

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 interailing 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.

Six Months Later

(JULY 2013)

He wakes up just after eight. It's bright outside the window and the carriage is warming up, a heavy warmth of breath and sweat. Minor train stations with unreadable names flash past and vanish. Elaine is already awake but Niall is still sleeping. Connell rubs his left eye with his knuckles and sits up. Elaine is reading the one novel she has brought with her on the journey, a novel with a glossy cover and the words *Now a Major Motion Picture* along the top. The actress on the front has been their constant companion for weeks. Connell feels an almost friendly affinity with her pale period-drama face.

Whereabouts are we, do you know? says Connell.

Elaine looks up from the book. We passed Ljubljana about two hours ago, she says.

Oh, right, he says. We're not far, then.

Connell looks over at Niall, whose sleeping head is bobbing slightly on his neck. Elaine follows his gaze. Out for the count as usual, she says.

There were others at the beginning. Some friends of Elaine's went with them from Berlin to Prague, and they met a few of Niall's Engineering classmates in Bratislava before they crossed over to Vienna on the train. Hostels were cheap, and the cities they visited had a pleasantly temporary feeling about them. Nothing Connell did there seemed to stay with him. The whole trip felt like a series of short films, screened only