



THIS WOMAN SAYS SHE'S SEEN HEAVEN... COULD IT BE TRUE?

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Somewhere in Roma Downey's sprawling mansion in Malibu hangs a simple but arresting piece of art, inspired, according to the artist, by a glimpse of the hereafter. A swathe of silk embellished with swirls of Swarovski crystals, it's worth a fraction of the value of the Londonderry-born actress's investment artefacts, but it resonates deeply with her spiritual leanings.

"We're behind you, Roisin," the *Touched By An Angel* star told the artist, when she and her producer husband Mark Burnett attended one of her early exhibitions in New York - a priceless seal of approval from Hollywood royalty. The encounter is related in Roisin Fitzpatrick's uplifting account of her near death experience (NDE), which has been validated by a leading expert in the field of NDE research, Dr Bruce Greyson, a professor of psychiatry and neurobehavioral sciences at the University of Virginia. Number three on the Irish bestsellers list, *Taking Heaven Lightly* was launched in Dublin recently with US Ambassador to Ireland Kevin O'Malley and SDLP leader Alisdair McDonnell in attendance - Roisin's from Bray, but has cousins from Ballycastle and a keen interest in the peace process. A former high level banker, she was attending the European Bank's AGM in London's financial district when the IRA bombed the heart of the City on a Saturday morning in April 1993, blasting multiple - but luckily - empty buildings, including the NatWest Tower. Roisin, then in her 20s, was shaken by the impact but unhurt. Forty-four people were injured by the bomb and News of the World photographer Ed Henty was killed after ignoring police warnings and rushing to the scene.

"I had a hard time believing in any sort of spirituality or any life past the material world at that stage of my life," she recalls.

Bright-eyed and engaging when we meet in Dublin's *Ecrivain* restaurant, Roisin (45) shows none of the physical signs of the ill health that had begun to plague her in the year before the bomb. At the end of 1993, she collapsed outside a corner shop near her London apartment and had to be helped home by a stranger. Unaware that she was suffering from glandular fever and a debilitating parasitic infection she'd contracted in Mexico, she hauled herself upstairs on her knees and went straight to bed, only to find herself floating by the ceiling in the middle of the night. "I was hovering above the foot of the bed and I could see my body lying limp and lifeless below," she says in a soft brogue. "I remember my face was gaunt and pale, but I had this deep sense of knowing that all was well, even though I was no longer in my body. I was totally free of a restrictions and limitations; I've no idea for how long. Then, just as unexpectedly, I found myself back in the heaviness of my body again. I felt burdened, not just physically but emotionally, in stark contrast to the light state I had just experienced."

Although she felt something profound had just occurred, Roisin rationalised the experience as a delusion or weird dream. The seeds of her transformation had been planted, however. They began to take root when she found herself virtually bed-ridden, back home in Dublin, with chronic fatigue syndrome when a homeopathic therapist introduced her to spiritual writings. A meeting with a "spiritual healer" further intrigued the scientifically-minded Roisin, who began to realise banking was the wrong path for her. Then, in March 2004, any remaining doubts on her part were blown away when a severe brain haemorrhage sent her flying into a "beautiful, bright, breath-taking" alternative universe of light. Recovered from the chronic fatigue syndrome, she had gone salsa dancing to celebrate her 35th birthday the previous night and had been full of fresh vigour, but that afternoon in her new home near the sea, a searing pain shot through the base of her neck and exploded in an agonising spasm. She managed to get to the phone to call an ambulance and was rushed her to Dublin's foremost neurosurgical hospital, Beaumont.

"I remember lying in the ICU feeling completely overwhelmed, I was trying to stay calm but I was utterly terrified," she admits. "I didn't smoke, hardly drank and was fit enough to dance four nights a week. But there I was on death's door in the ICU - I felt I was standing on the edge of the unknown." She snaps her nicely manicured fingers to explain the abruptness of what happened next. "Then I suddenly became aware of being enveloped by the light and the love. It was nothing I'd ever experienced before. A profound sense of peace; a hushed silence.

"My thinking was more lucid than ever. I remember thinking, 'Who am I, what am I, where am I?' I wasn't in my body anymore. I was part of this vast, blissful expanse of a pure love and a powerful

radiant light." Physiologists are quick to dismiss such experiences as what we feel as the dying brain is deprived of oxygen. Rosin's heart was still beating, however, and her doctors had given her the very minimum pain medication to keep her as conscious as possible as they assessed her.

"I was on a tiny percentage of painkillers that wouldn't cause hallucinations. Drug hallucinations tend to be very different. You don't get a sense of unity; it doesn't profoundly change you. I realised that we're always a part of this eternal light, each and every one of us," she says. "We are so much more powerful than we can begin to imagine. When we're born we just put this coat on - some muscles, some bone, a bit of skin covering a few organs, but ultimately, we are this eternal light, full of love. Then when we die, we just take the coat off. And this is the deepest truth of each and every one of us."

Roisin's experience is similar in part, to that described recently by Fay Weldon. The celebrated author and playwright had an NDE during a knee operation at 17 and another in her mid-70s, when her heart unexpectedly flat-lined under anaesthetic. Roisin describes going in and out of a realm of light all through the night and into the next day, coming back into her body with a jolt each time, and becoming aware that she had to return for the sake of her elderly parents. Over the following days she experienced visions, including being held in the "enormous but benevolent" hand of God, and felt herself being healed. From facing death or being paralysed for the rest of her life, as she had been warned, the bleeding in her brain mysteriously stopped of its own accord and the swelling subsided, confounding her consultant. "He kept staring at the X-ray of my brain for ages, then told me I was one lucky lady." As with the best-selling NDE account *Proof Of Heaven* by American neurosurgeon, Dr Eben Alexander - catapulted to fame by Oprah Winfrey - Roisin's background is atheistic, professional and academic. When it comes to the unexplainable, she points to quantum physics and the discovery of multiple universes and time travelling particles.

"Physicists have proved we are all energy - even that solid table is energy vibrating at a level we can't see or understand," she says. "You're energy; I'm energy. I'm exactly the same as everybody else - I'm a very ordinary person. I just happened to have an extraordinary experience." Following her remarkable recovery against all odds, Roisin started sharing her experience through art. She had found an old silk curtain at home and was inspired to hand sew onto it dozens of tiny crystals, to reflect the sparkling light she encountered in her NDE and "for people to see the beauty of their own souls". While exhibiting in New York, she came into contact with Dr Greyson, who encouraged her to write *Taking Heaven Lightly* from a western cultural perspective. The book - endorsed by Deepak Chopra and Marianne Williamson - draws a profound parallel between her experience and Celtic mythology.

"One of the Gaelic ways of saying 'May you rest in peace' is *solas siorai* - which literally means 'the eternal light'. I realised that we're always a part of this eternal light, each and every one of us. Yes, we all face challenges - health issues, financial issues, relationship issues or bereavement," she adds. "But when we can connect with something so much deeper, it gives us the strength and the courage to pull through. You don't need to go through an NDE to connect with this." A more profound loss, as witnessed in her tears at the restaurant table, was the deaths of her adored mother and father, a well-known Grafton Street retailer, within 10 weeks of each other, at the end of 2010. "When dad died, even though he was no longer with us in physical form, I believe his spirit was still close to his body. I distinctly remember seeing shimmering, vibrant colours surrounding his body when he was laid out in the open coffin. And in my mother's dying moments in the nursing home, I had what's called a 'shared death experience' with her. I sensed an all-encompassing serenity and peace, as in my NDE. It was a joy to feel, as I believe mum was embraced by pure love as she departed this life."

Roisin Fitzpatrick will give a talk on *Taking Heaven Lightly*, Hachette Publishing, £13.99, on Thursday, April 2, at 6pm in Waterstones, Belfast. See roisinfitzpatrick.com and [facebook.com/RoisinFitzpatrickArtistoftheLight](https://www.facebook.com/RoisinFitzpatrickArtistoftheLight) The latter part of *Taking Heaven Lightly* is made up of insights and life lessons from Roisin's NDE,