

LILY

She leaves her flat at 3.30 p.m. and idles to the supermarket around the corner. The day is giving off its last vestiges of bright and the Belfast sky is like Peach Melba. A person in a floral dress passes her on the footpath, taking wide, load-bearing steps to accommodate an enormous box of Heineken. In the supermarket she buys a packet of rectangular caramel shortbread. Each comes in a pink paper casing – they look like artisanal sex toys. She takes them home and eats them in bed. She feels the sun go down.

SIOBHÁN

She tries for a prurient whisper, conjuring mental images of Scandinavian women from crime dramas for inspiration. She imagines herself as elusive and leggy; she has poreless skin, possibly a motorcycle.

‘Fuck me,’ she says, huskily. He takes a breath.

‘I will,’ he says, then pauses. ‘In a minute.’ His expression is tortured. She rolls on to her back and stares at the ceiling.

LILY

She was born with unusually long fingernails. ‘You were this soft ball of a thing, with these sudden sharp surprises – like finding bits of eggshell in your omelette,’ her mother said once. A nurse offered to trim them, but she declined. ‘I liked that you were born capable of inflicting damage,’ she said. ‘In my post-labour fugue state it made me less anxious, less worried about my own competency.’

She presses one thumbnail into the skin behind the other until red appears under the nail’s crescent, like a slow geyser of tomato juice. She peels the nails off, one by one, then arranges them in a spherical cluster on the bedsheet in front of her. They look like an astrolabe. When she’s finished she deposits them into a mug. The empty plastic box from the shortbreads sits on the counter, the shed pink skins susurrating against one another as she flips the pages of a calendar. It is the first Saturday in February, and her mother has been dead for seven months.

Earlier, on her way in from the supermarket, she encountered Siobhán in the foyer of their building. Siobhán was standing by the noticeboard, which looks like a steamrollered tennis ball. She was staring fixedly at her phone, ignoring the flyer for the dehumidifier for sale, the notice of roadworks scheduled for March and the handwritten, cloying request for people to stop

overfilling the bins. She had a shopping bag on the floor next to her, bottles of red wine visible inside. Her feet were positioned in a stance of indecipherable intent, as though in the next moment she was as likely to sit down as she was to perform an emergency tracheotomy.

Lily pulled the front door closed behind her and strode past, steeling herself for a relaxed interaction. She'd been preparing for this moment. At the entrance to the stairwell she turned.

'Are you coming this way?' she asked. She hadn't spoken to anyone that day, and her voice crackled like timber, expanding in the heat. Siobhán looked up, frowning, and Lily blushed from bungling her delivery.

'Sorry?' Siobhán said.

Lily tried to avoid sounding impatient. Siobhán ought not to be held accountable for her malfunctions.

'Upstairs,' she said, more clearly this time. 'Are you coming upstairs?' She jiggled the door a little, to emphasize the relative time-sensitivity of the question. Siobhán looked at the door as though it was her first time seeing a door.

'Oh,' she said. 'Yeah, sorry, in a sec. You go ahead.'

'I can wait,' Lily said.

'Oh,' Siobhán said again. She put her phone in her pocket and picked up the shopping. The carrier bag clinked. 'Thanks,' she said, as she reached out to assume the weight of the door.

'That's all right,' Lily said. She smiled widely. Siobhán smiled back. A pause as they showed their teeth to each other.

'Do you live in the building?' Siobhán said.

The building is officially listed as Benson Tower, but the first E and the second O from the signage have been missing for as

long as Lily has lived there. The remaining letters are stuck, tarnished and worn, above the doorway, sandwiching the faint echoes of their former colleagues and listing slightly, as though with survivor's guilt. They spell out Bnson Twer. Her mother would have liked this – she liked playing with the phonetics of acronyms, typos, numerals. MRSA was 'Morrissey'; the IV full of chemicals was her 'four'.

The foyer is tiled with black and white and the occasional aberrant triangle of matte grey where they've chipped to reveal the grout. There are burgundy-coloured mailboxes with patinas around their keyholes and two thick-trunked artificial ficus plants in orange-brown planters. The colour scheme is like standing in a Tupperware lunchbox that once, however briefly, housed leftover Bolognese.

The day before she moved in, when she was still sleeping in a sleeping bag on the undressed mattress of her mother's erstwhile bed, she brought two final suitcases' worth of saucepans and towels and Pyrex dishes and long-handled rubber spoons to Bnson Twer. She slid two postcards into her postbox and tried to forget having done so. The next day, after trotting upstairs, opening the windows and boiling the kettle, she returned to the postbox with her newly acquired key. There were two postcards waiting for her, one a print of Brian Ballard's *Flower and Skull*, the other a print of John Luke's *The Three Dancers*. In one, thick brushstrokes in gloomy blues and greys capture light landing on bone and porcelain. Six angular blooms in coral and umber sit in a vase alongside, perforating the dusk. In the other, three people balance on their toes and cock their arms in a sloping, layered valley. The precarious balancing of the triumvirate seems to imply something about their dependences upon one another. She stared at the A6

Luke print and felt herself transposed into its language; she was flat and rampant on the matte background of her new existence.

On the back of the Ballard postcard it said, 'Congratulations on your new job,' and on the back of the Luke, 'Welcome to your new home.' Both messages were written in her handwriting. She took them upstairs and secured them to the fridge with a magnet. She made a cup of tea and suppressed the reflex to call out, 'You want tea?'

She had actually met Siobhán three times already. The first time, she had approached her from behind. Siobhán was standing in the doorway of the building, looking out. Lily had at that point already lurked for too long in the stairwell, having watched Siobhán's head bob down and around each landing, not wanting to risk the awkwardness of Siobhán turning around, spotting Lily looming above her like a buzzard over some carrion, of them having to exchange small talk from different vantage points. In the foyer, there was nowhere to go but forward, so she proceeded quietly, and then they were side by side, watching the December rain and the cars and the sporadic people, stationary and mobile. Siobhán's head came up to Lily's chin, and Lily tried to draw her arms into her torso to seem smaller.

'It's raining,' Lily said, and Siobhán said, 'Not even the rain has such small hands.' She laughed brusquely, then drew her scarf over her head – it was thin, silky, maroon – and walked out. Her tan-coloured ankle boots had wide openings and no zips, and Lily wondered if they would fill with water, like novelty flowerpots.

The second time they met was unavoidably in the stairwell.

Lily was descending, Siobhán ascending. Before Siobhán looked up Lily watched the top of her head growing steadily in her field of vision, her centre parting and thick hair that fell in waves, its thickness such that it sat up from her scalp in a plume. Lily wondered if she ever worried about losing it, if she considered her beauty a fragile thing to be clung to as it risked erosion by time. She wondered if Siobhán worried about the precariousness of good things, and she felt an impulse to tell Siobhán about the time she had sinusitis for five days; how she sipped Sprite through a straw and whimpered at intervals like a lame sheep; how when it finally dissipated she vowed to never take a painless face for granted. She retreated into the banister and allowed Siobhán to pass. Her scarf this time had an art deco print, geometric zigzags overlaid with gold-beige deltas that matched the coppery strands of hair around her face. Without looking up, eyes fixed on her phone, Siobhán intoned, ‘Thanks,’ to Lily’s feet. Lily glanced into the canvas tote bag suspended by one strap from Siobhán’s shoulder – it was filled with small, pale blue exercise books. Lily said, ‘No problem,’ and once past Siobhán said, ‘They could do with fixing that, couldn’t they?’ and gestured vaguely with her free hand at the flickering tube of electrical light protruding from the wall. Lily nodded, but Siobhán wasn’t looking. ‘Maybe I’ll email the estate agents,’ she muttered, then walked on. The bulb is still flickering, Morse-coding something indecipherable.

The third time they met was last week. Siobhán was trying to forcibly inject her key into the crusty lock of her postbox. Lily wanted to tell her that sometimes it helps to jerk it once in an anticlockwise direction, then once in a clockwise, like starting a car. She said nothing. One of the ficus plants had a Santa hat perched on top – a lingering side effect of

December. ‘The Venn diagram of days before Christmas and days after Christmas is a circle,’ her mother said once.

Siobhán rattled the key, swearing under her breath, then gave up. She began searching in her bag, and without looking up propelled herself forward. Her shoulder collided with Lily’s chest and Lily made an *oooft* noise. ‘Oh God, sorry,’ Siobhán said. Lily said, ‘That’s all right,’ and Siobhán, still fixated on her bag, muttered, ‘One of those days,’ then performed an apologetic shrug with her shoulders. She disappeared into the stairwell and Lily stood, watching the spaces she no longer occupied.

It was in this moment that an idea began to assemble itself in the fraying distortion of her mind – the idea that Siobhán could help her. Siobhán’s concurrence with her surroundings, the ease with which even her transgressions and apologies seemed to occur, the way their innocuous interactions had almost managed, for a few, fleeting instances, to concretize Lily. Although still an ersatz person, for a moment she felt realer. Her blood, which had become mulchy and frozen, seemed capable of thawing. She went to Siobhán’s postbox that wouldn’t open and forcibly extricated the envelope that was half in, half out of the slot. She opened it. It was from the Student Loan Company, and Lily decided that this was the first thing she could do for Siobhán: remove this gloomy portent of debt. She took the letter upstairs and hid it in her wardrobe. She spent the rest of the week feeling like this was a beginning, as if the vapour of grief could maybe be compressed, made to share her mind with something else.

‘Do you live in the building?’ Siobhán said as they exchanged the stairwell door. For a moment Lily said nothing. Clearly,

Siobhán thought they were meeting for the first time. Lily's cheeks went hot. To ascribe undue weight to an interaction is so much more shameful than to have forgotten the interaction, she realized. Forgetfulness is the luxury of a rich existence. She wanted to redress the balance. She wanted to say, 'We've actually met multiple times,' and for Siobhán to say, 'I'm so sorry it's just—', which Lily could interrupt with, 'Personal occupation doesn't absolve you of poor manners.' She wanted Siobhán to blush, then apologize profusely, till her apologies reached the ceiling of their intensity, wilted under their own mass.

She said nothing, though, and nodded, and Siobhán said, 'Me too. See you about.' She commenced climbing the stairs, and Lily once again hung back, watching the muscles in Siobhán's legs tauten and slacken in her tights as she ascended. Back in her flat, she took the caramel shortbreads from her bag and ate them without tasting.

'Common decency' was a phrase her mother had used often. She had been a Biology teacher at one of Derry's more pernicious secondary schools, and after an especially challenging day she was prone to say that common decency ought to be taught to teenagers, rather than cellular meiosis. Lily wasn't sure what impact this model would have had upon her job – if all disciplines would get subsumed into a more generalized intent to bestow good manners, or if it was just Biology. She forgot to ask.

One night, years ago, when Lily was a teenager, her mother sat on the blue, sausagey sofa in the living room, eating yoghurt-covered raisins. Lily had been in the park, pulling blackberries off bushes in anticipation of jam. Each removal involved the same stretching out of the floricate, then its pinging back as

the fruit came loose. As the incorrigible evening oozed in she sat on a swing and ate some. There were three boys lolling on the climbing frame, and the low-slungness of their jeans made them look like walrus. Lily heard one say, 'Watch this,' and a moment later a pebble bit her on the shin. She looked up and they averted their eyes, laughing. A moment later another pebble landed next to her feet and she heard the first boy say, 'Nice shot, spastic,' and another respond, 'Fuck off.' A third stone hit her on the hand and she dropped the box of blackberries. They bounced on to the spongy black terrain – that material ubiquitous in children's play parks. The boys laughed again, and when she looked up they held her gaze, their expressions goading. She bent over and salvaged a few of the berries, sad and pearlescent on the ground. She got up and left, the skin on her leg stinging.

She spent the drive home imagining progressively more violent methods of retaliation. Her mother was on the sofa when she got in, dressed in her greying T-shirt that had a drawing of breasts on it in an anatomically incorrect place. She had a stack of exams on her lap and a red biro in her hand, the raisins next to her. Lily relayed some of her revenge fantasies: knotted electrical wire and garrotes and barrels of water. Her mother placed a hand on her knee and rubbed, saying nothing for a moment. Finally she said, 'Revenge is like cleaning your bathroom to impress a ghost.'

Lily sighed and put her fingers to her temple. 'What does that even mean?' she said. This was a common inversion of their prescribed dynamic – Lily as exasperated guardian, her mother boisterous theorist.

'Ghosts don't care if there's hair in the drain,' her mother said. Lily frowned at her, then took a raisin, chewed, contemplative.

‘Wait,’ she said. ‘Wait, no. Wait – what?’

‘Damn,’ her mother said. ‘I thought maybe I’d got away with it.’

‘No,’ Lily said. ‘Explain.’

‘Sorry,’ she said. ‘I’m feeling my way through the thought.’ There was a companionable silence, then: ‘Maybe people perceive revenge differently from cruelty, because it’s in retaliation to a wrong, but actually both are teleological. Perhaps cruelty isn’t altered by its motivating factor. Perhaps revenge is just cruelty with a hat on.’

‘Oh.’

‘You get it?’

‘Yeah, but—’

‘What?’

‘I think you just reinvented, through gross overcomplication, the very familiar concept of “Two wrongs don’t make a right.”’

Her mother laughed.

‘Plus,’ Lily said.

‘What?’

‘Maybe it’s easy to frame revenge that way if you have the luxury of neutrality. Maybe revenge and cruelty only seem synonymous—’

‘Good word.’

‘Shut up. I’m just saying,’ Lily said, ‘seems like this perspective might be enabled by a position of lofty detachment.’

Her mother laughed again.

‘And also,’ Lily said, ‘what does any of this have to do with ghosts?’

‘I feel silly postulating, now you’ve put me so firmly in my place.’

‘No, please. Postulate away.’

‘Well,’ her mother said, ‘maybe if the bathroom needs cleaning, you’ll clean it. The ghosts are neither here nor there.’

‘I think that’s the generally accepted position on ghosts,’ Lily said.

‘You know what I mean.’

That year Lily wrote ‘Ghosts are neither here nor there’ inside a birthday card. When her mother opened it she laughed the sort of laugh elicited by an old joke, forgotten in the interim. The kind of joke that wouldn’t survive the duration of its own explanation, a joke contingent on the closeness of two people.

When Lily was clearing out the house she found the card inside a copy of *Wuthering Heights*. All the cards she’d ever given her mother were secreted inside books.

After finishing the caramel shortbreads, Lily washed her hands till they smelt of chemical lavender. The sky was the black treacle of late winter.

She thought of how the cruelties that had exacted themselves upon her mother, though numerous, were largely faceless – you can’t enact revenge upon a wet road, a precipitous coastal shelf, a slow-acting disease, a fast-acting disease. Maybe the intangible, spectral nature of her enemies was what provoked her mother’s benevolence. Kindness as an alternative to impotent rage. In the muggy, poorly ventilated air of her flat, Lily edged her way up the bed and adhered her thoughts to the ceiling, Siobhán’s floor.

Sometimes, when she’s quiet, she can hear the music from Siobhán’s laptop, or the sound of her laughing on the phone. She has a microwave that squeals like a pig when the food’s cooked.

★

Lily's father died when her mother was six months pregnant, on the wet road traversing the border and tethering Culmore to Donegal. A man in a red Toyota saw through the rain's onslaught the motorbike careen to one side, yearn to right itself, then capitulate, capsizing. It slid across the road's uneven surface and into the path of an approaching black Honda. He saw the figure in the helmet bounce heavily at the kerb and the Honda's driver burst through the windshield to splay among broken glass. He called an ambulance, and both men were dead upon arrival at Altnagelvin. Lily was born three months later, a week later than her due date.

'Maybe I was reluctant to be told the bad news,' Lily said.

'What?' her mother said. 'That you'd be stuck with just me?'

'Exactly,' Lily said.

After taking the student-loan letter from Siobhán's postbox several weeks ago, Lily climbed one flight of stairs too many to inspect Siobhán's doorway. The tiled floor of the stairwell seemed to increase in stickiness as she rose, each footstep emitting a wetter Velcro sound, as though trying to hold her in place. The light from the wall sconces in the small hallway flickered on with her arrival, and she saw six pairs of shoes outside Siobhán's door, on a silver, expandable shoe rack. There were two pairs of the same style of ankle boot, one black and one brown, a pair of pink-and-purple running shoes, a pair of black trainers and two pairs of black high heels. They were all a size five. This, as well as their being displayed so casually outside her door, seemed to yield the promise of something. The blithe naivety required to abandon her shoes outside her home, potentially prey to the interference of others; the quiet assuredness of her own dominion over this space. It was this manner

of living that Lily wanted for herself, wanted Siobhán to teach her. It's this manner of living that she now decides to target.

She spends the next day formulating the tentative beginnings of a plan. After that, she contemplates the boxes in the corner of her room. They've been there for six months. She goes to the uppermost box and lifts a flap covered in strips of formerly adhesive packaging tape, then glances into its depths. Her mother's books sit inside, clammy. She moves the box from the stack on to the floor, then sits cross-legged before it. She removes a book, turns it over in her hands, replaces it, conceals the contents with the flaps. At 6 p.m. she gets into bed, and the premature darkness allows her to sleep through the evening and into the night, her thoughts nonsensical and swaddled in auburn hair.

SIOBHÁN

The points of contact between them – their thighs, their upper arms – have cultured a warm, sticky moistness. To move would require peeling herself off him. She listens to his breathing, her eyes pointed upwards. A long-legged spider turns slowly in the corner.

When they spend longer than two days together he invariably turns guilty. She can sense it, the moment he wakes up – the space between them on the mattress will have widened since they fell asleep, will feel curated with plausible deniability in mind. Her motions and movements will be newly dictated by his anticipated reception of them, and this will make her reticent and apologetic. Once, on day three of a weekend in Galway, she tried to hold his hand. He squeezed hers for half a second, then put both hands in his pockets and glanced around, fearful. She said nothing, but felt like a child, chastened by a disappointed parent.

Sometimes, she wakes to discover that he's put on pyjamas in the night, and they might as well be a chastity belt. If she tries to snake a hand surreptitiously towards his crotch he'll catch her wrist with his fingers, will sigh and say, 'Sweetheart,' in a tone more pleading than warning but that she knows means, 'Back off. Please.' Sometimes he'll roll away from her, as though magnetically repelled, muttering, 'I should take a

shower,' before departing with his phone to the bathroom. She's left forsaken on the bed, tragic in her great nakedness: her breasts wilting across her chest and torso, her nipples hard from the air-conditioning. This was back when they still stayed at hotels. As the shower faucet hissed she would sometimes rise and take a thumb-sized bottle of vodka from the mini fridge. She'd say aloud, 'What, is there a global shortage?' and imagine a studio audience laughing. The whole thing seems less pathetic if she pretends somebody is getting a kick out of it.

She wonders which of them will cave first. It's invariably her, but today, like always, she contemplates assuming the risk of alienating him. She sighs an aggrieved sigh and folds her arms across her abdomen. 'Just this once,' she thinks in his direction. 'Just this once, you be the one to restabilize things.' In her peripheral vision she can see him rubbing his face like an anguished otter. 'No,' she thinks to herself. 'No. Stay strong – don't always be the one to capitulate.'

Moments later she turns towards him.

'You okay?' she says. He rolls into her side and buries his face in her neck.

'You're fantastic,' he murmurs.

'You're beautiful,' she whispers back.

She can't stand herself.

When she breaks the silence and offers accord she doesn't consider it a gesture of compromise, of subjugating her own needs for his happiness. She used to think that, at the beginning. 'Love makes you selfless,' she thought, grandiose, after he'd cancelled their five-months-in-the-making plans, or forgot her birthday, and she still neglected her own work to talk

him through an ontological crisis. Now, she thinks it's more that she can't bear the thought of having someone un-love her. She lacks the courage to risk existing undesired, and the longer a relationship is permitted to go on, the more daunting the prospect of extrication. She's weak, she supposes, but that's not love's fault. She's always been weak.

They met three summers ago, when she was about to start her PGCE. She was two years graduated from her BA and was renting a room in a cold, tall house off the Lisburn Road, with high ceilings and wet walls. She had four cohabitants she strove to avoid – two smug medical students, a barista and a bearded man who was known to sit in the park every day but pretended to be an accountant if you ever asked. She was working in a small hotel off Botanic, not far from where she lives now – she did bar work and occasionally reception, sometimes shepherding lower-budget bridal parties.

She met him in early June. He was being put up in the hotel for a university conference, and she noticed him immediately. Necklaces on men normally made her think of interrailers or interchangeable uncles at wakes, but his was a barely conspicuous gold crucifix on a thin chain, and the intermittent gleam of it beyond his shirt placket and among his just visible chest hair made something inside her tighten with lust. When the day's talks were over the attendees returned to the hotel and congregated in the bar, standing in clusters or squashing on stools around small tables. He kept appearing in front of her to order drinks, and each time she made a little more eye contact, made herself a little more gregarious. On his fourth expedition he hovered his hands over the bar, and when she smiled he set them down on the just-wiped counter and leaned forward. He

was painfully polite, what she has always thought of as ‘Presbyterian polite’: half eager, half restrained. It seemed like he’d been aching to have a very specific conversation for years, and now that he was he was frightened of ruining it. That’s something she still finds addictive about him: he has the power to make her feel apotropaic and precious.

‘The usual?’ she said, on that fourth visit to the bar.

‘I’ve always wanted to have a usual somewhere,’ he said, and although this response would have aggravated her from someone else – she had a no-chat, maximum-efficiency approach to customer service – she was thrilled that he wanted to prolong the transaction.

‘Me too,’ she said. ‘I’m sometimes tempted to choose somewhere at random, go in and say, “The usual!” just to see what happens.’

He laughed, and she felt bolstered.

“‘The usual, please, Greg,’ I’d say,’ she continued. ‘And the barman would say, “Who the hell is Greg?” and I’d say, “Oh, Greg, how I’ve missed your irreverent and off-piste humour.”’

He laughed again, for longer than the joke deserved, and she took this as further encouragement. She felt overstimulated and giddy.

“‘Oh, Greggy boy, Gregosaurus. It’s been a rough ol’ week, Greg,’” she said. She could feel Clodagh, another server, eyeing her steadily. “‘Wait till you hear what the wife’s been putting me through this week, Greg!’” she concluded, blushing slightly.

With hindsight, she’s surprised this final line wasn’t sufficient to subdue him, as any passing reference to wives usually does. Instead, he just smiled at her. Something she has realized about him since is that he rarely engages with the joke – he’s too serious, or too nervous around her to be fully

uninhibited – but he always laughs, and his general reticence to reciprocate makes it feel all the more special when she can occasionally coax silliness from him.

He watched her pour his pint, never having confirmed that it was what he wanted. She beamed at him, then swore when, distracted, the beer rose over the rim of the glass and over her fingers.

‘So, what would your usual be?’ he said, and she wanted to atone for her clumsiness by being memorable.

‘Sausage in a glass,’ she said, then immediately, ‘God, sorry – I don’t know why I said that,’ but he was already laughing again, and it occurred to her, even then, that he was the kind of person who gave you the permission you needed to forgive yourself.

Looking back on it now, the nebulosity of it makes it seem all the more like it was unavoidable. The combination of variables that led him to her, that isolated him from the others in the bar to grant her the chance to perceive him as an individual. The precise arrangement of his characteristics, gestural and physical; characteristics that she couldn’t do justice to if describing them to someone else but that made him, to her, the most beautiful thing. What was unjustifiable about her attraction is what made it real, and that is why she knows that, regardless of what happens, regardless of the extent to which she will compartmentalize her needs to keep him, she will always want him.

She loitered after her shift was over, trying not to think. She sat in the blue-lit lobby with a book she found on a shelf behind reception, though it might as well have been a stuffed ferret for

how much attention she paid. At 7 p.m. the students and lecturers and consortium staff began to drip-feed out of the bar. She kept her eyes down, not so much on the page but near the page. She heard someone say, 'You coming for a bite to eat, Andrew?' and she heard him reply, 'No, thanks, I'm going to turn in. I'll see you in the morning.'

When she was sixteen she and her best friend, Tara, would attend every performance of the French debate club, sometimes even getting the bus to Lisburn or Downpatrick after school, just so they could listen to a boy in the year above named Hugo Diamond. They'd never spoken to him in person, and in another context they'd probably have been cruel about him, but behind a lectern, flanked by his team, they were entranced. They called his voice 'velvet chocolate', and that night, when she heard Andrew say, 'No, thanks, I'm going to turn in,' she felt the same thing she used to feel listening to Hugo Diamond argue against recreational drug use: as if all she needed in the world was to have that voice say her name.

With every muscle in her body she willed him towards her, and when she saw his feet next to her chair she felt telekinetic, as though her lust was sanctioned by unseen forces. He said, 'How is it?' and she said, 'I don't know – I can't read,' and he laughed. She turned the book over and was surprised to see that it was *Daisy Miller*. He said, 'I really love *The Portrait of a Lady*,' and she, grasping in the chambers of her memory for any information, said, 'It's good, but my favourite is "The Turning of the Shrew".' He laughed again. He has an easy laugh, which she theorizes comes partly from his innate need to please people, but also from a genuine pleasure he takes in living, given the chance. He

said, 'Would you like to have a drink with me?' and she said, 'Yes,' and they decamped to another archipelago of chairs in an empty lounge. They spent the next two and a half hours cross-legged on a sofa, facing one another. He seemed young to her, but not in the way she now knows her students to seem young – brash, so as not to betray their ignorance. He seemed young like conversation wasn't about using the other person's contributions as stepping stones to his own, young like it didn't matter to him whether he spoke at all.

She stayed behind after work three days in a row, spent all her tips on pints and chips of varying undercooked- and overcookedness. She was defensive about letting him spend money on her – she worried it would gesture to an imbalance already possibly denoted by their age difference. Clodagh and Nathan behind the bar were incorrigible – her winking; him pretending to fellate the cola hose. 'Fuck *off*,' Siobhán hissed each time she ordered more drinks, before turning on her heels and becoming winsome again. At 9 p.m. each night she would begin her campaign to convince him to stay downstairs for longer, but at nine thirty he'd rub his thighs as if he were trying to get a fire going, put his palm on her bare forearm for a moment, then retreat to his room. She'd trudge home in the waning colours of the etiolated summer sky, then masturbate under her duvet.

He told her about his wife and daughter on the first night, and later she was irritated with herself for being shocked, given his wedding ring, given the disproportionate gratitude he showed her, which could only have come from a man who hadn't felt wanted in a long time. They held hands for three uninterrupted minutes on the second night, while he told her that he'd never leave his family; that he couldn't. They kissed on

the third – close-mouthed and chaste, his mouth seasoned with chip vinegar. When he checked out on the final morning he left a note for her at reception, with his email address rather than his phone number, as though that might absolve them. They exchanged emails every day for a month. A fortnight in, she wrote that she loved him. A fortnight later, he wrote it back. A month later, he asked if they could meet.

The day before they saw one another, she spent the afternoon on Royal Avenue, trying on skirts and sheer blouses. That morning she curled her hair and put on layers and layers of mascara, till her lashes were huge and rigid. When she saw him walk through the station doors, from the platform on to the concourse, she felt pangs of regret at all the ways she could have looked better. He took four equine bounds towards her and then her face was pressed to his neck. Afterwards he would reminisce about how it felt to hold her and hear her breath catch in her throat. A lot of their moments together are like this – they feel scripted in their enormity.

He'd booked them a room in a hotel off Donegall Square, with a great pavlova of a bed. When they entered the room she was coy in her attempts to conceal her feelings of coyness. He closed the door behind them, set his overnight bag on the floor, and said, 'Come here.' Although he was born in Donegal, his accent has been neutralized, hybridized, made unplaceable; the result of moving to Coventry when he was five, then back to Donegal at sixteen, then to Dublin for a decade of elite tertiary education. When he said, 'Come here,' a traitorous, bucolic growl emerged, and he looked at her in a way that felt feral. She went to him, and he wrapped his hands in her hair and kissed her. This time, she felt her breath catch, and she wanted

to roll her eyes at herself. He whispered, 'This is pretty,' as he lifted her new top over her head, and when he unhooked her bra and took her bare breast in his hand he groaned and said, 'Oh my God.' When he put his hand to the damp gusset of her knickers she was briefly ashamed at how tangible his effect on her was, but when she saw the effect his effect on her had on him she was grateful for her body's lack of reactive subtlety. By some statistical anomaly she'd never been with someone uncircumcised before, and she was delighted by the sensitivity of him, how it made her feel powerful. When she slid his foreskin down and pressed her tongue to the amaranth-coloured dome of his penis his whole body shook in her grip. Afterwards they lay with him on top of her, her hands on the damp skin of his back, him whispering, 'I love you, I love you,' into her ear and her whispering it back, but also worrying that his sweat was turning her hair frizzy.

They spent the evening in the Cathedral Quarter, eating market-price fish (her seabass, him crab) and getting progressively drunk on New Zealand Sauvignon. He was used to Dublin prices, and his delight at the comparative cheapness of Belfast led to an extreme and excitable profligacy. They had desserts, dessert wine, coffee, shots of sambuca. They went back to the hotel bar, where a lissome woman was singing Bonnie Raitt's 'I Can't Make You Love Me', his favourite song. Reinstalled in their room, she cried, then he cried, and then they slept for three-hour intervals between bouts of sex that felt both animalistic and transcendent. She resented their sleeping at all, because their time together was so limited, but in the morning he was impossible to rouse, so she watched the strengthening light percolate through the curtains, begging the cosmos to officiate their union. She watched how the rising