

## Six Weeks Later

(SEPTEMBER 2012)

He's late to meet her. The bus was caught in traffic because of some rally in town and now he's eight minutes late and he doesn't know where the cafe is. He has never met Marianne 'for coffee' before. The weather is too warm today, a scratchy and unseasonal heat. He finds the cafe on Capel Street and walks past the cashier towards the door at the back, checking his phone. It's nine minutes past three. Outside the back door Marianne is sitting in the smoking garden drinking her coffee already. No one else is out there, the place is quiet. She doesn't get up when she sees him.

Sorry I'm late, he says. There was some protest on so the bus was delayed.

He sits down opposite her. He hasn't ordered anything yet.

Don't worry about it, she says. What was the protest? It wasn't abortion or anything, was it?

He feels ashamed now that he didn't notice. No, I don't think so, he says. The household tax or something.

Well, best of luck to them. May the revolution be swift and brutal.

He hasn't seen her in person since July, when she came home for her father's Mass. Her lips look pale now and slightly chapped, and she has dark circles under her eyes. Although he takes pleasure in seeing her look good, he feels a special sympathy with her when she looks ill or her skin is bad, like when

someone who's usually very good at sports has a poor game. It makes her seem nicer somehow. She's wearing a very elegant black blouse, her wrists look slender and white, and her hair is twisted back loosely at her neck.

Yeah, he says. I would have a bit more energy for protesting if it was more on the brutal side, to be honest.

You want to get beaten up by the Gardaí.

There are worse things than getting beaten up.

Marianne is taking a sip of coffee when he says this, and she seems to pause for a moment with the cup at her lips. He can't tell how he identifies this pause as distinct from the natural motion of her drinking, but he sees it. Then she replaces the cup on the saucer.

I agree, she says.

What does that mean?

I'm agreeing with you.

Have you recently been attacked by the guards or have I missed something? he says.

She taps a little extra sugar from a sachet into her cup and then stirs it. Finally she glances up at him as if remembering he's sitting there.

Aren't you going to have coffee? she says.

He nods. He's still feeling a little breathless after the walk from the bus, a little too warm under his clothes. He gets up from the table and goes back into the main room. It's cool in there and much dimmer. A woman in red lipstick takes his order and says she'll bring it right out.

Until April, Connell had been planning to work in Dublin for the summer and cover the rent with his wages, but a week

before the exams his boss told him they were cutting back his hours. He could just about make rent that way but he'd have nothing left to live on. He'd always known that the place was going to go out of business, and he was furious with himself for not applying anywhere else. He thought about it constantly for weeks. In the end he decided he would have to move out for the summer. Niall was very nice about it, said the room would still be there for him in September and all of that. What about yourself and Marianne? Niall asked. And Connell said: Yeah, yeah. I don't know. I haven't told her yet.

The reality was that he stayed in Marianne's apartment most nights anyway. He could just tell her about the situation and ask if he could stay in her place until September. He knew she would say yes. He thought she would say yes, it was hard to imagine her not saying yes. But he found himself putting off the conversation, putting off Niall's enquiries about it, planning to bring it up with her and then at the last minute failing to. It just felt too much like asking her for money. He and Marianne never talked about money. They had never talked, for example, about the fact that her mother paid his mother money to scrub their floors and hang their laundry, or about the fact that this money circulated indirectly to Connell, who spent it, as often as not, on Marianne. He hated having to think about things like that. He knew Marianne never thought that way. She bought him things all the time, dinner, theatre tickets, things she would pay for and then instantly, permanently, forget about.

They went to a party in Sophie Whelan's house one night as the exams were ending. He knew he would finally have to tell Marianne that he was moving out of Niall's place, and he would have to ask her, outright, if he could stay with her

instead. Most of the evening they spent by the swimming pool, immersed in the bewitching gravity of warm water. He watched Marianne splashing around in her strapless red swimsuit. A lock of wet hair had come loose from the knot at her neck and was sealed flat and shining against her skin. Everyone was laughing and drinking. It felt nothing like his real life. He didn't know these people at all, he hardly even believed in them, or in himself. At the side of the pool he kissed Marianne's shoulder impulsively and she smiled at him, delighted. No one looked at them. He thought he would tell her about the rent situation that night in bed. He felt very afraid of losing her. When they got to bed she wanted to have sex and afterwards she fell asleep. He thought of waking her up but he couldn't. He decided he would wait until after his last exam to talk to her about moving home.

Two days later, directly after his paper on Medieval and Renaissance Romance, he went over to Marianne's apartment and they sat at the table drinking coffee. He half-listened to her talking about some complicated relationship between Teresa and Lorcan, waiting for her to finish, and eventually he said: Hey, listen. By the way. It looks like I won't be able to pay rent up here this summer. Marianne looked up from her coffee and said flatly: What?

Yeah, he said. I'm going to have to move out of Niall's place.

When? said Marianne.

Pretty soon. Next week maybe.

Her face hardened, without displaying any particular emotion. Oh, she said. You'll be going home, then.

He rubbed at his breastbone then, feeling short of breath. Looks like it, yeah, he said.

She nodded, raised her eyebrows briefly and then lowered them again, and stared down into her cup of coffee. Well, she said. You'll be back in September, I assume.

His eyes were hurting and he closed them. He couldn't understand how this had happened, how he had let the discussion slip away like this. It was too late to say he wanted to stay with her, that was clear, but when had it become too late? It seemed to have happened immediately. He contemplated putting his face down on the table and just crying like a child. Instead he opened his eyes again.

Yeah, he said. I'm not dropping out, don't worry.

So you'll only be gone three months.

Yeah.

There was a long pause.

I don't know, he said. I guess you'll want to see other people, then, will you?

Finally, in a voice that struck him as truly cold, Marianne said: Sure.

He got up then and poured his coffee down the sink, although it wasn't finished. When he left her building he did cry, as much for his pathetic fantasy of living in her apartment as for their failed relationship, whatever that was.

Within a couple of weeks she was going out with someone else, a friend of hers called Jamie. Jamie's dad was one of the people who had caused the financial crisis – not figuratively, one of the actual people involved. It was Niall who told Connell they were together. He read it in a text message during work and had to go into the back room and press his forehead against a cool shelving unit for almost a full minute. Marianne had just wanted to see someone else all along, he thought. She

was probably glad he'd had to leave Dublin because he was broke. She wanted a boyfriend whose family could take her on skiing holidays. And now that she had one, she wouldn't even answer Connell's emails anymore.

By July even Lorraine had heard that Marianne was seeing someone new. Connell knew people in town were talking about it, because Jamie had this nationally infamous father, and because there was nothing much else going on.

When did you two split up, then? Lorraine asked him.

We were never together.

You were seeing each other, I thought.

Casually, he replied.

Young people these days. I can't get my head around your relationships.

You're hardly ancient.

When I was in school, she said, you were either going out with someone or you weren't.

Connell moved his jaw around, staring at the television blandly.

Where did I come from, then? he said.

Lorraine gave him a nudge of reproach and he continued to look at the TV. It was a travel programme, long silver beaches and blue water.

Marianne Sheridan wouldn't go out with someone like me, he said.

What does that mean, someone like you?

I think her new boyfriend is a bit more in line with her social class.

Lorraine was silent for several seconds. Connell could feel his back teeth grinding together quietly.

I don't believe Marianne would act like that, Lorraine said. I don't think she's that kind of person.

He got up from the sofa. I can only tell you what happened, he said.

Well, maybe you're misinterpreting what happened.

But Connell had already left the room.

Back outside the cafe now, the sunlight is so strong it crunches all the colours up and makes them sting. Marianne's lighting a cigarette, with the box left open on the table. When he sits down she smiles at him through the small grey cloud of smoke. He feels she's being coy, but he doesn't know about what.

I don't think we've ever met for coffee before, he says. Have we?

Have we not? We must have.

He knows he's being unpleasant now but he can't stop. No, he says.

We have, she says. We got coffee before we went to see *Rear Window*. Although I guess that was more like a date.

This remark surprises him, and in response he just makes some non-committal noise like: Hm.

The door behind them opens and the woman comes out with his coffee. Connell thanks her and she smiles and goes back inside. The door swings shut. Marianne is saying that she hopes Connell and Jamie get to know each other better. I hope you get along with him, Marianne says. And she looks up at Connell nervously then, a sincere expression which touches him.

Yeah, I'm sure I will, he says. Why wouldn't I?

I know you'll be civil. But I mean I hope you get along.

I'll try.

And don't intimidate him, she says.

Connell pours a splash of milk in his coffee, letting the colour come up to the surface, and then replaces the jug on the table.

Oh, he says. Well, I hope you're telling him not to intimidate me either.

As if you could find him intimidating, Connell. He's shorter than I am.

It's not strictly a height thing, is it?

Seen from his point of view, she says, you're a lot taller, and you're the person who used to fuck his girlfriend.

That's a nice way of putting it. Is that what you told him about us, Connell's this tall guy who used to fuck me?

She laughs now. No, she says. But everyone knows.

Does he have some insecurities about his height? I won't exploit them, I'd just like to know.

Marianne lifts her coffee cup. Connell can't figure out what kind of relationship they are supposed to have now. Are they agreeing not to find each other attractive anymore? When were they supposed to have stopped? Nothing in Marianne's behaviour gives him any clue. In fact he suspects she is still attracted to him, and that she now finds it funny, like a private joke, to indulge an attraction to someone who could never belong in her world.

Back in July he went to the anniversary Mass for Marianne's father. The church in town was small, smelling of rain and incense, with stained-glass panels in the windows. He and Lorraine never went to Mass, he'd only been in there for

funerals before. He saw Marianne in the vestibule when he arrived. She looked like a piece of religious art. It was so much more painful to look at her than anyone had warned him it would be, and he wanted to do something terrible, like set himself on fire or drive his car into a tree. He always reflexively imagined ways to cause himself extreme injury when he was distressed. It seemed to soothe him briefly, the act of imagining a much worse and more totalising pain than the one he really felt, maybe just the cognitive energy it required, the momentary break in his train of thought, but afterwards he would only feel worse.

That night, after Marianne went back to Dublin, he went out drinking with some people from school, to Kelleher's first, and then McGowan's, and then that awful nightclub Phantom around the back of the hotel. No one was around that he had ever been really close with, and after a few drinks he became aware that he wasn't there to socialise anyway, he was just there to drink himself into a kind of sedated non-consciousness. He withdrew from the conversation gradually and focused on consuming as much alcohol as he could without passing out, not even laughing along with the jokes, not even listening.

It was in Phantom that they met Paula Neary, their old Economics teacher. By then Connell was so drunk that his vision was misaligned, and beside every solid object he could see another version of the object, like a ghost. Paula bought them all shots of tequila. She was wearing a black dress and a silver pendant. He licked a line of salt off the back of his own hand and saw the ghostly other of her necklace, a faint white trace on her shoulder. When she looked at him she did not

have two eyes, but several, and they moved around exotically in the air, like jewels. He started laughing about it, and she leaned in close with her breath on his face to ask him what was so funny.

He doesn't remember how he got back to her house, whether they walked or took a taxi, he still doesn't know. The place had that strange unfurnished cleanliness that lonely houses sometimes have. She seemed like a person with no hobbies: no bookcases, no musical instruments. What do you do with yourself at the weekends, he remembers slurring. I go out and have fun, she said. This struck him even at the time as deeply depressing. She poured them both glasses of wine. Connell sat on the leather sofa and drank the wine for something to do with his hands.

How is the football team looking this year? he said.

It's not the same without you, said Paula.

She sat beside him on the couch. Her dress had slipped down slightly, exposing a mole over her right breast. He could have fucked her back when he was in school. People joked about it, but they would have been shocked if it had really happened, they would have been scared. They would have thought his shyness masked something steely and frightening.

Best years of your life, she said.

What?

Best years of your life, secondary school.

He tried to laugh, and it came out very goofy and nervous. I don't know, he said. That's a sad thought if that's true.

She started to kiss him then. This seemed like a strange thing to happen to him, unpleasant on the surface level, but also interesting in a way, as if his life was taking a new direction.

Her mouth tasted sour like tequila. Briefly he wondered if it was legal for her to kiss him, and he concluded it must be, he couldn't think of a reason why it wouldn't be, and yet it felt substantially wrong. Every time he pulled away from her she seemed to follow him forward, so that he found himself puzzled about the physics of what was going on, and he was no longer sure whether he was sitting upright on the sofa or reclining backwards against the arm. As an experiment he tried to sit up, which confirmed he was in fact sitting up already, and the small red light which he thought might have been on the ceiling above him was just a standby light on the stereo system across the room.

Back in school Miss Neary had made him feel so uncomfortable. But was he mastering that discomfort now by letting her kiss him on the sofa in her living room, or just succumbing to it? He'd hardly had time to formulate this question when she started unbuttoning his jeans. In a panic he tried to push her hand away, but with such an ineffectual gesture that she appeared to think he was helping her. She got the top button undone and he told her that he was really drunk, and maybe they should stop. She put her hand inside the waistband of his underwear and said it was okay, she didn't mind. He thought he would probably black out then, but he found he couldn't. He wished he could have. He heard Paula saying: You're so hard. That was an especially insane thing for her to say, because he actually wasn't.

I'm going to get sick, he said.

She jerked back then, pulling her dress after her, and he took the opportunity to stand up from the sofa and button his jeans back up. Cautiously she asked if he was okay. When he

looked at her he could make out two separate Paulas sitting on the couch, so clearly delineated that it was no longer obvious which was the real Paula and which the ghost. Sorry, he said. He woke up the next day fully clothed on the floor of his living room. He still has no idea how he made it home.

He must be insecure about something, says Marianne now. I don't know what. Maybe he'd like to be more cerebral.

Maybe he just has good self-esteem.

No, definitely not that. He's . . .

Her eyes flick back and forth quickly. When she does this, she looks like an expert mathematician performing calculations in her head. She sets the coffee cup back in the saucer.

He's what? says Connell.

He's a sadist.

Connell stares at her across the table, simply allowing his face to express the alarm he feels at this remark, and she gives a cute little smile. She twists her cup around on the saucer.

Are you serious? says Connell.

Well, he likes to beat me up. Just during sex, that is. Not during arguments.

She laughs, a stupid laugh that doesn't suit her. Connell's visual field shudders violently for a second, like the beginning of a gigantic migraine, and he lifts a hand to his forehead. He realises he is scared. Around Marianne he often feels somehow innocent, though really he's a lot more sexually experienced than she is.

And you're into that, are you? he says.

She shrugs. Her cigarette is burning out in the ashtray. She picks it up quickly and drags on it before stubbing it out.

I don't know, she says. I don't know if I really like it.

Why do you let him do it, then?

It was my idea.

Connell picks up his cup and takes a large mouthful of very hot coffee, wanting to do something efficient with his hands. When he replaces the cup it splashes up and spills over into the saucer.

What do you mean? he says.

It was my idea, that I wanted to submit to him. It's difficult to explain.

Well, go on and try if you want. I'm interested.

She laughs again now. It's going to make you feel very awkward, she says.

Okay.

She looks at him, maybe to see if he's joking, and then she lifts her chin at an angle, and he knows she won't back down from telling him about it, because that would be giving in to something she doesn't believe about herself.

It's not that I get off on being degraded as such, she says. I just like to know that I would degrade myself for someone if they wanted me to. Does that make sense? I don't know if it does, I've been thinking about it. It's about the dynamic, more than what actually happens. Anyway I suggested it to him, that I could try being more submissive. And it turns out he likes to beat me up.

Connell starts coughing. Marianne picks a small wooden coffee-stirrer out of a jar on the table and starts twisting it in her fingers. He waits for the coughing to subside and then says: What does he do to you?

Oh, I don't know, she says. He hits me with a belt some-

times. He likes choking me, things like that.

Right.

I mean, I don't enjoy it. But then, you're not really submitting to someone if you only submit to things you enjoy.

Have you always had these ideas? Connell says.

She gives him a look. He feels like the fear has consumed him and turned him into something else now, like he has passed through the fear, and looking at her is like swimming towards her across a strip of water. He picks up the cigarette packet and looks into it. His teeth start chattering and he puts a cigarette on his lower lip and lights it. Marianne is the only one who ever triggers these feelings in him, the strange dissociative feeling, like he's drowning and time doesn't exist properly anymore.

I don't want you to think Jamie's a horrible guy, she says.

He sounds like one.

He's not really.

Connell drags on the cigarette and then lets his eyes half-close for a second. The sun is very warm, and he can sense Marianne's body close to him, and the mouthful of smoke, and the bitter aftertaste of coffee.

Maybe I want to be treated badly, she says. I don't know. Sometimes I think I deserve bad things because I'm a bad person.

He exhales. In the spring he would sometimes wake up at night beside Marianne, and if she was awake too they would move into each other's arms until he could feel himself inside her. He didn't have to say anything, except to ask her if it was alright, and she always said it was. Nothing else in his life compared to what he felt then. Often he wished he could fall asleep inside her body. It was something he could never have

with anyone else, and he would never want to. Afterwards they'd just go back to sleep in each other's arms, without speaking.

You never said any of this to me, he says. When we were . . .

It was different with you. We were, you know. Things were different.

She twists the little strip of wood with both hands and then releases it on one side so it recoils from her fingers.

Should I be feeling insulted? he says.

No. If you want to hear the simplest explanation, I'll tell you.

Well, is it a lie?

No, she says.

She pauses. Carefully she sets down the wooden coffee-stirrer. She has no props now, and reaches to touch her hair instead.

I didn't need to play any games with you, she says. It was real. With Jamie it's like I'm acting a part, I just pretend to feel that way, like I'm in his power. But with you that really was the dynamic, I actually had those feelings, I would have done anything you wanted me to. Now, you see, you think I'm a bad girlfriend. I'm being disloyal. Who wouldn't want to beat me up?

She covers her eyes with her hand. She's smiling, a tired and self-hating smile. He wipes the palms of his hands on his lap.

I wouldn't, he says. Maybe I'm kind of unfashionable in that way.

She moves her hand away and looks at him, the same smile, and her lips still look dry.

I hope we can always take each other's sides, she says. It's very comforting for me.

Well, that's good.

She looks at him then, like she's seeing him for the first time since they sat down together.

Anyway, she says. How are you?

He knows the question is meant honestly. He's not someone who feels comfortable confiding in others, or demanding things from them. He needs Marianne for this reason. This fact strikes him newly. Marianne is someone he can ask things of. Even though there are certain difficulties and resentments in their relationship, the relationship carries on. This seems remarkable to him now, and almost moving.

Something kind of weird happened to me in the summer, he said. Can I tell you about it?

relationship

## Four Months Later

(JANUARY 2013)

She's in her apartment with friends. The scholarship exams finished this week and term is about to start again on Monday. She feels drained, like a vessel turned out onto its rim. She's smoking her fourth cigarette of the evening, which gives her a curious acidic sensation in her chest, and she also hasn't eaten dinner. For lunch she had a tangerine and a piece of unbuttered toast. Peggy is on the sofa telling a story about interrailing in Europe, and for some reason she insists on explaining the difference between West and East Berlin. Marianne exhales and says absently: Yes, I've been there.

Peggy turns to her, eyes widened. You've been to Berlin? she says. I didn't think they let people from Connacht travel that far.

Some of their friends laugh politely. Marianne taps the ash off her cigarette into the ceramic tray on the arm of the sofa. Extremely hilarious, she says.

They must have given you time off from the farm, says Peggy.

Quite, says Marianne.

Peggy continues telling her story then. She has lately taken to sleeping over in Marianne's apartment when Jamie's not there, eating breakfast in her bed, and even following her to the bathroom when she showers, clipping her toenails blithely and complaining about men. Marianne likes to be singled out

as her special friend, even when this expresses itself as a tendency to take up vast amounts of her leisure time. But at certain parties lately, Peggy has also started to make fun of her in front of others. For the sake of their friends, Marianne tries to laugh along, but the effort contorts her face, which only gives Peggy another chance to tease her. When everyone else has gone home she snuggles into Marianne's shoulder and says: Don't be mad with me. And Marianne says in a thin, defensive voice: I'm not mad at you. They are right now shaping up to have this exact exchange, yet again, in just a few short hours.

After the Berlin story concludes, Marianne gets another bottle of wine from the kitchen and refills people's glasses.

How did the exams go, by the way? Sophie asks her.

Marianne gives a humorous shrug and is rewarded with a little laughter. Her friends sometimes seem uncertain about her dynamic with Peggy, volunteering extra laughter when Marianne tries to be funny, but in a way that can seem sympathetic or even pitying rather than amused.

Tell the truth, says Peggy. You fucked them up, didn't you?

Marianne smiles, makes a face, puts the cap back on the wine bottle. The scholarship exams finished two days ago; Peggy and Marianne sat them together.

Well, they could have gone better, Marianne says diplomatically.

This is one hundred per cent typical you, says Peggy. You're the smartest person in the world but when it comes down to it, you're a bottler.

You can sit them again next year, says Sophie.

I doubt they went that badly, Joanna says.

Marianne avoids Joanna's eyes and puts the wine back in

the fridge. The scholarships offer five years of paid tuition, free accommodation on campus, and meals in the Dining Hall every evening with the other scholars. For Marianne, who doesn't pay her own rent or tuition and has no real concept of how much these things cost, it's just a matter of reputation. She would like her superior intellect to be affirmed in public by the transfer of large amounts of money. That way she could affect modesty without having anyone actually believe her. The fact is, the exams didn't go badly. They went fine.

My Stats professor was on at me to sit them, says Jamie. But I just couldn't be fucked studying over Christmas.

Marianne produces another vacant smile. Jamie didn't sit the exams because he knew he wouldn't pass them if he did. Everyone in the room knows this also. He's trying to brag, but he lacks the self-awareness to understand that what he's saying is legible as bragging, and that no one believes the brag anyway. There's something reassuring in how transparent he is to her.

Early in their relationship, without any apparent forethought, she told him she was 'a submissive'. She was surprised even hearing herself say it: maybe she did it to shock him. What do you mean? he asked. Feeling worldly, she replied: You know, I like guys to hurt me. After that he started to tie her up and beat her with various objects. When she thinks about how little she respects him, she feels disgusting and begins to hate herself, and these feelings trigger in her an overwhelming desire to be subjugated and in a way broken. When it happens her brain simply goes empty, like a room with the light turned off, and she shudders into orgasm

without any perceptible joy. Then it begins again. When she thinks about breaking up with him, which she frequently does, it's not his reaction but Peggy's she finds herself thinking about most.

Peggy likes Jamie, which is to say that she thinks he's kind of a fascist, but a fascist with no essential power over Marianne. Marianne complains about him sometimes and Peggy just says things like: Well, he's a chauvinist pig, what do you expect? Peggy thinks men are disgusting animals with no impulse control, and that women should avoid relying on them for emotional support. It took a long time for it to dawn on Marianne that Peggy was using the guise of her general critique of men to defend Jamie whenever Marianne complained about him. What did you expect? Peggy would say. Or: You think that's bad? By male standards he's a prince. Marianne has no idea why she does this. Any time Marianne makes the suggestion, however tentative, that things might be coming to an end with Jamie, Peggy's temper flares up. They've even fought about it, fights that end with Peggy curiously declaring that she doesn't care whether they break up or not anyway, and Marianne, by then exhausted and confused, saying they probably won't.

When Marianne sits back down now, her phone starts ringing, a number she doesn't recognise. She stands up to get it, gesturing for the others to continue talking, and wanders back into the kitchen.

Hello? she says.

Hi, it's Connell. This is a bit awkward, but I've just had some of my things stolen. Like my wallet and my phone and stuff.

Jesus, how awful. What happened?

I'm just wondering— See, I'm all the way out in Dun Laoghaire now and I don't have money to get in a taxi or anything. I wonder if there's any way I could meet up with you and maybe borrow some cash or something.

All her friends are looking at her now and she waves them back to their conversation. From the armchair Jamie continues to watch her on the phone.

Of course, don't worry about that, she says. I'm at home, so do you want to get a taxi over here? I'll come outside and pay the driver, does that suit you? You can ring the bell when you're here.

Yeah. Alright, thanks. Thanks, Marianne. I'm borrowing this phone so I'd better give it back now. See you in a bit.

He hangs up. Her friends look at her expectantly as she holds the phone in one hand and turns to face them. She explains what's happened, and they all express sympathy for Connell. He still comes to her parties occasionally, just for a quick drink before heading on somewhere else. He told Marianne in September what had happened with Paula Neary, and it made Marianne feel unearthly, possessed of a violence she had never known before. I know I'm being dramatic, Connell said. It's not like she did anything that bad. But I feel fucked up about it. Marianne heard herself in a voice like hard ice saying: I would like to slit her throat. Connell looked up and laughed, just from shock. Jesus, Marianne, he said. But he was laughing. I would, she insisted. He shook his head. You have to tone down these violent impulses, he said. You can't be going around slashing people's throats, they'll put you in prison. Marianne let him laugh it off, but quietly

she said: If she ever lays a hand on you again I will do it, I don't care.

She has only spare change in her purse, but in a drawer in her bedside cabinet she has three hundred euro in cash. She goes in there now, without switching the light on, and she can hear the voices of her friends murmur through the wall. The cash is there, six fifties. She takes three and folds them into her purse quietly. Then she sits on the side of the bed, not wanting to go back out right away.

Things at home were tense over Christmas. Alan gets anxious and highly strung whenever they have guests in the house. One night, after their aunt and uncle left, Alan followed Marianne down to the kitchen, where she had taken their empty cups of tea.

State of you, he said. Bragging about your exam results.

Marianne turned on the hot tap and measured the temperature with her fingers. Alan stood inside the doorway, arms folded.

I didn't bring it up, she said. They did.

If that's all you have to brag about in your life I feel sorry for you, said Alan.

The water from the tap got warmer and Marianne put the plug in the sink and squeezed a little dish soap onto a sponge.

Are you listening to me? said Alan.

Yes, you feel sorry for me, I'm listening.

You're fucking pathetic, so you are.

Message received, she said.

She placed one of the cups on the draining board to dry and dipped another into the hot water.

Do you think you're smarter than me? he said.

She ran the wet sponge around the inside of the teacup. That's a strange question, she said. I don't know, I've never thought about it.

Well, you're not, he said.

Okay, fair enough.

*Okay, fair enough*, he repeated in a cringing, girlish voice. No wonder you have no friends, you can't even have a normal conversation.

Right.

You should hear what people in town say about you.

Involuntarily, because this idea was so ridiculous to her, she laughed. Enraged now, Alan wrenched her back from the sink by her upper arm and, seemingly spontaneously, spat at her. Then he released her arm. A visible drop of spit had landed on the cloth of her skirt. Wow, she said, that's disgusting. Alan turned and left the room, and Marianne went back to rinsing the dishes. Lifting the fourth teacup onto the draining board she noticed a mild but perceptible tremor in her right hand.

On Christmas Day her mother gave her an envelope with five hundred euro in it. There was no card; it was one of the small brown-paper envelopes she used for Lorraine's wages. Marianne thanked her, and Denise said airily: I'm a bit concerned about you. Marianne fingered the envelope and tried to arrange her face into a suitable expression. What about me? she said.

Well, said Denise, what are you going to do with your life?

I don't know. I think I still have a lot of options open. I'm just focusing on college at the moment.

And then what?

Marianne pressed her thumb on the envelope and smudged

it until a faint dark smear appeared on the paper. As I said, she repeated, I don't know.

I'm worried the real world will come as a bit of a shock to you, said Denise.

In what way?

I don't know if you realise that university is a very protective environment. It's not like a workplace.

Well, I doubt anyone in the workplace will spit at me over a disagreement, said Marianne. It would be pretty frowned upon, as I understand.

Denise gave a tight-lipped smile. If you can't handle a little sibling rivalry, I don't know how you're going to manage adult life, darling, she said.

Let's see how it goes.

At this, Denise struck the kitchen table with her open palm. Marianne flinched, but didn't look up, didn't let go of the envelope.

You think you're special, do you? said Denise.

Marianne let her eyes close. No, she said. I don't.

It's almost one in the morning by the time Connell rings the buzzer. Marianne goes downstairs with her purse and finds the taxi is idling outside the building. In the square opposite, a mist wreathes itself around the trees. Winter nights are so exquisite, she thinks of saying to Connell. He's standing talking to the driver through the window, with his back turned. When he hears the door he turns around, and she sees his mouth cut and bloody, dark blood like dried ink. She steps back, clutching her collarbone, and Connell goes: I know, I saw myself in the mirror. But I'm okay actually, I just need to get

cleaned up. In a state of confusion she pays the driver, almost dropping her change in the gutter. On the staircase inside she sees Connell's upper lip is swollen into a hard shiny mass on the right side. His teeth are the colour of blood. Oh god, she says. What happened? He takes her hand kindly, stroking her knuckles with his thumb.

Some guy came up and asked me for my wallet, he says. And I told him no, for some reason, and then he hit me in the face. I mean, it was a bad idea, I should have just given him the money. Sorry for calling you, it's the only number I knew off the top of my head.

Oh, Connell, how awful. I have friends round, but what suits you? Do you want to have a shower or something and you can stay here? Or do you want to just get some cash and go home?

They're outside the door of her apartment now, and they pause there.

Whatever's good for you, he says. I'm really drunk, by the way. Sorry.

Oh, how drunk?

Well, I haven't been home since the exams. I don't know, do I still have pupils?

She looks in his eyes, where his pupils are swollen to round black bullets.

Yes, she says. They're huge.

He strokes her hand again and says more quietly: Oh well. They get like that when I see you anyway.

She laughs, shaking her head.

You're definitely drunk if you're flirting with me, she says. Jamie's here, you know.

Connell breathes in through his nose and then glances over his own shoulder.

Maybe I'll just go back out and get punched in the face again, he says. It wasn't that bad.

She smiles, but he lets go of her hand. She opens the door.

In the living room her friends all gasp and make him retell the story, which he does, though without the desired drama. Marianne gets him a glass of water, which he swills in his mouth and then spits into the kitchen sink, pink like coral.

Fucking lowlife scum, says Jamie.

Who, me? Connell says. That's not very nice. We can't all go to private school, you know.

Joanna laughs. Connell isn't usually hostile and Marianne wonders if getting punched in the face has put him in a hostile mood, or else he's more drunk than she thought.

I was talking about the guy that robbed you, says Jamie. And he was probably stealing to buy drugs, by the way, that's what most of them do.

Connell touches his teeth with his fingers as if to ascertain that they're still in his mouth. Then he wipes his hands on a dishtowel.

Oh well, he says. It's not an easy life out there for a drug addict.

No, indeed, says Joanna.

They could always try, I don't know, giving up drugs? says Jamie.

Connell laughs and says: Yeah, I'm sure they've just never thought of that.

Everyone's quiet and Connell gives a bashful smile. His teeth are less insane-looking now that he's rinsed them with

water. Sorry, everyone, he says. I'll get out of your way. They all insist he's not in their way, except Jamie, who says nothing. Marianne experiences a flash of maternalistic desire to run Connell a bath. Joanna asks him if he's in pain, and he responds by rubbing his front teeth with a fingertip again and then saying: It's not that bad. He's wearing a black jacket over a stained white T-shirt, under which Marianne recognises the glimmer of an unadorned silver neckchain he's had since school. Peggy once described the neckchain as 'Argos chic', which made Marianne cringe, though she couldn't tell which friend she was cringing for.

How much cash do you think you'll need? she says to Connell. The question is sensitive enough that her friends start to talk amongst themselves, so she feels she has him almost alone. He shrugs. You might not be able to make withdrawals without your bank card, she says. He squeezes his eyes shut and touches his forehead.

Fuck me, I'm so drunk, he says. I'm sorry, I feel like I'm hallucinating. What are you asking me?

Money. How much can I give you?

Oh, I don't know, ten quid?

Let me give you a hundred, she says.

What? No.

They argue like this for a while, until Jamie comes up and touches Marianne's arm. She is suddenly conscious of his ugliness, and wants to pull away from him. His hairline is receding and he has a weak, jawless face. Beside him, and even covered in blood, Connell radiates good health and charisma.

I'll probably have to head off shortly, says Jamie.

Well, I'll see you tomorrow, says Marianne.

Jamie looks at her in shock and she swallows the impulse to say: What? Instead she smiles. It's not like she's the world's best-looking person, far from it. In certain photographs she appears not only plain but garishly ugly, baring her crooked teeth for the camera like a piece of vermin. Guiltily she squeezes Jamie's wrist, as if she can perform the following impossible act of communication: to Jamie, that Connell is injured and regrettably requires her attention, while to Connell, that she would rather not be touching Jamie at all.

Alright, says Jamie. Well, goodnight, then.

He kisses the side of her face and goes to get his jacket. Everyone thanks Marianne for having them. Glasses are left on the draining board or in the sink. Then the front door closes and she and Connell are alone. She feels her shoulder muscles relaxing, like their solitude is a narcotic. She fills the kettle and takes cups down from the press, then places some more of the dirty glasses in the sink and empties the ashtray.

Is he still your boyfriend, then? says Connell.

She smiles, and so does he. She takes two teabags from the box and tamps them down into the cups while the kettle is boiling. She loves to be alone with him like this. It makes her life seem very manageable suddenly.

He is, yes, she says.

And why would that be the case?

Why is he my boyfriend?

Yeah, says Connell. What's going on there? In terms of like, why you're still going out with him.

Marianne snorts. I presume you'll have tea, she says. He nods. He puts his right hand in his pocket. She takes a carton of milk from the fridge, it's damp in her fingers. Connell is

standing against the kitchen counter now, his mouth swollen but most of the blood rinsed off, and his face looks brutally handsome.

You could have a different boyfriend, you know, he says. I mean, guys are constantly falling in love with you, from what I hear.

Stop that.

You're the kind of person, people either love you or hate you.

The kettle clicks its switch and she lifts it out of the cradle. She fills one of the cups and then the other.

Well, you don't hate me, she says.

He doesn't say anything at first. Then he says: No, I'm immune to you, in a way. Because I knew you in school.

When I was an ugly loser, says Marianne.

No, you were never ugly.

She puts the kettle back down. She feels a certain power over him, a dangerous power.

Do you still think I'm pretty? she says.

He looks at her, probably knowing what she's doing, and then looks at his own hands, as if reminding himself of his physical stature in the room.

You're in a good mood, he says. Must have been a good party.

She ignores this. Fuck you, she thinks, but she doesn't mean it. She dumps the teabags in the sink with a spoon, then uses the milk and replaces it in the fridge, all with the rapid movements of someone dealing impatiently with a drunk friend.

I'd rather literally anyone else, says Connell. I'd rather the guy who mugged me was your boyfriend.

What do you care?

He says nothing. She thinks of the way she treated Jamie before he left, and rubs her face with her hands. Some milk-drinking culchie, Jamie called Connell once. It's true, she has seen Connell drink milk directly from the carton. He plays video games with aliens in them, he has opinions about football managers. He's wholesome like a big baby tooth. Probably never in his life has he thought about inflicting pain on someone for sexual purposes. He's a good person, he's a nice friend. So why does she go after him like this all the time, pressing him for something? Does she have to be her old desperate self around him always?

Do you love him? says Connell.

Her hand pauses on the door of the fridge.

Unlike you to take an interest in my feelings, Connell, she says. I kind of thought that stuff was off-limits for us, I have to say.

Alright. Okay.

He rubs at his mouth again, looking distracted now. Then he drops his hand and looks out the kitchen window.

Look, he says, I probably should have told you before, but I've been seeing someone. I've been with her for a while, I should have mentioned it to you.

Marianne is so shocked by this news that it feels physical. She looks at him, plainly, unable to disguise her astonishment. In the time they've been friends he has never had a girlfriend. She's never even given much thought to the idea that he might want one.

What? she says. How long have you been together?

About six weeks. Helen Brophy, I don't know would you know her. She studies Medicine.

Marianne turns her back on him and takes her cup from the counter. She tries to hold her shoulders very still, frightened that she'll cry and he'll see her.

Why are you trying to get me to break up with Jamie, then? she says.

I'm not, I'm not. I just want you to be happy, that's all.

Because you're such a good friend, is it?

Well, yeah, he says. I mean, I don't know.

The cup in Marianne's hands is too hot to hold, but instead of placing it down again she just lets the pain seep into her fingers, down into her flesh.

Are you in love with her? she says.

Yeah. I do love her, yeah.

Now Marianne starts crying, the most embarrassing thing that has happened to her in her entire adult life. Her back is turned but she feels her shoulders jerk upwards in a horrible involuntary spasm.

Jesus, says Connell. Marianne.

Fuck off.

Connell touches her back and she jolts away from him, like he's trying to hurt her. She puts the cup down on the counter to wipe her face roughly with her sleeve.

Just go away, she says. Leave me alone.

Marianne, don't. I feel awful, okay? I should have told you before, I'm sorry.

I don't want to talk to you. Just leave.

For a while nothing happens. She chews on the inside of her cheek until the pain begins to settle her nerves and she's not crying anymore. She dries her face again, with her hands this time, and turns around.

Please, she says. Please just go.

He sighs, he's looking at the floor. He rubs his eyes.

Yeah, he says. Look, I'm really sorry to ask, but I do kind of need that money to get home. Sorry.

She remembers then and feels bad. In fact she smiles at him, that's how bad she feels. Oh god, she says. In the excitement there I forgot you actually got assaulted. Can I give you two fifties, is that okay? He nods, but he's not looking at her. She knows that he feels bad; she wants to be a grown-up about things. She finds her purse and hands him the money, which he puts in his pocket. He looks down, blinking and clearing his throat, like he's going to cry too. I'm sorry, he says.

It's nothing, she says. Don't worry about it.

He rubs at his nose and looks around the room like he's never going to see it again.

You know, I didn't really know what was going on with us last summer, he says. Like, when I had to move home and that. I kind of thought maybe you would let me stay here or something. I don't really know what happened with us in the end.

She feels a sharp pain in her chest and her hand flies to her throat, clutching at nothing.

You told me you wanted us to see other people, she says. I had no idea you wanted to stay here. I thought you were breaking up with me.

He rubs his palm flat against his mouth for a second, and then breathes out.

You didn't say anything about wanting to stay here, she adds. You would have been welcome, obviously. You always were.

Right, okay, he says. Look, I'll head off, then. Have a good night, yeah?

He leaves. The door clicks shut behind him, not very loudly.

In the Arts Block the next morning Jamie kisses her in front of everyone and says she looks beautiful. How was Connell last night? he says. She grips Jamie's hand, she gives a conspiratorial roll of her eyes. Oh, he was so out of it, she says. I got rid of him eventually.