that life had knocked out of most women their age.

‘I just never gave up.’ Evelyn shrugged her narrow shoulders. They were sitting in a nice restaurant; it wasn’t even mid-day and already they’d had a glass of champagne and were ordering their second. ‘I mean, I was devastated, obviously after the divorce, but then I looked at my life. I had three great kids, a roof over my head and food in the cupboards and I thought, well, I can stay the same or I can just go for it.’ She smiled then.

‘You’re an inspiration.’ Maura was truly a little in awe of her old friend. ‘I mean, it’s as if we’ve swapped places and now, I’m the mouse.’ She wanted



to apologize, for all the times when they'd called Evelyn that, but the other woman brushed away her words.

'Well, look at me, you definitely don't have to be a mouse all your life and let me tell you a little secret, with fashion, it's not life or death if you get things wrong and it's never, literally, never too late to take a bit of pride in yourself.'

They established a budget. Maura had been conservative, thinking that a mother of the bride or in this case groom, would have to spend a lot of money on her outfit.

'Oh, no. All that oversized flower dress and big hat look – it's much too aging. No, if you have five hundred pounds to spend, we're going to keep your wedding day look to under a fifth and the rest is going to update your proper wardrobe.' She'd already looked Maura up and down, and while she didn't exactly shake her head or wrinkle her nose, there was no doubt, that she could far more quickly diagnose the problem as Maura had come to realise it.

And then they were off, Maura a little tipsy, but that was probably for the best, if she'd been completely sober, there was no way she'd have agreed to buying silk knickers (a little luxury) or shiny red shoes (a splash of colour.)

'Who knew shopping could be so much hard work?' Maura had asked as they lugged the last of the bags up to her hotel room.

‘Hard work, yes, but fun too?’

‘Yes, because you made it fun. If I’d come here on my own, well.... I’d probably have gone home with a sensible two piece and a fascinator that made me look like a cockatoo.’ She laughed and then she realised, that this was her day with Evelyn over. She needed to pay her for her work, because, probably, even though they’d giggled their way around the city, it was all part of Evelyn’s job.

‘Have you plans for dinner?’ Evelyn asked then.

‘No. I’ll probably just settle for something light here in my room.’

Because really, Maura couldn’t imagine going down with the bright young things in the restaurant downstairs and ordering anything from a menu that read like a foreign language to her.

‘Let me take you out somewhere, so?’

‘Really?’

‘Yes, why not? I don’t have plans and you’ve got several lovely outfits to show off, you can’t just wear them padding about a hotel room.’ She began to empty the bags and hang up the clothes they’d bought. ‘And, Maura, there’s another thing, when you go back to Ballycove, there’s no good hiding at home all day long. You have to join clubs, meet up with people; it’s the secret to staying young...’ She handed her the slim fitting trousers they’d bought earlier

– instead of an elasticised waist there was a diamante design that trailed along one leg – very oriental. ‘Are you able for these?’ Evelyn asked taking out the gorgeous red court shoes she’d eventually talked Maura into earlier.

‘I am.’ Maura giggled but she felt a well of resolve rise within her, ‘you know, you’re right, if I’m not ready for red shoes now, I’m never going to be ready for them.’

The day of the wedding arrived far more quickly than Maura had expected. Cormac and Alex had organised everything from Canada. The ceremony and reception were to be held in the local hotel. They were lucky in Ballycove, the hotel had been standing at the centre of the main Garden Square since Georgian times. It had changed hands many times over the years, but each owner had been sympathetic to its past and so now, thanks to a fancy French chef and an appetite for boutique hotels, it was having quite a moment in terms of small intimate, expensive weddings.

Paddy and Sarah docked up in plenty of time, each looking as miserable and po-faced as the other. She was wearing a gaudy pink and purple dress, with a large feather number on her head that made her look more aging saloon girl than classy, sassy femme d’un certain age. Paddy looked wrecked, same suit, bigger frown and eyes that had lost any real joy in life. Gay weddings were not their scene, obviously. But Evelyn had adored the idea of it, she’d invited herself along as soon as she realised that Maura had a plus one to spare.

‘God, we can’t have that.’ She said, of course, it was a great excuse to get back to Ballycove. Her family had moved away not long after she’d finished school. And her return was quite the talking point around the village.

Suddenly, it seemed to Maura that people didn’t really notice that she no longer wore elasticised waist trousers in either grey or navy. Nor did anyone comment when she turned up at the village shop in a brand-new fitted jacket that was more Jackie O than *O My God - here she comes in this old thing again*.

And as time went on, Maura began to realise that her old friend had been right – fashion wasn’t something she’d ever been prepared to follow, but style – that was something that didn’t go out of fashion. Maura now knew that she’d managed to catch the boat in plenty of time before it left the harbour. She might not be able to carry off bright pink hair like Evelyn, but she wore her lovely new gold and silver bob with far more *je n'ai sais quoi* than any young whipper snapper about the place. Now, she had her eye on a pair of snake skin trousers that she’d spotted on Boohoo – all she had to do was find the perfect shoe to match! They’d be ideal for the Christmas party, now she’d joined the local salsa club.