

Friends

The day I met Neil Armstrong I was already teetering on the edge of sanity from a life gone wrong. A week before, fearing that I might take a scissoring to my throat, I confessed my secrets to a doctor, who went pale and said 'Jesus, Mary and Joseph' before writing a prescription. I didn't cut down on the gargle though and the two mixed badly. In fact, when I showed up in Tralee that morning I was more than a little unsteady on my feet and was starting to see triple.

A large crowd had gathered and when I asked a young girl what they were there for, she grew very abusive and accused me of molesting her. The situation was turning violent so I turned on my heels and before I knew it I was standing in front of a man who shook my hand and thanked me for coming out to see him. I hadn't a clue who he was but later that evening in the pub, I picked up the local paper only to see the two of us standing together, and a headline announcing that my new friend was none other than Neil Armstrong, the first man to walk on the moon.

'Can you believe it?' I asked the barman, who had once been a friend of mine but who had fallen out with me over a nag. 'I'm a celebrity.'

'You're an owl' bollix,' he suggested. 'You always were and you always will be, you cunt.'

I didn't know how I could be both at once and told him so and he hit me a slap.

The next morning I woke up in a hospital bed and a nurse, one of them foreign bits, told me I'd overdosed on my medication and collapsed on the street. She said she needed the name of my next of kin.

'I'm an unmarried man,' I explained. 'There was a woman, once, but she left me because of my ways.'

'Family then?' asked the nurse.

'No one. Not anymore.'

'Well, we need a name,' she said with a shrug.

'I don't know what to tell you,' I said.

'Sir, I'm sorry, but we have to put someone down on the form. In case you die.'

That gave me a fright but still, nothing came to mind. I looked away from her and saw the local paper folded up on a chair.

'Neil Armstrong,' I told her then. 'We're not close, but -'

'He'll do,' she said, signing the form. All she wanted was to get away from me on account of my stink. I could smell it myself. I was rank.

'And I have photographic evidence of our relationship, should it be required.'

'It won't be,' she said. And for a moment or two, I felt happy. On account of my having a friend. Someone who would look out for me. Someone who would see that I was taken care of.

In case I died.