

After Midnight

Maggie O'Hare had a theory about sleep: the better your day, the madder your dreams. And by that logic, she was doomed. It had been, by any measure, a pretty good day - the sort of grown-up Tuesday that involved paying her rates, enduring a training webinar, and resisting the urge to throttle Dave from Accounts.

She tucked herself into bed with a cup of tea and a quick spritz of her relaxing pillow spray, muttering, "Here we go again."

Because, unlike normal people who surrendered to sleep, Maggie directed hers. Ever since she'd watched a YouTube video titled "How to Seize Control of Your Dreams and Finally Meet Harry Styles", she'd been practising lucid dreaming.

At first, it was chaos - the kind of dream where you're sitting an exam in your underwear while your granny judges you from a hot-air balloon. But slowly, she got the hang of it. By now, she could shape entire nights like stage plays: pick the cast, set the lighting, decide what snacks would be available.

That night, as the clock hit twelve, Maggie closed her eyes and thought: "Let's make this a classy one. Something Parisian. Something romantic".

She opened her eyes on Royal Avenue, just in front of Belfast City Hall. It was midnight but glowing like summer; shop windows shimmered, taxis purred like contented cats, and everyone seemed better dressed than usual.

"Alright, this'll do," she said aloud.

Her pyjamas had turned into a red silk dress. Her hair, usually immune to order, now fell in perfect curls around her shoulder. She caught sight of herself in a café window. "Not bad, O'Hare. You look like someone who took more than five minutes to get ready."

She began to stroll, humming some tune she half-remembered. But Belfast - or Dream Belfast, rather - wasn't content to stay ordinary. People drifted past on roller skates, an old fella sold chips out of a pram, and a group of women in sequined dresses shouted, "Come on, Maggie love, it's starting!"

"What's starting?" she shouted back.

"The Mayor's Ball!"

They yanked her along, and soon she found herself outside City Hall, which in the dream had a giant disco ball glittering at the entrance.

Inside, the place was heaving. Councillors in tuxedos were tangoing, Auntie Eileen (who was the kind of Auntie who was actually her mum's best friend) was holding court at the bar like she owned the place, and someone, heaven help us all, was playing Enya remixes on the harp.

Maggie took a glass from a passing waiter, sniffed it, and said, "Ah. Champagne – classy – just what I fancied."

From across the room, she spotted him. Nigel. From work. He worked two floors up from Maggie in Marketing. Always polite, rarely spectacular, except tonight he looked like he was channelling his inner James Bond.

When he smiled at her, it felt like she'd stepped straight into a movie.

He crossed the floor. "Maggie O'Hare. Didn't expect to see you here."

"Well," she said, tossing her hair, "I had nothing on after midnight."

He laughed - a deep sort of laugh that made her knees go a bit funny. "Dance?"

Right on cue, the band switched tempo to a slow number, and the two of them floated across the floor. Maggie tried to look sophisticated but couldn't shake the worry she'd start snoring and ruin it mid-spin.

"You know this isn't real," she blurted.

"Does it matter?" he said. "Half of Belfast isn't real after midnight anyway."

She brushed that off as dream nonsense until the fire alarm went off. At least, she thought it was the fire alarm - it could've been the harpist trying dubstep again. Water (or was it more Champagne?) rained from the ceiling, the lights flickered, and within seconds the whole place was in chaos.

Wee Lucy from HR was gathering up canapé trays "for later." The Lord Mayor had nicked the microphone to share an acapella rendition of Sweet Caroline. And in the middle of it all, Nigel grabbed Maggie's hand and whispered, "Come with me."

They bolted into the rain, laughing like teenagers bunking off work. He led her toward the Waterfront, shoes in hand, water shimmering under the streetlights.

"You ever notice," he said, "how dreams feel more honest than real life?"

"Honest?" she snorted. "Mine usually involve pastries attacking me."

"No, really. There's something about the dark - you get to start again. After midnight, there's no expectations."

He turned to her, grinning, and suddenly the city looked brand new. She wanted to say something clever, something unforgettable, but before she could, he kissed her.

And then ...

BEEP. BEEP. BEEP.

The alarm clock screamed.

“Ach for feck’s sake,” she groaned, flinging an arm at the snooze button. It was 7:32. Her pillow smelled faintly of Champagne.

“Brilliant, O’Hare. Snogged a man made of REM cycles.”

She stumbled to the kitchen. The cat gave her some side eye – as if saying, so how’s Nigel, then?

Pouring her tea, she muttered, “You know what I need? Less meaning and more caffeine.”

But then - mid-yawn - she noticed something odd. Her shoes were by the radiator, soaked through, and there was glitter on the tiles. That wasn’t there before, she thought.

“Oh, aye, right,” she said aloud. “Next thing I’ll find wee Lucy in the fridge.”

Of course, she opened the fridge and there it was: a half-eaten chicken canapé nestled beside the butter.

She slammed the door shut, heart doing little handstands. “It’s fine. It’s stress. Daydream residue. Too much dairy.”

Later, on the bus to work, she kept thinking about that kiss. The city looked duller than usual, the kind of damp greyness that made pigeons look philosophical. Her phone buzzed. A text from an unknown number:

“You left this behind. – N”

Attached: a photo of a red heel, her red heel, beside a City Hall bench.

Maggie felt her face heat up. “Right,” she whispered. “Okay. Either he’s real, or I’ve upgraded from lucid dreaming to interdimensional dating.”

At the office, everyone was their usual selves - grim, caffeinated, dead behind the eyes. Nobody mentioned a ball. Nigel wasn’t even in; apparently, he’d “called in sick.”

She spent the morning pretending to concentrate while sneaking glances at her phone. No more messages. Maybe he wasn’t real. Maybe she’d texted herself.

That night, she tried not to think about it. She told herself she’d skip dreaming altogether - an early night, a boring night. But come 11:59, curiosity got the better of her.

She turned off the light and smirked. “Alright, subconscious. Let’s see what you’ve got.”

When she opened her eyes, she was back on Royal Avenue. It was raining softly, her dress was still red, and the neon lights flickered like they knew her secret.

Nigel appeared, holding an umbrella.

“Knew you’d come back,” he said simply.

“Wasn’t sure I could,” she admitted.

He slipped the heel from his coat pocket. “Found this.”

Maggie laughed, taking it from him. “You’re some man for collecting lost causes.”

They walked together under the umbrella, the soft puddles reflecting the glow of streetlights like melted gold. “If this is a dream,” she said, “I’m not in a hurry to wake up.”

“Maybe that’s the trick,” he said. “Stop worrying which side’s real.”

And then they turned a corner - straight into a wedding. On Donegall Place. In the rain. The bride turned out to be Auntie Eileen. The groom was, inexplicably, the Mayor.

“Maggie, darling!” Eileen shouted, veil sliding off. “Get over here and hold my flowers!”

Nigel grinned. “I think your family’s showing up.”

“Typical. Can’t escape them even in fantasyland.”

Eileen gave her a bouquet and whispered, “Make sure nobody steals the cake. It’s from Marks & Spencer’s.”

The harpist began again - badly - and the guests cheered as traffic halted to watch. Maggie and Nigel exchanged a look somewhere between laughter and disbelief.

Then, softly, he said, “What if this isn’t a dream?”

The wind carried a gust of confetti right into her face. “Oh, trust me,” she coughed, “no reality includes you in that tie.”

He laughed, and for a moment, she wished it were all real.

She woke before dawn, hair tangled, face aching from smiling. The clock read 5:58 a.m.

At first, everything seemed normal again. Until she saw the bouquet. An actual bouquet of soaked roses and plastic pearls lying beside her bed, still dripping rainwater.

Downstairs, the doormat was covered in confetti.

Maggie just stood there, staring at it all. Then she poured herself a strong tea, added a wee biscuit for sustenance, and sat by the window. Outside, the street was silent, respectable, boring.

And yet - faintly - she could smell perfume and hear the echo of laughter, fading down Royal Avenue.

She smiled to herself.

“Well,” she said, lifting her cup, “see you after midnight.”