

**Even
-ings**

and

**Week
-ends**

'A novel
brimming
with life'
NICOLA DINAN,
AUTHOR OF
BELLIES

'This book
swallowed
me whole'
SABA SAMS,
AUTHOR OF
SEND NUDES

OISÍN MCKENNA

EVENINGS AND WEEKENDS

Oisín McKenna

4th ESTATE • *London*

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4th Estate
An imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers
1 London Bridge Street
London SE1 9GF

www.4thEstate.co.uk

HarperCollinsPublishers
Macken House
39/40 Mayor Street Upper
Dublin 1
D01 C9W8
Ireland

This eBook first published in Great Britain by 4th Estate in 2024

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Cover design by Jo Thomson

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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Source ISBN: 9780008604172

Ebook Edition © May 2024 ISBN: 9780008604196

Version: 2024-04-12

Dedication

For my mam, Fiona, and dad, Ricky.

Epigraph

*'summer as a
time to do
nothing and make
no money.'*

'Peanut Butter' – Eileen Myles (1991)

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2019

1

A WHALE GETS STUCK IN THE THAMES. IT'S A RARE whale, a big whale, a northern bottlenose whale to be precise. Five metres in length, twelve tonnes of shuddering blubber and bone; thrashing, frantic, wildly distressed, its body half-beached next to shopping trolleys and syringes on Bermondsey Beach. By Friday, it becomes a sensation. People on Twitter give it a name. They photoshop its image over screenshots from *The Simpsons*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *Harry Potter*, at first a hilarious meme, then an annoying fad once brands begin using it to sell their products on Instagram. It's suddenly important to have an opinion. Callers to daytime talk shows wish the whale well and suggest schemes for rescuing it. Crowdfunds are set up, bake sales planned, and thousands of pounds are raised within hours, though some argue that certain causes – food banks, police bail funds, refugees crossing the Mediterranean, injured British army veterans, people in need of gender-affirming care, and generally, Syria – are more deserving of your money. Battle lines are drawn, arguments lost and won. Blame is attributed to some combination of carbon emissions, single-use plastics, the European Union, English nationalism, eco-fascism, the volume of fossil fuel required to keep the internet turned on, and anyone who still buys cheap clothes from high street shops. The exact ratio of factors is yet to be agreed, but one thing is certain: the whale is bad news. It points its finger in accusation. No one is innocent in the whale's unblinking eyes. You, declares the whale, are morally, spiritually and ecologically bankrupt. The whale is alive, but only just about.

It's a tense summer. It's June. Dehydrated office workers spew from Tube stations with frayed nerves and anxiety. On every beautiful day, people feel compelled to look out their window and say, 'It's very worrying, isn't it?' as

if it were tasteless to comment on the warm sun and blue sky without remarking on the mass extinction of humans and whales within the same breath. The air is warm and damp. No bedsheet is un-drenched, and everything, everywhere is sticky with sweat. The hours of each day are rationed between unbearable heat and biblical rain, and even though it has only been this way for three weeks, it is impossible to imagine that things have ever been any other way. People move slowly, if they move at all, and no one has thought a coherent thought all month.

. . .

ED SEYMOUR, A COURIER, IS DELIVERING A BOX OF pastries to an office in Canary Wharf, dripping with sweat and chirpier than he's been in weeks. He's cycling along the riverbank – not the fastest route, but so calming to watch the river glisten – when he spots the whale on the opposite bank. He steadies himself and rubs his eyes like a crazed cartoon character. Ed Seymour, a good man, a normal man, a man with a pregnant girlfriend, is certain that he's hallucinating. He thinks the whale is the latest in a long line of imaginary creatures he's encountered recently, sometimes friendly, sometimes threatening, but, crucially, never real.

It is not the first time that Ed has hallucinated this year. It is not the second, third or fourth time either. Nine weeks ago, Ed learned that his girlfriend Maggie was pregnant, and his life would change forever. While this change was not necessarily unwelcome, it was certainly unplanned, and shocking enough for Ed to call his friend Callum, a small-time drug dealer, and ask if they could meet at the pub. Callum, on learning the news, consoled Ed in the only way he knew how: he passed a tab of acid under the table. Ed didn't want to get high, exhausted by the news of the pregnancy and the fact that his friend only knew how to express love through the sharing of drugs, but seeing that Callum was trying to express love all the same, and at thirty years old still keen to be seen as one of the boys, he wearily complied, at heart a people pleaser. Ed placed the tab beneath his tongue and twenty minutes later the walls turned pink and fleshy. They expanded and contracted like the walls of a lung, and Ed became spindly like a frail little bronchiole.

Now, he grips his handlebars, struggles to breathe, and wonders if he's going to die. He's had this thought more than once since January, when his dad, a labourer, passed away at fifty years old and Ed became aware that a

life could end. Ed had always known about death in a theoretical sense, but now that he had encountered death in the flesh – his dad’s seizure, the chill of his hands – it was no longer abstract or hypothetical. It was real, wrenching, unacceptably painful, so painful that it should quite literally be impossible. Death could happen to anyone at any time, even people like Ed’s dad, big people, solid people, people with the weather-beaten resilience of a surviving Stone Age monument. Even those people die. Even Ed will die. So when he glares at the whale and his heart beats from his chest to his ears, he thinks: this is it. The end. I’ll never meet my baby.

He takes out his phone and almost calls Maggie, primed to say his last goodbye, but remembering she’s at work, and also, is pregnant, feels the news of his upcoming death would be both inconvenient and distressing. He managed to carefully conceal the acid trip from her – not the first secret he’s kept over the years – even though there’s no one who could have calmed him down from those panic attacks like Maggie could have done (taking him somewhere quiet, holding him, prompting him to breathe to the same rhythm that she does).

She was amazing at the funeral. She made sure everyone knew where the toilets were, and that there was coffee (normal and decaf) and which sandwiches had no butter and which had no mayo, and sometimes she told little jokes to break the tension. She could always tell when things were getting too much, and then she would put her hand around his hand, and squeeze it, and stroke it with her thumb, and she would quietly say: I love you so much.

That night at home, she cradled his head and kissed his hair, and he felt tiny as a baby.

Anyway, he calls emergency services instead, and when they answer he instantly blurts out a stream of unintelligible gibberish. He tells them his heart is racing and he thinks he’s dying and there’s a whale half-beached on the banks of the Thames but the whale does not actually exist.

‘Calm down, sir. I’m going to need you to start again.’

He tries to breathe like Maggie would have told him to.

‘I think I’m hallucinating. I’ve seen a whale on the banks of the Thames.’

The voice on the other end laughs.

‘You’re not hallucinating, sir. The whale is real.’

‘It’s real?’

‘It’s been on the news. The whale is real.’

Ed is mortified and relieved. He apologises, hangs up, and after taking a few breaths to calm down, takes a picture of the whale to send to Maggie. He says that he loves her and he can't wait to see her later. He wishes her luck for her last day at work.

Then, he remembers that he is meant to be delivering pastries to a professional networking event, and partially on account of the scenic route, partially on account of the time lost to the whale, is now half an hour late. When he arrives, the professional networkers are muttering about their belated pain-au-chocolats and hungry tummies. It's only 10 a.m. and he's already lost out on earnings: he normally would have completed two or three orders by this time. He'll take on more jobs today. No more scenic routes or toilet breaks. He's got a baby on the way, and he can't sleep at night for fear of how they're going to pay for the nappies and the food and God knows what else.

. . .

MAGGIE DOESN'T NOTICE THE MESSAGE FROM ED UNTIL later the same day. She's on her break, her last one ever, in the kitchen of the Greenwich café where she's worked as a waitress for the past eight years. It's 4 p.m. In an hour, she'll clock off for the final time. She notices Ed's text, ignores it, and holds her phone up to Renée so that they can watch a news clip together.

Renée squints at the video and slowly shakes her head.

'No. No. I just don't see it, babe.'

Maggie laughs, incredulous, and says, 'But they're literally identical!'

'I honestly don't know what you're talking about.'

They're watching a marine biologist, Valerie, give an interview to the news.

Valerie has been tasked with the return of the whale to the sea. She explains to the reporter what the rescue operation will entail. She is confident and clear.

But here's the important thing about Valerie: she looks exactly like Princess Diana. Or perhaps: *somewhat*. The precise likeness is contested, but suffice to say, someone posted a clip of the interview to Twitter, and within the hour: a new discourse.

Hundreds, then thousands, posted their take. They're nothing short of identical. They're literal opposites. The marine biologist does not, in fact,

look like Princess Diana, and instead, looks like Lady Gaga, or Marine Le Pen, or, most bizarrely, Saint Hildegard of Bingen. A new subgenre of conspiracy theory emerges: Diana never died. She has been living the humble life of a marine biologist this entire time. First claimed ironically, then sincerely, then an impossible-to-interpret blend of the two. It's not just that she looks like Princess Diana, say the theorists: she speaks like her too. She says, 'Well, the Thames isn't very deep for a whale of this size', with the exact same intonation that Princess Diana said 'Well, there were three of us in this marriage' in her famous 1993 interview with the journalist Martin Bashir. All over London, people re-watch the interview and are struck by Diana's magnetism. A gay icon, they say, a fashion icon, an icon of the twentieth century, Diana, Princess of Wales, we love you. Then: the pun, held back at first, but it can't be helped: *Diana, Princess of Whales*, posted by dozens, hundreds, thousands within the hour, each claiming to have been the phrase's true creator, and proclaiming all instances in which it is uttered uncredited to be flagrant violations of intellectual property. Then: the perfunctory debate on the digital commons – everyone has been here before, the old points rehashed – and Maggie wonders: does she truly believe that Diana, Princess of Wales and Diana, Princess of Whales are all that alike? But then, this is beside the point. The point is that it's funny to say that she does.

How to explain all this to Renée?

Maggie puts her phone away and Renée returns to the chopping board. Hands deep purple with beetroot, she tells a story of her six-year-old son.

'Jackson wants to be a marine biologist now. Can you imagine? I don't have a clue where he gets it from. I know the sea is interesting, but he's barely ever seen it.' She chops rapidly while she chats, and Maggie remembers a joke from the internet about how the ocean is queer (expansive, unknowable, subversive). She starts to tell the joke to Renée, but doubts herself; they are of different generations, different cultural touchstones. She remarks simply, 'The sea is gay, you know.'

Renée stares. Maggie is mortified. Renée is a serious woman, mother of Jackson, future marine biologist. Maggie is a woman who says things like 'The sea is gay, you know.'

Renée laughs, perplexed. 'What are you talking about – the sea is gay?'

'Lots of gay kids like the sea.'

Renée sighs, ignores her, and rinses the beetroot from her hands. She says, 'It won't be long now until you've got a little marine biologist of your own. How are you feeling?'

Maggie breathes in. 'I feel great,' she says.

She pauses for a moment, lets her smile linger.

She goes on, 'Like, I'm scared too, obviously. But no morning sickness, so that's been a relief. And we're all set for the big move. Just wish I didn't have to leave you lot!'

'Oh you won't miss this place. You'll miss London though.'

'It's only half an hour on the train. Basically a London suburb.'

Renée smiles encouragingly and says nothing more.

It's almost twelve weeks to the day that Maggie and Ed had sex for the first time in months. A surprise even to themselves. They had returned home from a day in Brighton, a little drunk on beer and sun, a little more daring than normal. The city throbbed, unseasonably hot, its skin was flushed. Maggie throbbed too. His breath in her ear. The tips of their noses touching. A little sore at first, then, the imperceptible shift from *gentle, go slow* to *fuck, that feels good*, both wanting deeper, longer, more. They both came at once. He flopped on top of her, then onto the mattress, and his dick flopped onto his thigh too, sloppy with semen smeared down its side. It was cute. She smiled at it, and he smiled at her smiling.

Then: the missed period.

Then: the peeing on a stick.

Then: confirmation from the doctor. Undeniable. She was pregnant.

There were other events too. There was a mother on the street, and for the first time thinking: *Could that be me?* There were conversations with Renée, one of the first people Maggie told of her pregnancy, desperate for someone older and kinder to tell her what to do.

Subtle at first, barely noticeable, but by the time the doctor confirmed it, she had decided: it was fantastic, miraculous, the best thing that could have happened to her.

She was thirty years old: would this be her only chance?

And Ed? Ed will be an *excellent* dad. He does impersonations of cartoon characters. The baby will love his Homer Simpson, and the way he sings absent-mindedly in the style of Frank Sinatra. Sure, they will become a teenager and be embarrassed by the Frank Sinatra crooning – *You're such a loser, Dad* – but Maggie will say in response, *Don't be so hard on your poor*

dad, he works very hard for you, which will be true, because Ed *will* work hard, *does* work hard, and he wakes up early on birthdays and Sundays and sometimes even Tuesdays to cook her favourite breakfast. That's the life in store for you, little baby! Special breakfast from your dad on an otherwise uneventful Tuesday, and when you grow beyond your teenage years, you'll look back on his embarrassing singing with absolute affection.

Of course, the money. The slow slog towards the back wall of their overdraft. Even at their most frugal – no holidays, no takeaways, no new clothes – they can't afford their life in London, and that's without a baby. How much did nappies cost? And food and cleaning products and childcare? They would make it work, they said. They would move further out. Leyton, Romford, Dagenham. A baby couldn't have survived their flat in Hackney in any case. Ed can barely survive it himself. The damp in their bedroom has affected his breathing, his work, their sex life. The carpet has rotted through, and Ed's breathlessness has become chronic.

So they improvised. They were grasping for anything to hand. It felt as if they had been put on the spot and ordered to agree the course of their life within seconds. *Basildon!* they blurted out under pressure, faces grimaced, shoulders hunched into a shrug as if to say: will this do? Is this the right answer? *Baby!* they went on, then the more uncertain ... *baby?* and finally, looking at each other, nodding seriously: *baby*, they confirmed. Full stop.

She'll get a job at the restaurant where her cousin works, Ed will work at one of the distribution centres in Tilbury.

'I've never been to Basildon,' calls Renée now, hauling boxes from the freezer.

'It's nice. Got a shopping centre. Leisure centre. Not too far from the sea. The rent is literally five times cheaper and the house is three times the size. We'll be close to my mum, and Ed's mum, so we'll save a fortune on childcare, and Ed's a homebird at heart anyway.'

'That's not too bad so. And as you say, it's close enough so your mates can visit. What's the name of that boy? The nice one. A bit quiet until he has a few drinks in him. I'll never forget when you brought him to the staff Christmas party and he did Cher at karaoke.'

'Phil.'

'He didn't even need to look at the screen. Knew all the words by heart.'

Maggie laughs at the memory, and then sharply inhales.

She's leaving next week and she hasn't even told him yet.

At 5 p.m., it's time to leave.

She makes her way to the kitchen. She mutters under her breath, 'It's my last day.'

She tries to take it all in as if it were a film.

To Renée, she always thought she'd say: Renée, you're the best person I've ever worked with and I love you. To her manager, she thought she'd say: Adrian, you're a tyrannical bully and that's why you can't retain staff in this overpriced hellhole. But lingering at the little party Renée has organised in the kitchen, she doesn't say much at all. Renée has made a platter of cheesy olive bites; everyone sips an aperitif; they all say 'Cheers!' Somehow, it has passed into café folklore that Maggie adores the cheesy olive bites. Her love for them has become a popular joke. Someone will say 'Maggie, will you take the bins out?' and someone else will say 'Only if you give her a cheesy olive bite!' Maggie can't account for where the joke came from, or why it's a joke at all; she feels ambivalent at best about the cheesy olive bites and is almost certain that she's never stated otherwise. But still, it was kind of Renée to make them. She gives her a hug, tells her she's an angel. She says her goodbyes, and leaves.

Outside, she sits on the bench where she used to smoke. Tourists huddle for pictures with Canary Wharf in the background, and an *Evening Standard* flaps at her feet, a grainy picture of the whale and a sensational headline. This is my last day, she says again.

She takes a breath and drafts a text to Phil, typing quickly and pressing send before there's time to entertain her doubts. *Are you free in the morning? Got some big news.*

. . .

THERE HAS BEEN A LONGSTANDING COMPETITION between Maggie and Phil, so palpable and real that it seems frankly absurd that neither of them has ever acknowledged it out loud.

When they were eleven, for example, a shopping trolley showed up on the estate where they grew up. No one knew where this shopping trolley came from and no one ever found out. It was summer and summer was a time during which unexplained phenomena could randomly occur without anyone ever needing to understand their backstories.

This particular summer was a long summer. A hot summer. It was the summer they were friends with Kyle Connolly, and Kyle Connolly had smoked a cigarette. He hadn't enjoyed it, so he never smoked another, and this gave him a sense of mystique; to have done something so transgressive, and to have been above even that! An unspeakable glamour. He had snogged one girl in Majorca, one girl in Chelmsford. He wore a silver studded belt.

Maggie and Phil competed viciously for his affection.

Someone would say, 'Let's play the shopping trolley game,' and Maggie and Phil would power walk towards it, never admitting they were trying to overtake each other, and never breaking into a run so as not to appear desperate. Kyle trailed behind ambivalently.

The shopping trolley game was this: one person sat in it, someone else pushed as fast as they could. Maggie and Phil always wanted to be the one to push Kyle.

That summer, Kyle and Phil played another game too, a game they kept secret from Maggie. Like the shopping trolley, this game was another of summer's great inarticulable mysteries. Even if Phil wanted to tell her, he wouldn't have known what words to use. The game had been Kyle's idea. He had suggested it vaguely, giggling, through gestures and broken sentences. Phil didn't know where the game came from, but he knew that it was nice and that he wanted to keep playing. The game was this: Phil would go to Kyle's house, they would close his bedroom door, they would take off their clothes, and Kyle would lie on top of Phil beneath the duvet. They would stay that way for twenty minutes – eyes open, arms dead-straight by their sides, chests swollen with held breath – and they wouldn't move an inch.

One day, Maggie walked in. She had waited for her friends for hours. When they didn't come, she called to Phil's house, then Kyle's house, then she ran up the stairs, two steps at a time. She exploded into the room and saw them in bed. It was very bewildering.

'What are you doing?' she said.

'Nothing,' they responded, panicking, scrambling for white lies. They didn't really know what they were doing, but they understood intuitively that it was wrong, and by extension, that they were bad. It was critically important that no one ever knew.

Maggie said, 'I have to go have lunch now,' even though it wasn't even midday yet. She ran out the door and the boys wordlessly agreed to never play the game again.

The next day, she told Phil, 'I don't care about yesterday and I'm not going to tell, as long as you let Kyle push me and *only me* in the trolley for the next three weeks.'

Phil agreed that this was a reasonable deal.

For the next three weeks, Maggie rode through the estate like a queen.

IT'S 5.30 P.M., AND PHIL IS STUCK IN A MEETING WHICH should have already ended. He clicks his pen. He unclicks it again. He barely tries to conceal the impatience in his cough. The windows here don't open. The sun is hung at such an angle so that no matter where you sit you have to shield your eyes from the glare. This room, which normally smells of air conditioning and the burning dust of an overheating overhead projector, today smells disconcertingly organic: sweat, coffee breath, a brief but truly shocking whiff of unacknowledged fart. Outside, there is London. Every now and then, its sounds – its traffic, its birdsong, its shouts – puncture the ambient din of the office; the rumbling air vents, the sad old PCs growling on their desks, a high-pitched beep which happens at the same time every week and for which no one has any explanation. Everyone is on their phones. Phil receives a series of texts in succession: his housemate Debs is planning her outfit for the party tomorrow and wants to know if her new dress makes her look like Theresa May.

Alan, Phil's manager, has been practising gratitude. To thank the team for their work, he scattered fun-sized packets of Haribo across the table at the start of the meeting ('Sweeties!' he announced in the manner of a children's entertainer, or indeed, in the manner of an actual child). The empty wrappers, sugar-crashes, and ceaseless drone of conversation recall the cranky close of a sixth birthday party, waiting to be taken home by parents who won't stop conversing with the other adults. No one has been paid for their time since 5 p.m.

Phil daydreams. Specifically, he daydreams about Keith, the book he plans to give to him this weekend, and the inscription he plans to write in the book.

'Keith,' he'll write, 'before I met you, I never knew that the earth beneath London was made out of clay – one of many deep things I learned from you.'

He turns the phrase over in his mind, omitting a word here or there.

‘Keith,’ he’ll write, ‘before I met you, I hadn’t known that the earth beneath London was made out of clay. It’s not the only deep thing I’ve learned about from you.’

The book is about geology, specifically the geology of London, the minerals in the soil, the plants that thrive, the taste of the tap water, the tough clay that Keith turns over in his allotment on Sunday mornings while Phil struggles with the strimmer.

Sometimes, especially now that it’s summer, Keith takes off his shirt while he works, and sweat dribbles down his back towards the waistband of his pants.

Sometimes, he kisses Phil like that, half-naked, mucky, drenched in sweat, and Jacinta, the old woman in the neighbouring allotment, wolf-whistles, says, ‘Good on ya, lads!’ and jokes about how it’s been too long since she herself had a good roll around in the grass. Then, they usually listen to Jacinta’s funny but long-winded anecdotes about the disputes that plague the allotment committee, while Phil dreams of getting Keith to himself.

Phil bought the book because Keith is interested in the soil and the trees and the birds and the buildings of London. Really, that’s what he’s referring to when he says ‘deep things’; time and again, Keith has shared a morsel of knowledge about the city and this morsel of knowledge has been enough to make the city seem strange and entirely new.

He senses a shift in the room; Alan is no longer the only person speaking. He tunes back in to the conversation; it seems that each member of the team has been asked to describe an event that happened this week which they’re proud of. It’s nearly 6 p.m. now – an hour after the meeting was supposed to finish. Everyone outlines some difficult task they completed, some breakthrough in personal or professional development. Phil tunes back out.

Of course, when he says ‘deep things’ he is referring to deep things of an emotional nature too, like caring and being cared for, feeling kinship, taking pleasure from food and landscapes and having a body that dances, a body with nerve endings and erogenous zones, and he supposes, too, that one of the deep things he’s referring to is his own asshole – not *explicitly*, as such, but if Keith were to interpret it on that level, he certainly wouldn’t be against it – and while Keith has only fucked Phil on one prior occasion, it was an experience so explosive that it allowed Phil a brief but truly life-changing glimpse into just how much pleasure a human body can feel.

‘Phil.’

Phil jolts; Alan is speaking to him, everyone glaring.

‘It’s your turn, Phil.’

‘Yes, it is, it’s—’

‘To say what you’re proud of.’

‘Of course, yes.’ Phil is so checked out of the room that he’s barely conscious of what he says at all. He says, ‘I’m proud of the way the team gelled this week. Our channels of communication felt open. I think we’re finally ready to be vulnerable.’

Alan nods profoundly as if Phil were a contestant on a TV talent show who has just revealed a tragic backstory, and Phil reaches for his phone to make a note of the mental edits he’s made to the book’s inscription. This is when he notices the message from Maggie.

Big news? That seems like a foreboding thing to say.

Maggie and Phil have spoken every day since they were kids. They’re so accustomed to each other – dependent, really – that they begin to feel unlike themselves when they’ve been out of touch for too long. He replies: *Yeah I’m free tomorrow*, even though this is not true and means he’ll have to postpone plans with his mother until later in the afternoon.

He has a big weekend ahead; Keith after work, Maggie in the morning, his mum in the afternoon, the party tomorrow night. Any second now, the meeting will finish, and the hottest weekend of the year will burst into being. In one brief moment, he’ll race to his desk, shut down his PC, and sprint, panting, towards the sun; then, only then, will his real life begin.

. . .

ROSALEEN CLIMBS INTO THE DRIVING SEAT AFTER WORK. She is fastening her seatbelt when her phone pings with a message from Phil. *Hi mum, something came up tomorrow, can we do 2pm instead of 12? Thanks xx.*

She mutters, ‘For Christ’s sake,’ feeling a brief but potent flare of guilt at having taken the Lord’s name in vain, even though she’s not had a drop of faith in the Lord or his name since she left Ireland at eighteen years old.

She blows through her lips. She’s always guilty these days. Her sense of guilt has taken on a new lease of life since she sat in the doctor’s office last week and he told her about the lumps in her breasts and armpits and back. A renewed interest in the Lord, too.

She replies, tells him it’s fine, feeling guilty at having felt it wouldn’t be.