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I

In the next town over, a man had killed his family. He'd nailed the doors shut so they couldn't get out; the neighbours heard them running through the rooms, screaming for mercy. When he had finished he turned the gun on himself.

Everyone was talking about it – about what kind of man could do such a thing, about the secrets he must have had. Rumours swirled about affairs, addiction, hidden files on his computer.

Elaine just said she was surprised it didn't happen more often. She thrust her thumbs through the belt loops of her jeans and looked down the dreary main street of their town. I mean, she said, it's something to *do*.

Cass and Elaine first met in Chemistry class, when Elaine poured iodine on Cass's eczema during an experiment. It was an accident; she'd cried more than Cass did, and insisted on going with her to the nurse. They'd been friends ever since. Every morning Cass called to Elaine's house and they walked to school together. At lunchtime, they rolled up their long skirts and wandered around the supermarket, listening to music from Elaine's phone, eating croissants from the bakery section that were gone by the time they got to the checkout. In the evening, they went to each other's houses to study.

Cass felt she'd known Elaine for ever; it made no sense that they had not always been friends. Their lives were so similar it was almost eerie. Both girls came from well-known families in the town: Cass's father, Dickie, owned the local Volkswagen dealership, while Elaine's dad, Big Mike, was a businessman and cattle farmer. Both girls were of slightly

above-average height; both were bright, in fact they were consistently at the top of their class. Both intended to leave here some day and never come back.

Elaine had golden hair, green eyes, a perfect figure. When she bought clothes online, they always fitted perfectly, as if they'd been made with her in mind. Writing about her in her journal, Cass used words like *grace* and *style*. She had what the French called *je ne sais quoi*. Even when she was clipping her toenails, she looked like she was eating a peach.

When Cass came round to Elaine's house, they would sit in her bedroom with the carousel lamp on and look at the Miss Universe Ireland website. Elaine was thinking seriously about entering, though not for the title itself so much as the opportunities it might offer. The previous year's winner was now brand ambassador for a juice company.

Cass thought Elaine was prettier than any of the contestants pictured online. But it was tricky. Each of the girls competing to be Miss Universe Ireland, and from there to be Miss Universe for the world/universe overall, had an adversity they had overcome. One had been a refugee from a war in Africa. Another had needed surgery when she was a small girl. A very thin contestant had once been very fat. The adversity had to be something bad, like a learning disability, but not really bad, like being chained up in a basement for ten years by a paedophile. Cass's eczema would be a perfect adversity; they wondered, if she held her skin up against Elaine's long enough, whether she could pass it on to her. But it didn't seem to work. Elaine said the adversity requirement was unfair. When you think about it, it's almost like a kind of discrimination, she said.

The housekeeper knocked on the door to say it was time for Elaine's swimming lesson. Elaine rolled her eyes. The swimming pool was always full of Band-Aids and old people. Coming from *here*, she said. If that isn't an adversity, I don't know what is.

Elaine hated their town. Everyone knew everyone, everybody knew your business; when you walked down the street people would slow down their cars to see who you were so they could wave at you. There

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were no proper shops; instead of McDonald's and Starbucks, they had Binchy Burgers and Mangan's Café, where the owners worked behind the counter and asked after your parents. You can't even buy a sausage roll without having to tell someone your life story, she complained.

The smallness wouldn't have been so bad if the townsfolk had had a little more sophistication. But their only interest, besides farming and the well-being of the microchip factory, was Gaelic games. Football, hurling, camogie, the county, the Cup, the under-21s – that was all anyone ever talked about. Elaine hated GAA. She was bad at sports, in spite of her grace. She was always the last up the rope in gym class; in games, she confined herself to the sidelines, where she scowled, flicked her hair, and wafted reluctantly back and forth with the general direction of play, like a lovely frond at the bottom of a noisy, grunting ocean.

The Tidy Towns Committee, of which Cass's mother was a member, was always shiteing on about the natural beauty of the area, but Elaine did not accept this. Nature in her eyes was almost as bad as sports. The way it kept *growing*? The way things, like crops or whatever, would die and then next year they *came back*? Did no one else get how creepy that was?

I'm not being negative, she said. I just want to live somewhere I can get good coffee and not have to see nature and everyone doesn't look like they were made out of mashed potato.

Cass didn't care for GAA either, and she agreed about the general lack of *je ne sais quoi*. For her, though, the presence of Elaine was enough to cancel out the town's faults.

She had never felt so connected to someone. When they messaged each other at night – sometimes they'd stay up till two in the morning – they got so in synch it was almost like they were the same person. If Elaine texted Cass to say WTF was up with that jumper today, she would know immediately whose jumper she was talking about; a single, unexplained word, *bagatelle* or *lickout*, could make her laugh so loud that her dad would hear from across the landing and come in and tell her to go to sleep. In some ways, that was the best time of all – better even than

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being together. As she lay in bed, messages flying back and forth between them, Cass would feel like she was flying too, far above the town, in a pure space that belonged completely to her and her best friend.

Most days they went to Elaine's after school, but sometimes, for a change of scene, Elaine would want to come to Cass's instead. She liked to hang out in the kitchen talking to Imelda – that's what she called Cass's mother, 'Imelda', so casually and naturally that after a while Cass started doing it too. You are so working those jeggings, Imelda, she'd say. Oh, you think so? Cass's mam/'Imelda' would say, and she'd lean over with impossible willow-like grace to examine the back of her own thighs. I wasn't sure about the stripes. The stripes are what make it, Elaine would say conclusively, and Imelda would look happy.

Cass's mother was a famous beauty. She too had blonde hair and green eyes. It's so weird that she's your mam, Elaine said. Doesn't it make more sense that I should be her daughter?

Then we'd be sisters! Cass said.

No, I mean, instead of you, Elaine said.

Cass wasn't sure what to do with that. But the fact remained that Elaine got on better with her mother than she did. Imelda liked to give Elaine face creams to try out; they traded beauty secrets and product advice. Cass was a bystander in these conversations. Nothing works on her skin, Imelda said, because of the eczema. It's a real adversity, Elaine agreed.

Once, Imelda had taken the girls with her to Dublin for the pre-sales. The discounts hadn't been put on the price tags yet; only platinum customers knew about them. This secret elevation over the other shoppers had made Elaine visibly giddy; she watched Imelda stalk the clothes-rails, whipping pitilessly through the garments like an empress at the slave market, as if she could see the difference, like an aura around her, a platinum glow.

Cass did not totally get the Imelda-worship. In her view, Elaine was much prettier than her mother. Yeah, but your mam's got to be at least, like, thirty-four, Elaine said. I mean, she's really kept her looks.

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Elaine felt that her own mother hadn't aged well, and had once confessed her 'greatest fear' was that her looks too would be transitory, and that she would spend the rest of her life as one of the lumpen potato-people she saw shuttling their shopping trolleys through the Lidl car park.

It was true: even now, as a mother of two, Imelda had an electrifying effect on people. When she walked down the street women would cock their heads and gaze at her adoringly, as if at some dazzling athletic display. Men would stop, and stammer, their pupils dilating and their mouths quivering in half-formed O's, as if trying to push out some ineffable word.

Cass's own effect was not electrifying, and when she told people that Imelda was her mother, they would stare at her a moment as if trying to solve a puzzle, then pat her hand sympathetically, and say, It's after your father you take, so.

Elaine said it wasn't just about looks. Imelda also had mystique, magnetism.

I can't believe she married your dad, she said candidly.

Cass too sometimes had trouble believing it – that her dad, who was so thoughtful, so sensitive, had fallen for Imelda's 100 per cent superficial allure like every other chump. She didn't want to devalue her mother in Elaine's eyes. At the same time, she didn't know how Elaine could think Imelda had mystique. To spend time with her mother was to get a running commentary on the contents of her mind – an incessant barrage of thoughts and sub-thoughts and random observations, each in itself insignificant but cumulatively overwhelming. I must book you in for electrolysis for that little moustache you're getting, she'd say; and then while you were still reeling, Are those tulips or begonias? There's Marie Devlin, do you know she has no sense of style, none whatsoever. Is that man an Arab? This place is filling up with Arabs. Where's this I saw they had that nice chutney? Kay Connor told me Anne Smith's lost weight but the doctor said it was the wrong kind. I thought it was supposed to be sunny today, that's not one bit sunny. Who invented chutney, was it

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Gorbachev? And on, and on – listening to her was like walking through a blizzard, a storm of frenzied white nothings that left you snow-blind.

Frankly, she would have preferred that Elaine stayed away from her house altogether, that after school they only went to Elaine's, where Elaine's housekeeper, Augustina, would make them iced coffees, and they'd sit in Elaine's bedroom looking at the Miss Universe Ireland website, swapping sex tips they had never used, ranking the best-looking boys from the secondary school down the road.

At the same time, she knew she should be thankful for her mother's undeniable glamour – thankful to have something in her life that her friend envied, especially now.

The fact was that their lives were not so similar as Elaine imagined. Yes, they had the same tennis racket, the same terry hoody in peach melba. But though Elaine hadn't seemed to realize it yet, some of the other things they had in common were actually things they *used* to have in common. Both families had Brazilian housekeepers. But Marianna had been away 'visiting her family' for almost a year now, and Cass knew she was never coming back. Cass could say where the best shops were in New York City, and the best beaches on the Cap d'Antibes; but Elaine's arms still bore the tan-fade from her holidays, while if she looked at her own arms, which she tried not to, Cass would see that between the patches of eczema they were clammy white, almost indistinguishable from the fabric of the ugly school blouse.

When she first became aware that business was 'slowing down', as her dad had put it, she thought it might not be a bad thing. Elaine had confided recently that, before they became friends, she'd thought Cass and her family were stuck-up. Not just me, she hastened to explain. It's what most people think.

Cass had been horrified. She knew her family was well off, but she had never behaved like this made her special. Maybe it wouldn't hurt if they were brought down to earth a little; then Elaine would know she wasn't trying to act superior or compete for the limelight.

But the slowdown quickly became more of a freefall. An air of dread

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gathered over the showroom. And she used to love to visit it! From the wings she would gaze at the dazzling bodywork, the gleaming newness that was almost overwhelming. Then she would sit in the display models in turn, imagining a different life to go with each: princess, explorer, scientist, fairy. Now she couldn't bear it. The unloved, unbought cars, still dazzling desperately, reminded her of stray dogs in the pound, waiting to be put down.

Dad did his best to comfort her. Things will pick up, he said. It's all cyclical. But that only tightened the knot in her stomach.

Dickie Barnes was not a natural salesman. Often, when Cass called in to the showroom, he would be sitting in his office, reading a book. If he did happen to be on the shop floor, that was almost worse. Someone would come in looking for a new car, and he would steer them towards a used one. If they wanted a used one, he'd push them in the direction of a smaller, cheaper model. More than once she'd heard him talk people out of buying cars altogether.

When this was put to him, Dickie liked to quote his father, Cass's granddad, who had said that the key to the business was not selling cars, but building relationships. Once the customer trusts you, he's with you for life, he said. And by way of proof, he'd point out to the street, where you could see the Maurice Barnes Motors sticker in the back window of every third car that went by.

But now the customers had stopped coming.

It wasn't Dad's fault. There had been a *crash*. That was the word they used on the news: it made Cass think of something sudden and explosive, a car hitting a wall. But this crash was slow – in fact it had been going on for years – and nothing had exploded. Nothing had happened at all that you could see, yet somehow, because of this crash, there was no more money. Even the banks were out of money. Last year the microchip factory had let a hundred people go; half the shops on Main Street had an A4 page in the window, thanking customers for their many years of loyalty. Everyone was in the same boat.

And yet some people were in a different boat.

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Elaine's dad had 'gone in' with a developer on a small estate of houses, carved out of the woods behind Cass's family's land. Now the developer had gone bust, and the unfinished houses were mouldering away; Elaine told her Big Mike was spending three days a week up in Dublin now, arguing with lawyers. But somehow as well as summer holidays in France, he had taken his family skiing in the autumn midterm break; they still had a standing order of lobster at the delicatessen, and every Sunday at Mass they sat up at the very front.

That man is nothing but a crook, her mother said. She couldn't stand Big Mike, with his smirk, and his investments, and his Gucci cowboy boots. And him only a yahoo, that grew up on handouts from the Lions!

But he knew how to use his loaf, which was more than she could say for some people.

Cass's mother was not handling the downturn well. She had always been an assiduous shopper. She knew every delivery man in town by name; her walk-in wardrobe was a secret paradise of unworn sweaters and shawls, boots that crowded the shoe-rails like giddy dancers, waiting to pour onto the stage. Now, with things the way they were, she couldn't even shop in the sales. For Imelda, this was like a death sentence. Other than Tidy Towns meetings, which took place in the back room of the Olivia Smythe boutique on Main Street, she had largely stopped going out.

At home, with no one to look at her, she fell into black, ugly moods. She'd lie on the couch with a magazine propped against her crossed legs, snapping the pages so loud Cass could hear it from upstairs. Then with a hiss of dissatisfaction she'd toss it aside, and go stalking from room to room, clicking her fingers – 'active', but with nothing to do, like a grounded teenager, or a supercharged pensioner in an old folks' home – before deciding on something guaranteed to make her angry, like attempting to bake a soufflé, or knitting socks.

Imelda did not listen to the news. She didn't want to hear a whole load of blather about global this and economic that. When it came to the failing business, she knew where to put the blame.

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Imelda had long held that Cass and Dickie were ‘in cahoots’. They liked books, clever talk. They had a bond, she felt, that excluded her. Now she believed Cass had ‘turned’ her father against the garage. Last year Cass had done a project for Geography class about climate change. With your parents’ help you had to calculate how their work contributed to global warming. Dickie had thrown himself into this; he loved homework. They sat in the kitchen and made a list of all the cars the garage sold, estimated how much CO₂ it had taken to make them and ship here, worked out on average roughly how much greenhouse gas they would release over their lifetime. At the end they added the numbers up.

Cass could remember that moment very clearly. It had all been fun until then. Flippin’ hell, Dad said. He looked from the picture Cass had taken of Maurice Barnes Motors to the images of sodden Bangladeshi refugees after their village went underwater. That can’t be right, he said, checking the final total again.

According to Imelda, he was never the same after that. He’d started making vegetarian meals and cycling to work. Lunacy! Imelda said. What does it look like, a car dealer riding a bike to work?

Maurice himself, Cass’s grandfather, had had to fly back from Portugal to talk him out of expanding the fleet to sell more electric cars. We’re not selling to Björn and Agneta the Swedish architects, Dickie! he told him. People here want diesel! *Now you’re suckin’ diesel*, that’s the bumper sticker! Not, now you’re suckin’ bloody soy beans.

But the damage was done, Imelda said. He never put his back into it again. And all because his golden girl made a song-and-dance. I hope you’re happy, miss.

Cass couldn’t deny it: she had been disturbed by the project. It wasn’t just the garage; she was up to her neck in climate change too. Looking at Instagram, eating an ice cream, switching on a light: her most casual act left a toxic trace behind – as if she had a marauding shadow-self that choked the very world she lived in. For weeks she had moped around, paralysed by the inescapability of her own evil. She would stand on the

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threshold of the back garden, looking at the flowers and grass and the trees in the distance, imagining everything turning black, the birds and the insects falling out of the sky. Even on good days, like when Elaine gave her a bracelet she had two of, she would remember suddenly all of the animals that were going extinct and how the earth was going to flood and everything was doomed – because of the Barnes family.

Still, she was old enough now to realize that the international car trade had not been brought to a halt by her Transition Year Geography class. It's happening all over the world, Mam, she told her. It's not Dad's fault. It's a global phenomenon.

A global phenomenon and a work-shy attitude, Imelda said.

That was why it made Cass so nervous when Elaine came over. Her mother's moods swung like a ship's lantern in a storm. Who knew what she might say? It was quite possible that she would start complaining about Dickie in front of Elaine and give the game away. And what then? What would Elaine do? Would she think less of Cass? Would she still be her friend, now that their lives were no longer the same?

She tried to dissuade Elaine from visiting; she subtly undermined her mother when she could. But – although she had recently run out of toner and complained that her face felt like it had been tarmacked – Imelda was as beautiful as ever, and Elaine remained obsessed.

It was Elaine who noticed the wedding photos.

They were in the good room, where strictly speaking they shouldn't have been; Cass and PJ were only allowed in there when there were visitors, that was the rule. But Elaine wanted to look at Uncle Frank, who she thought was hot, even though he was dead; anyway, she said, technically she was a visitor.

The good room had the artificial feeling of the roped-off section of a guided tour. There was an enormous couch of turquoise velvet, a crystal chandelier, lots of little tables crowded with china ornaments. The mantelpiece was covered with pictures of the family through the years. Maurice and Peggy in sunglasses, on the deck of a yacht; Dickie and

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Frank as toddlers in matching dungarees; Frank in his football gear (That's how hot he is, Elaine said, he even looks good in a GAA jersey); Cass's First Holy Communion, PJ's First Holy Communion; Dickie, Imelda and the kids on holidays past, in Malaga, in Chamonix, in Disneyland, in Marrakesh, skiing, snorkelling, sunbathing, riding donkeys.

But no wedding photos, Elaine pointed out.

Cass was sure she was wrong; there must be something tucked away somewhere. But she looked and there wasn't.

Mysterious, Elaine said, and this time Cass couldn't disagree. Having her picture taken was literally her mother's favourite thing in the world. The house was full of free newspapers and glossy magazines, in the back pages of which Imelda appeared, glowing, at the town Talent Show, or the Lions Christmas Lunch, or the new Hermès store at Brown Thomas, or the relaunch of Coady's pub, with the Mayor or the PR or one of her friends from the Tidy Towns Committee looking wan or orange or cellulitey beside her. For her mother to pass up a photo op like her own wedding was not so much baffling as genuinely shocking.

They spent the afternoon in Cass's bedroom, coming up with conspiracy theories, but nothing explained it. That night, Cass sat down on the couch beside her father while he was watching TV. Hey, Dad? Do you have any photos of you guys's wedding?

She had rehearsed this line in front of her mirror for maximum casualness.

Her dad didn't reply at first. Instead, he stroked his chin, keeping his eyes fixed on the screen, so she wasn't even sure if he'd heard. Then, just as she was debating whether to repeat the question, There are some somewhere, all right, he said at last. I must see can I dig them out. And he turned and looked at her with the same smile as when he was telling her business was cyclical.

What the fuck? Elaine said when Cass relayed this to her.

I know, Cass said.

Until then, in her heart of hearts, Cass had suspected that the answer

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to the riddle was something mundane – that the pictures had got lost when they moved house, or PJ had spilled paste on them, or there was some olden-days type mishap with the negatives or whatever. Now she wondered if there genuinely was a secret conspiracy.

You have to ask your mam, Elaine said.

Yes, Cass said.

I can do it if you don't want to, Elaine said.

I'll ask her, Cass said.

That was the answer. Imelda was no good at lying. If Cass timed it right, she was bound to blurt out the truth.

Right now, though, Cass was trying to steer clear of her mother, who was in a particularly bad mood. Last week Dickie had sold her car. She'd parked it at the dealership, as was her habit, and went off to do her messages; while she was gone, Big Mike had come in, looking for a car for Augustina, the housekeeper. He told Dickie he only wanted a banger; then his eyes fell on the Touareg.

It wasn't – as Cass's dad had repeatedly and vainly pointed out – *actually* her car; he'd been trying to shift it for almost a year. If he'd sold it to anyone else, maybe she wouldn't have been quite so angry. But she was convinced Big Mike had bought it out of malice. He's rubbing our faces in it – that's what she kept yelling at Dickie. Until she calmed down, Cass thought it best to avoid any provocative questions, and keep Elaine out of her way.

Elaine, however, didn't like to wait. That Sunday she ran up to Cass after Mass in a state of great excitement to say that her father had been at Dickie and Imelda's wedding, seventeen years previously, and had told her what had happened.

Something happened? Cass said.

Elaine couldn't tell her right now because she had ballet. I'll come over to you later, she promised.

Is it bad? Cass said.

But Elaine was already climbing into her dad's car.

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When her friend rang the doorbell Cass made sure she was the one who answered it; she hustled Elaine upstairs before Imelda could see her. She'd come directly from her dance class, wearing a hoody over her leotard. She sat herself on the duvet with her legs crossed. But for a moment she didn't speak.

Cass had been a little offended that Elaine had gone ahead and uncovered a secret that rightfully belonged to her. Now she felt a sudden sting of dread. Maybe her parents had never got married at all! Maybe they weren't even her real parents! So? she said.

Elaine goggled at her with glassy eyes. Then she said, There was a bee.

What?

There was a bee, Elaine repeated.

I don't understand, Cass said.

Elaine, keeping her face very stiff, explained that as Imelda's father was driving his daughter to the church, a bee had flown in the window of the car and got trapped in her veil. She started freaking out, Elaine said. But her dad thought she just didn't want to marry Dickie.

When at last he realized what was happening, he'd pulled over, and tried to get the veil off her. But it had got caught in the seat belt, and he couldn't get it free. So he jumps out of the car, and he runs around to the passenger side, Elaine said. But just as he finally untangles it, he hears this scream.

It stung her? Cass said.

Right on the eye, Elaine said, with a certain amount of relish.

Imelda's father had tried to find a pharmacy on the way to church, but the best he could do was a little pub, where he'd bought her a Twister to hold against the swelling till they arrived. It didn't help, and Imelda had kept the veil over her face as she walked down the aisle, as she stood at the altar, as they exchanged their vows, even when Dickie went to kiss the bride. She didn't take it off right through the reception, Elaine said. And she wouldn't tell anybody what happened. Everyone just thought she'd lost the plot.

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Jesus, Cass said.

Yeah, Elaine said.

So that was why no pictures? Cass said. The sting was that bad?

My dad said it looked like she had a pig bladder stuck to her face, Elaine told her.

God, Cass said reflectively.

A moment passed in silence; then, at exactly the same time, they caught each other's eye. Once they'd started laughing it was impossible to stop. Before long, they were rolling around on the floor: Cass laughed so hard that she thought she might throw up.

A bee stuck in her mother's veil! A literal bee in her bonnet! It was too hilarious, too perfect. And that she had never told her children about it, even though the whole town knew – that was the icing on the cake. Imelda was so vain, she couldn't bear to be the punchline of a joke.

That evening after she went home Elaine sent her a close-up picture of a bee with the message **Will you bee mine Cass?** Cass sent one back of a bee superimposed onto a wedding dress that said **Bee my honey Elaine.** They stayed up half the night sending each other random pictures of bees. Each one was as funny as the one before it. Putting the phone down at last, she felt exhausted, in a good way, as if she'd climbed a mountain.

When she turned out the lights, though, the scene came back to her. This time she seemed to witness it through her own eyes, as if she were seated in a pew near the back of the church. She watched her mother push through the door and make her way up the aisle, and though she was veiled Cass could see her humiliation, her confusion – and Dickie's confusion too, gaping at the mysterious figure (who was under there?) he was about to wed. They were not much older than she was now; she felt sorry for them, stranded on the altar of the church she knew so well, while everyone stared, making their judgements.

She felt sorry for the bee too. Bees were dying everywhere, all around the world: PJ was always talking about it. Nobody knew the cause, but it was bad because the bees brought pollen from plant to plant and

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without them, Nature itself would die. This particular bee had been humming along, minding its own business, when it was swept without warning through the car window and into her mother's world. Enveloped by her veil, by her cries, it must have thought it was lost in some vast, labyrinthine flower. All points of reference had been stripped away; there was only the veil and her mother's huge, beautiful face. It seemed she could feel the bee's panic, its desperation to escape; she could see her mother's hands pummelling the air, then, as the creature made its last suicidal effort to defend itself, the sting pulsating on her skin, pumping its futile poison. She felt the bee's life ebb away. Nature was dying, the world was ending. As she fell asleep, it was her body on the floor by her mother's silk wedding shoes, already turning to dust.

After that, Elaine's interest in Imelda seemed to wane. Cass supposed the bee story detracted from her mystique. She did worry that, without Imelda's glamour, Elaine might lose interest in her too. But that didn't happen; and before long the girls had a new obsession.

There were many things to hate about their school – the ankle-length skirts, the hospital smell, the desiccated principal, the prayers, the sports, the boredom. Their English teacher, Ms Ogle, however, was more to be pitied than despised. Also known as 'the Last Nun', she was a spinster who had stayed at home to take care of her mother. The mother had been on her deathbed for thirty years without ever actually dying. The two of them lived in a grim little cottage off Main Street; Ms Ogle's teacher's bag was full of wallpaper samples and paint colour charts that she would never use.

She was a tragic figure, but she didn't seem to see it. She had a grandiose manner, and was fond of using long, exotic words – *bagatelle*, *mellifluous*, *distinctive* – like weird drapey silks you might find in a box in your grandmother's attic. Her actual clothes, however, were not drapey; she wore a combination of dungarees and frilly blouses, a look that Elaine called 'Victorian petrol station'.

The girls mocked Ms Ogle unceasingly. Sometimes it felt like there

weren't enough hours in the day for all the mocking. Everything about her was funny – even her name, because who would want to ogle her? But they also discussed her seriously as a cautionary tale, the danger of staying in the town and 'getting stuck' looking after a relative.

Ms Ogle wasn't aware of this either. She adored Cass and Elaine, her best students. 'My girls,' she called them.

Then one day Ms Ogle wasn't in class. She was very sick, they heard; so sick that her dying mother had risen from her bed for the first time in a decade in order to take care of her.

Was this ironic? Was it funny? On Sunday they saw Ms Ogle at Mass – waxy-pale, her eyes bulging out of her head as if it had shrunk. My girls, she said to them emotionally, reaching to hug them from her wheelchair. It was so tragic that they had to bite their lips to keep from cracking up. But they also had an obscure sense that it was their fault – that the mockery they poured on her so regularly had brought her to collapse.

They forgot about that as soon as Miss Grehan appeared; they forgot Ms Ogle existed. She walked through the door in a white trouser suit that set off her long, magnificent red hair, went straight to the blackboard and wrote, in capitals, LADY POETS.

It seemed clear just from looking at her that Miss Grehan was neither a spinster nor tragic. When they found her social media that night, their opinion was confirmed. Her relationship status was 'It's complicated . . .' In the accompanying pictures, her life looked like one continuous party, shifting from one city to another, like a James Bond film. Here she was at a club in Barcelona. Now she posed on the battlements of a castle in Prague. On the seashore in California, a sunset swirled around her like an emanation of her glorious red hair. In Dublin, she sat barefoot before an open fire. Everyone she knew was good-looking. Even the old people, Elaine said.

What on earth was she doing here? Grehan, Grehan . . . Cass's dad mused when she brought it up at dinner. I sold a Passat to a Grehan a few years back. Wait – or was it a Fabia? Hold on now till I think.

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It's that long since he sold a car he can't even remember, Imelda commented tartly.

Oh Jesus, don't start, Dickie said.

Miss Grehan may have had some connection to the man with the Pas-sat or Fabia; they never found out. In the classroom she didn't talk about her past, or indeed her present, with the castles and the sunsets. What she talked about was lady poets.

The lady poets had glamorous, impassioned lives, or torturous, wretched lives. Sometimes they had both. She told them about Anna Akhmatova, a Russian who when she was young looked like a movie star and wrote about all of her love affairs, but when she was old was banned by the government, and they shot her husband and threw her son in prison and took her pen and paper so she couldn't write. She told them about Anne Sexton and Elizabeth Bishop, two women who had been gifted, misunderstood and suicidally depressed, and whose wonderfully terrible lives seemed themselves like poems of sorts, reproofs to the world so undeserving of them. She told them about Sappho, an olden-days poet from the island of Lesbos, and when there were a few snickers at this she began to recite a poem where Sappho is jealous when she sees the woman she loves laughing with a man, and she can't speak and fire ripples under her skin and her ears are filled with roaring.

People imagined poems were wispy things, she said, frilly things, like lace doilies. But in fact they were like claws, like the metal spikes mountaineers use to find purchase on the sheer face of a glacier. By writing a poem, the lady poets could break through the slippery, nothingy surface of the life they were enclosed in, to the passionate reality that beat beneath it. Instead of falling down the sheer face, they could haul themselves up, line by line, until at last they stood on top of the mountain. And then maybe, just maybe, they might for an instant see the world as it really is.

She is incredible, Elaine said when the bell rang for the end of class.

She *was* incredible. It was hard to imagine anyone so glamorous and sophisticated could come from anywhere near their school. On the one

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hand, it gave them hope that they, too, might escape, and start their lives anew; on the other, it made escape seem all the more urgent, as they saw their town as it must appear to Miss Grehan, so dull-witted and unpoetic. At home, Cass looked at her parents with new eyes: Dickie losing his hair, doughy around the mouth, stooped under the weight of the failing business; Imelda caked in make-up though she had been home all day, her face like a mask she held slightly away from herself. Yes, it was easy to imagine they were falling, falling down the side of a mountain, into a crevasse.

Tonight at dinner they had had a fight about her mother's 'extravagances'. Dad had wanted Mam to move to a different, cheaper phone plan. Mam said Dad had a cheek telling anyone about plans. Now they sat in different rooms – Dad drinking a beer in front of the TV, Mam typing at her phone, her long, curved nails going click, click, click against the glass. When the doorbell rang, neither of them even seemed to notice, which was good because it was Elaine.

Her face was flushed. I found something, she said.

Cass wasn't sure she wanted Elaine here if there was going to be more fighting, but her friend had already pushed her way past her. I had to show you this in person, she said. Cass followed her up to her bedroom, where Elaine opened the laptop, then stood back for Cass to see. Cass leaned down and stared into the screen and gasped. Oh my God, she said. Yes, Elaine said. It's her? Cass asked. Elaine scrolled down the page – and there she was, wearing the white trouser suit and a mysterious smile, her red hair falling around her shoulders like inverted flames. 'Julie Grehan has a Master's from Trinity College,' it said beneath. 'She has lived in Paris and New York City.'

Cass stepped back from Elaine's laptop in a daze. Miss Grehan *herself* was a lady poet! She had written a book – an entire book! – of poems, called *Salt: A Chapbook*. It was unbelievable. At the same time, it made perfect sense. Suddenly it was impossible to imagine her *not* being a lady poet.

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Salt: A Chapbook was available for €18.99. We have to get it! Elaine said. Yes! Cass said. Like, right now! Elaine said.

Elaine had her own bank card, but it was at home and she couldn't remember the number. Ask your dad to get it for you, she said to Cass. Tell him it's for school. Right, Cass said. Go and ask him now, Elaine said. OK, Cass said. She stood up. In her head was the word *extravagances*. I'll just go and ask him, she said casually.

Downstairs, a woman in a blazer was talking about the financial crisis on the RTÉ news. A giant CGI number, 3.7%, loomed behind her in the studio, and she spoke of it in terms of dread, as if the 3.7% was itself on the loose in the city, like a serial killer. The light from the screen had painted Dickie's profile a deathly blue-white. As he watched, he twisted his wedding ring around and around on his finger.

She stood in the doorway, waiting for him to notice her. If he speaks to me, I will ask him, she told herself. But his eyes stayed fixed on the screen, so she slipped quietly back out and went to the kitchen. Imelda still frequently bought things out of defiance or force of habit, and hid them from Dickie. It might make more sense to ask her.

Her mother wasn't in the kitchen, just PJ, sitting at the breakfast bar with a book.

Where's Mam? Cass asked.

Tidy Towns, PJ said. Listen to this, he said, and read from the book, *Your body sheds twenty pounds of skin every year. Just in the time it takes to read this sentence, your body has lost two thousand skin cells.*

That's disgusting, Cass said.

While you were saying that, you probably lost about eight hundred skin cells, PJ said. While I was saying that, I probably lost about two and a half thousand skin cells.

Elaine appeared in the doorway. Did you ask him? she said.

Ask me what? PJ said.

Shut up for a second, Cass said. She felt ashamed and confused, as if she were surrounded by tiny dead fragments of her body.

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Did you know, PJ said, looking back at his book, that the first part of the human body to form in the womb is the anus?

Elaine looked at PJ with an expression of utter repulsion. What is wrong with you? Cass said.

It's just nature, he protested.

Did you ask your dad? Elaine said.

Ask him what? PJ said.

Would you mind your own business? Cass said.

On the table, she saw Imelda's purse. I'll just use my mam's, she said airily. But her heart pounded, and as she undid the clasp and paged through the cards, she realized PJ was watching her from his vantage point at the breakfast bar. What? she demanded. PJ lowered his eyes to his book. Cass took the card and slipped it into her pocket. You're such a little spy, she said to PJ.

Leaving the room, she felt a strange mixture of triumph and humiliation. Your family is so hilarious, Elaine said.

In class next day they learned about Sylvia Plath. She was the most famous lady poet of all; in the movie of her life she was played by Gwyneth Paltrow, and they watched a clip of her cycling around Cambridge on a bicycle with a basket. She had come from America, aged nineteen, to university in England, where she fell in love with an Englishman named Ted. He was also a poet, Miss Grehan said. She showed them a picture. A murmur went around the room. He was literally the most handsome man Cass had ever seen, with a craggy jaw and eyes that were deep and stern but kind too, and playful. They had met at the launch of a college poetry magazine called *St Botolph's*. Ted came to the party with another girl. Sylvia went up to him and bit him on the cheek. So hard it left a mark, Miss Grehan told them.

Cass glanced across the room at Elaine. If Ms Ogle had told them the story, they would probably have been cracking up. Had Sylvia Plath ever heard of shaking hands? Was there ever in history a name as ridiculous as 'Botolph'?

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But Elaine was rapt: she watched the teacher, her skin glowing, her lips red as if she'd been chewing them all through class, and Cass knew her friend was thinking what it might be like to be swept up by a man like that, with a craggy jaw, and find yourself so flooded with passion that you would do things – that you would *want* to do things – that ordinarily you'd never dream of, like bite him on the cheek, or put his penis in your mouth. And watching her think that, she found herself thinking it too, and feeling it; and it seemed to her that that passion was very close, like a moon hidden in the brightness of the daytime sky, whose private gravity she could feel pulling her away from the earth.

After class Elaine told Cass she had decided that instead of a brand ambassador she now wanted to be a poet. Cass said that was crazy because she had just been thinking the exact same thing. They ran after the teacher in the corridor and asked her what to do.

Up close, she was actually only a little taller than Elaine, Cass realized; she had a splash of freckles across her nose, and her beautiful hair was more cinnamon than red.

She seemed surprised and happy when Elaine told her about their plan. She told the girls that to be a poet, all you needed to do was love poetry. Devote yourself to it! Fill your life with it!

And you would advise moving to the city, a big city, Elaine probed.

Not necessarily. Miss Grehan sounded a little bit surprised. You can write poetry anywhere, about anything.

But you lived in Paris, didn't you, Elaine said.

And New York, Cass said.

After you did your degree at Trinity, Elaine said.

Miss Grehan again seemed slightly taken aback. How do you know all this?

It's on your Facebook, Elaine said.

They had sometimes experienced this with adults – surprise that information that they had made available to be viewed by anybody at any time had, in fact, been viewed by somebody.

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If you want to move to the city, you can, Miss Grehan said. And studying poetry at university is a wonderful thing to do. But more important is to read poetry, and write poetry, every day. It doesn't have to be for long. If just once a day people read a poem instead of picking up their phone, I guarantee you the world would be a better place.

When she had gone Elaine said that this was very good advice but she still thought that living in a major city was key. The first thing we need to do is apply to college in Dublin, she said. That's what she did. Cass agreed this was the best way forward.

Inside she was exhilarated. They had often talked about leaving town before. But this was the first time Elaine had proposed they do it together. They walked through the school gates arm in arm, Elaine making plans in her ear. Lesbians! the droopy vaping boys shouted after them from the doorway of Spar. Dykes! But Cass didn't even blush. *We!* The word resounded in her head like the singing of angels.

A door opened behind her, and light slanted out onto the landing. What are you doing? a voice said.

Uh, what does it look like I'm doing?

'Uh,' eavesdropping?

Look who's talking, Cass retorted, then realized that this did not quite work. I wanted to ask Dad something, she said.

Her brother sat down beside her at the top of the stairs. Get this, he said. There's a butterfly called the Flambeau butterfly that *drinks* crocodile tears! Like, right out from their eyes! Isn't that crazy?

Cass sighed. From downstairs the argument continued in a kind of horrible clashing drone.

Seriously, isn't it? PJ said.

You are such a child, she said.

I'm almost a teenager, he said. Technically I *am* a teenager.

Cass didn't respond to this. After a moment he said, Are they still fighting?

Cass shrugged. Through the banisters she watched her mother stamp

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into the living room and stand in front of the TV with her hands on her hips. Who was the crocodile, and who was the butterfly? Imelda was beautiful, and iridescent, and she had lived off Dickie's job that he hated, so at first glance she seemed like the butterfly; but really wasn't it Dickie who had the fluttery, gentle quality? And Imelda who would chew your leg off? And hadn't she crocodile tears in abundance? But did that mean Dickie was living off her?

In a lower voice, PJ said, Things are really bad at the garage.

Duh, Cass said. She sank her chin into her folded arms.

A kid in my class said it's going to close. Not the one here, the other one.

She turned to look at him. He had an elfin face, his big eyes so dark in the shadows of the landing they were almost black.

What does some kid in your class know? she said.

His uncle works there. He's a mechanic.

Cass heaved a weary sigh. She was so sick of her family and its humiliating floundering. Has it ever occurred to you that I might have other things to think about?

Right, PJ said. But he didn't move from the step. Then he said, It's just, what do you think will happen?

I'm actually going to be moving to Dublin, so I couldn't really say.

As soon as she said it, she wished that she hadn't; here in the house it sounded fanciful, a child's whimsy, no different to when PJ told her he'd been practising his telepathy all day and he thought he'd almost cracked it.

You're moving to Dublin? PJ said.

To college, she said reluctantly. With Elaine.

With Elaine?

Why is that so hard for you to understand? It came out sharper than she meant and PJ flinched. She felt bad. It won't be for a while, she said. After my exams.

Oh, he said. He sounded relieved. He got up to go back to his room, but before he went he pushed something into her hands. Here.

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It was a padded envelope, with Imelda's name on the printed label.

It came right after I got back from school, he said. I picked it up before Mam could see it. They'd addressed it to her but I could tell it was a book so I knew it must be for you.

Oh, she said non-committally, and took it from his hand.

It'll still be on her credit card statement, he said. But she usually just throws those in the bin.

She looked up at him again. When they were little, they used to play squirrels in the woods: he was the grey squirrel, and she was the red. Red squirrel! he'd call. The hunter is coming! Thanks, grey squirrel! And she'd scramble into a tree as Dickie came crashing through the undergrowth. In fact, PJ's hair was coppery, closer to red; but she was the oldest, so she got to choose.

It's for school, she told him gruffly. As soon as his door closed, she ripped open the packaging, already composing a message to Elaine in her head along the lines of **Guess whats arrived OMG get here now!!!**

But when she pulled it from the envelope she paused.

It looked quite different to the picture on the website, more like a pamphlet than a real book. The cover was thick paper of an ugly maroon colour; there were staples in the middle, as if someone had made it themselves. *Salt: A Chapbook*, it said, *by Julie Grehan*.

The poems inside did not dispel her sense of unease. The first one was called 'Salt'. It began: 'Your salt on my tongue / A cause of heart disease / Yet meat needs salt / And you make me meat.' Hurriedly Cass moved on to the next, titled 'The Butcher': 'A jolly sign above the door: *Pleased to Meet You! Meat to Please You!* / Tell me, butcher, lover, does *my* meat please *you*? / Or do you leave it with the liver / As pussy carrion –'

On the pages that followed, the same words recurred, *meat, salt, butcher*, with others of a similar, unpleasantly corporeal tone, *slab, heart, slice*. She tried unsuccessfully to reconcile them to the graceful teacher, with her musical laugh and capricious wisdom. Alone in her bedroom, she felt her cheeks burn. How could she tell Elaine about

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this? They had ordered the book in the hope of seeing into the hidden parts of her life, but they'd imagined it as a kind of extension of her Facebook, further pictures of castles and craggy-jawed men. This was literally like looking inside someone, to the gore underneath their skin. Why would anyone want to see that? She put the book down. *Eighteen ninety-nine!* she thought miserably.

Then she pulled herself together. She had taken a risk to get this book. There must be something inside it to make that worthwhile. She flicked brusquely through the poems, finding only more of the same, until she got to the Acknowledgements at the back. It was a list of people who had helped her with the book. The first line was full of other Grehans, her family, Cass presumed. But then came others, with exotic-sounding names, who had let her stay with them in Paris and Barcelona while she was writing. When Cass looked them up online, she found a couple of faces she recognized from the teacher's social media. She felt a new surge of enthusiasm. This was what she wanted: extra facts, an exclusive look behind the scenes. The very last line was more mysterious: it pledged 'undying fealty' to 'the Bitches of Beastwick'.

And when Cass googled *that*, she got a big surprise.

She did not know what to do. She did not like keeping secrets from Elaine. Yet this secret was so ugly – ugly like the book, she thought, with its gross poems and anatomical line drawing of a heart – and Cass did not want to be the one to show Elaine something like that.

Yet the evil of the book seeped out anyway. In their English class, before Miss Grehan arrived, they found a gaggle of girls listening to Sarah Jane Hinchy, who was making a big stink over something she'd found online about Sylvia Plath. Apparently before she came to England and met Ted, 'Plath' – as Sarah Jane Hinchy called her – had tried to commit suicide.

So? Elaine said. She was suicidal. She died of suicide. Everybody knows that.

She couldn't stand Sarah Jane Hinchy, who was marginally ahead of

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them in the class rankings, and had famously worn a rainbow badge on her school jumper last year until the nuns made her take it off.

The suicide attempt Sarah Jane Hinchy had read about was particularly horrific. Plath had taken a whole load of sleeping pills, she said, and hidden under her house – it was some sort of American house that had a crawl-space underneath it. She crawled into this crawl-space and lay down there to die. Everyone thought she was missing, Sarah Jane Hinchy said. They were searching all over town for her. But the whole time, like for three days, she was unconscious under her house, basically *rotting*.

Cass saw Elaine flinch at this, and she felt a churn of unease. Suicide was one thing: lots of famous people had done it, and it meant you didn't get old and lose your looks. Rotting while alive and then reappearing out of the ground literally like a zombie was not glamorous by anyone's definition. Elaine had strong feelings about that sort of thing. So did the other girls.

I don't think we should be learning about someone like that, Petra Gilhooley commented. Like, I'm sorry, but how is that appropriate?

It's probably not true, Karen Casey said. I don't remember it being in the film.

When Miss Grehan arrived, however, she confirmed that the story was correct. She said that that was what made Sylvia so interesting – that she was, on the surface, a beautiful, all-American girl, from a good family, but underneath, she had terrible problems.

But do you think it's appropriate to be teaching us about that kind of person? Petra Gilhooley said, unmoved.

We're all that kind of person, Miss Grehan said. We all have problems. But often instead of accepting the truth about ourselves, we cover it up. We try to make ourselves the way we think we're expected to be. So many of the bad things that happen in the world come from people pretending to be something they're not.

Writing a poem does the opposite, she said. If you look at the world, a little piece of the world, and try to see it for what it actually is, you start

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to see yourself more clearly too. And that can be very liberating. Sometimes it can save your life.

So, for tonight's homework, each of them was to write a poem. A groan went up at this. Miss Grehan laughed. It's not a punishment, she said. It might even be something you enjoy. Write about your life, about your world. Your world is full of *details*. *Look* at them before you write. If something is red, what kind of red is it? If you see a tree, what kind of tree is it?

After class, to Cass's surprise, Elaine didn't mention the gruesome Sylvia Plath story at all. She did, however, have strong words to say about *some people* who seemed determined to sabotage Miss Grehan's class.

You don't think Petra had a point? Cass suggested neutrally. Like, maybe it's not appropriate.

Elaine said Petra Gilhooley was just a stooge. Sarah Jane Hinchy was the one pulling the strings. And it's obvious why, she said. She has a crush on Miss Grehan. And she's jealous because Miss Grehan prefers us.

You think so? Cass said. She had got the churning sensation in her stomach again.

Oh yeah, Elaine said. She's always staring at her and trying to get her attention.

I mean, you think Miss Grehan prefers us? Cass said.

Definitely, Elaine said. Because we get the whole poet thing. That reminded her of something. Her eyes sparked and she leaned forward confidentially. Come to my house after school. I have something to show you.

Then she hurried away to Business Studies.

On the way home Elaine told Cass she was going to post her poem on her Instagram. She had discovered that there was a new generation of lady poets who posted their poems online and got millions of views. They wrote about real-life issues, like racism and homophobia, and were

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friends with singers, influencers and other celebrities. You could actually become seriously famous from poetry, Elaine noted.

Miss Grehan didn't seem to have got very famous from it, Cass pointed out. Elaine agreed it was strange, especially considering the way she looked. Cass asked if Elaine thought Miss Grehan was good-looking. Elaine didn't reply, apart from a strange sort of smile, as if she had a joke in mind she wasn't sure Cass would get.

What are you going to write about? Cass asked her.

I have a few ideas, Elaine said airily. They had settled in her bedroom, with a plate of Ryvitas on the floor between them. She bent her head over the keyboard so her face disappeared behind her hair. Cass looked down at her own blank screen. She didn't have any ideas. All she could think about was the book; she had brought it with her in her schoolbag in case she suddenly changed her mind and wanted to show it to Elaine. Now she was worried Elaine would somehow discover it on her own.

Elaine's head jerked up. For a moment their eyes locked. How do you spell *caress*? Elaine said.

Cass spelled it. Elaine frowned. I was sure there were two r's.

Maybe I'm wrong? Cass said. Elaine returned to her keyboard without replying. After a moment she asked about Cass's trees.

Trees? said Cass.

The trees, the fucking trees you have in your back garden, Elaine said, snapping her fingers.

There are lots of different ones, Cass said. I think most of them are oaks.

Elaine pressed her lips and typed some more. What are you writing? Cass asked.

I'll tell you when I'm finished, Elaine said coyly. Cass smiled. She had to fight the urge to wrest the laptop away from Elaine so she could read her poem. Her own page remained pristine.

Evening was falling. In the silver glow of the screen Elaine looked like a moon child. What's another word for red? she said.

Scarlet, Cass said.

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No, when it's for someone's hair. Not ginger. Deeper than that.

Without knowing quite why, Cass felt uneasy, just as she had in the classroom that morning.

Cinnamon, she said in a low voice. The word was right there, as if it had been waiting for her.

Cinnamon. Elaine was happy. She typed some more, chewing savagely on her lips all the while. They were crimson, ruby, blood-red.

Cass's head buzzed. She yawned artificially. Wasn't there something you were going to show me?

Oh yeah! Elaine jumped to her feet, and without another word she ran into the en suite.

Immediately Cass seized her laptop, but Elaine had locked the screen. Where have you gone? she called after a minute. Almost ready, Elaine returned in a sing-song from the bathroom.

Cass picked up a cracker and crumbled it in her fingers. She looked around the room that she knew so well, the My Little Pony lamp sending its doe-eyed steeds around and around the walls in a pale rainbow carousel, the bed covered with teddy bears.

Check it out, Elaine's voice came from behind her.

Cass turned. Elaine was standing in the doorway of the en suite, wearing a bright white trouser suit.

What do you think? she said, doing a twirl. Do I look like a lady poet?

Cass didn't know what to say. All her thoughts slipped out of her head. Suddenly Elaine was a different person, chic, cosmopolitan, older. Not like a poet, not like a college student; more like a girl who lived in a big city, and worked in an art gallery or an advertising agency, someone who got up at 6 a.m. to do Pilates, and then went out onto a balcony in a towelling robe cupping her coffee in her hands. She was a woman already, Cass realized; her future was right there, a plush chamber at the edge of the bedroom she could step into at will.

She didn't know why that should make her feel so sad; but it was all she could do to whisper, Beautiful.

Elaine looked at her with a quizzical half-smile, then let out a laugh.

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It's a joke! she exclaimed. I found it in my mam's wardrobe. I wouldn't wear this for real!

Cass laughed weakly. Again her head was full of buzzing, as if a whole swarm of bees had got trapped there, behind some invisible veil.

I've got to find some way to show it to Julie, Elaine said. She'll think it's so funny.

Julie? Cass repeated dazedly.

Miss Grehan, Elaine said. She took out her phone and handed it to Cass. Here, take a selfie of me.

It had been long established that Cass took better pictures of Elaine than she did of herself. But this time, she couldn't focus. All she could see was a white-gold shimmer that seemed to blur free from the screen.

Then from behind her she heard a knock. The housekeeper was there. Your mother is downstairs, she said.

My mother? Cass said.

What's your mother doing here? Elaine said.

I don't know, Cass said, and then, forlornly, I'd better go and see what she wants.

From the landing, she saw Imelda down below in the hall, talking to Elaine's mother. She caught sight of Cass at the top of the stairs. You're needed at home, she said.

Now? Cass said, and then, What for? But Imelda had already stepped outside. Cass took a last glance behind her. Elaine, all in white, gazed down over the banisters, literally like an angel, bidding her farewell from heaven. Laterz, she said.

In the car Cass told her mother she should have just texted her. She could have come home herself, there was no need to physically remove her from her friend's—

Enough! Imelda said sharply. They made the rest of the journey in silence.

At home, PJ was sitting at the dinner table – just sitting, motionless. He didn't look at her; he had that blinking, misaligned look he got after he'd

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been swimming. Cass could hear their father talking on the phone in the next room. His voice was grave. With a sudden rush of fear, Cass realized what had happened. PJ had told them about the credit card! Her heart began to knock against her ribs. Inside she wept, she cursed the book, and Miss Grehan too, whose arrival had pulled everything apart! Her father came in and sat down at the end of the table. He let out a deep sigh. Then he began to speak.

It was not about the credit card. It was about the garage – the one in the next town over. With a heavy heart, their father told them, he had made the decision to close it. He'd done everything he could to keep it alive, but the numbers just wouldn't add up. They would cease trading at the end of next week.

He spoke for a while in this oddly formal way; Cass realized he was practising the speech he would have to give to his staff. Finally he looked across the table at the two children. I wanted you to know what was coming, he said. In case you heard any of the kids talking about it in school or around town. He paused a moment. Is there anything you want to ask me?

PJ shook his head.

Can I go back to Elaine's? Cass said.

No, snapped Imelda.

Cass burst into tears.

Dickie reached across the table, awkwardly, to put his hand on her shoulder. I know this has come as a bit of a shock, he said, in the measured, implacable tone of a moment ago. But I don't want you or PJ to worry. These things are cyclical. The market is slow now, but it'll pick up again. The important thing—

Oh Jesus, Dickie! Imelda exclaimed, slapping her palms on the table. You ran that place into the ground! Into the ground!

Her relief that they hadn't found out about the card had lasted only a moment, then it gave way to rage – rage that they had dragged her away from her friend to listen to this, dragged her into their humiliating mess.

As soon as she got upstairs to her room, she sent Elaine a message. Total fucking bullshit, it said. A tick appeared to show the message had been delivered, then two blue ticks to show Elaine had read it. But there was no reply.

Cass let out a gurgle of fury. She made fists, and dug her nails into her palms, then beat her fists against her head. She looked in the mirror at her hateful face. Tears were running down her cheeks. Everything was ruined. When the garage closed, there was no way Elaine wouldn't hear about it. At last she would know the truth about Cass and her family. And then? Would that be the end of Trinity too? In desperation she wrote again: U free 4 a call really need 2 talk 2 u

This time, the message wasn't even read. She looked out the window at the drab, dead landscape – the wet fields, the power lines, the trees. The sky above was bleak and grey. She felt like she'd been buried under her parents' lives, their failures, their unhappiness. Into her head came the grotesque image of Sylvia Plath lying in her crawl-space, rotting. She sobbed in revulsion, chased it from her mind – only for another to take its place, more terrible still.

Did Elaine *already* know? Had Imelda said it to her mother earlier when they spoke in the hallway? Was that why she wasn't responding now? Was it already too late? She let out a wail – she picked up her phone, begged aloud for Elaine to call her. But Elaine couldn't hear her. She was probably messaging Miss Grehan instead. *Julie!* She had friended her on Facebook – she had DM'd her the selfie – new messages were flying back and forth between them as they soared in their matching trouser suits, hand in hand, over the town, while Cass lay buried beneath it! Image after image sprang up in her mind: Elaine crossing the cobblestones of Trinity College, with Miss Grehan there beside her, it didn't make sense but nevertheless there she was, and now she turned to Cass from the dream or vision and looked out at her and smiled a click-clack mannequin smile, before turning back to Elaine, leaving Cass alone, alone, to weep . . .

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She told Elaine the next morning that Imelda had brought her home to Skype her granddad for his birthday. Uh huh, Elaine said. Her eye was on the door, waiting for Miss Grehan to appear; Cass knew she had a picture of the trouser suit with her, ready to share.

From her voice Cass could tell she hadn't heard about the garage. As class began she wondered whether there was some way to break it to her that would make it seem less bad – make it sound as if Dickie was closing it for dynamic business reasons, like he was planning to open another garage in a different county. Or if she told her he was planning a whole new—

Miss Grehan's hand fell on her shoulder. Do you mind, Cass?

What?

Do you mind if I read out your poem? Miss Grehan said.

Oh, Cass said, flustered. From the other side of the room, she saw Elaine looking at her. No, she said. She didn't know herself whether she meant no, she didn't mind or no, she would prefer if she didn't. But Miss Grehan cleared her throat, and there in the middle of the classroom, began to read.

Flying, by Cassandra Barnes

Hand in hand, night by night

We are flying out of sight

No one can touch us when we fly

Our words, our dreams become the sky.

Unseen, the higher up we go

The clouds themselves are far below

And our sleeping bodies, miles apart,

While we press closer, heart to heart.

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Paul Murray

And closer still, until the dawn
Returns us to our mortal form
And day, and rules – still, in your eye
I see the night dream of our sky.

Isn't that sensational? Miss Grehan said, smiling down at Cass, and then turning the smile on the rest of the class. I think that's just sensational. She turned to Cass once more. Can I ask you what inspired it?

Cass gazed unhappily at her hands in front of her on the desk. She had written the poem while lying in her bed with a breaking heart. *Twilight*, she said quietly.

Miss Grehan cocked her head, then nodded and smiled again. Well, thank you for letting me share it, she said, and then, to the others, she said, So as we can see, anything at all can be the spark for a great poem.

She moved off at last. Cass kept her eyes on her textbook. She was uncomfortably aware of Elaine looking at her still from her desk by the window. She longed to go to her side. The first chance she got she would tell her everything. But time dragged on endlessly, and when the bell finally rang, Miss Grehan called her back.

Unwilling, Cass approached the top of the class, aware again of Elaine's eyes flashing onto her and away again as she filed with the others out of the room.

At the teacher's desk, Miss Grehan regarded her merrily. Such a wonderful poem, Cass, she said. Well done.

Thank you, Cass said, looking at the floor.

I hope I didn't embarrass you by reading it out. I know poetry can be very personal.

Cass shook her head and said it wasn't personal at all. The teacher went on: there were competitions she should enter, poetry books she should read; Cass just kept nodding dumbly until at last Miss Grehan relented. Well, she said, putting her books in her tote bag. I hope you keep writing, anyway.

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Cass raced out after Elaine. She found her by the lockers, deep in conversation with Sarah Jane Hinchy. *Sen-sational!* Elaine was saying.

SEN-SATIONAL! Sarah Jane Hinchy exclaimed, in a louder voice. They both laughed.

Oh hello, Elaine said casually to Cass, over her shoulder. Then they went back to talking, and Cass had to hover at the edges until they were finished. Maybe see you later, Sarah Jane Hinchy said to Elaine as they parted. I'll text you, Elaine said to her. Then she turned to her locker and took out her coat. Cass scrambled around for something to say. At that moment Miss Grehan passed them. She beamed at the girls as she went. Cass said, Aren't you going to show her the photo?

Hmm? Elaine said, looking into her locker.

The photo, of you in the suit. Weren't you going to show it to – Julie?

Now Elaine turned to look at her directly. Her green eyes were cool and emotionless. That was a joke, Cassandra, she said.

Yeah, I know, Cass said. She laughed falsely. She blew air through her lips. I can't believe she read out my crappy poem, she said in a blasé, Elaine type way. I wrote it literally in thirty seconds this morning.

Don't run it down, Elaine said, gazing ahead of her again. It was good. She paused, then added, as if speaking to herself, It was *sen-sational*.

Cass laughed again, carelessly, but she felt a deep bell-toll of dread within. Will I come to yours today?

I don't care, Elaine said, with a shrug.

They walked through the school gates together, past the droopy boys, in silence. Elaine did not seem angry. She wore a half-smile, and gazed ahead of her placidly. They were like two strangers who happened to find themselves in lock-step on a city street.

Listen, there's something I have to tell you.

Just a minute, Elaine murmured, thumbing her phone.

Cass waited impatiently. She had already opened her bag to take out

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the book. Wait till Elaine heard about the Bitches of Beastwick! What does it mean? she would say, and Cass would be like, Google it, and she would, and she'd see for herself, and then they'd start a new story together, a story in which they alone knew the true identity of the seemingly perfect teacher, and slowly uncovered her plot.

Listen, she said again, when Elaine finally put the phone aside. I found out something crazy. It's about Miss Grehan.

Elaine rolled her eyes.

You're not going to believe this, Cass promised.

Do you realize you talk about her a lot? Elaine said. Like – a *lot*?

Me? Cass said.

It's like you're obsessed, Elaine said.

Cass gaped. Her heart was beating hard. She didn't know what to say or do. She began to feel like she'd been trapped – as if Miss Grehan, by singling her out in class, had pulled her over to her side – as if she knew that Cass knew, and wanted to separate her from Elaine, to make her as repulsive as she was, so she couldn't pass on her secret. It's mental, I swear, she said, reaching for the book. Just look.

I'm kind of tired, Elaine said doubtfully.

It'll only take a second, Cass pleaded.

I might just go in and have a nap, Elaine said. They were outside her house.

Oh, Cass said. She remembered her exchange with Sarah Jane Hinchy. Okay, she said.

You can tell me whatever it is tomorrow, Elaine said.

Sure, Cass said. She stayed and watched as her friend walked up her driveway. She couldn't move, she couldn't speak; fire rippled under her skin. Then she turned. She did not continue to her own house; instead she went back to the school. She locked her bike in the bike stand, and walked inside, down the corridor to the Principal's Office. She left the book at the door, with the corner turned down at the Acknowledgements page.

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Miss Grehan did not come to class the following day. In fact, for the rest of the week, the girls spent English in study hall.

No one in authority would tell them where she had gone, but there were rumours that a parent had complained. Complained about what? Here the stories became vaguer, weirder. Some said the content of the class was inappropriate. Others that it was the teacher herself who was found inappropriate. Petra Gilhooley said she'd heard Miss Grehan was in a coven. Karen Casey said no, it was some kind of dance troupe; they wore tassels on their nipples and strap-on dildos.

None of the rumours predicted she would be coming back.

You know who's behind it, don't you? Elaine said darkly. Sarah Jane fucking Hinchy.

Elaine was so distraught by the teacher's disappearance that when the news broke about the garage closing she didn't even notice. She went about in a daze, her eyes red from crying. Then one morning right before midterm she came up to Cass with a lot of wild talk about how they needed to go to Dublin and track Miss Grehan down. Her face was flushed, her hair in disarray. What if something's happened to her? she said. We need to find her!

But how? Cass said.

From her Facebook, Elaine said.

Cass was surprised, because the week before Miss Grehan had set her account to private. But before she did, it turned out, Elaine had taken screengrabs. She showed Cass her phone, scrolling through what seemed like hundreds of pictures of pubs, cafés, grocery stores, bookshops, sea-side strolls. It's everywhere she referenced in the last three months, she told Cass. She zigzagged her finger over the screen and a map appeared, with all of the locations marked out and red lines traced between them. We'd start around here, Elaine said, placing her fingertip on a dense red blot at the centre.

Cass listened, nodded along, agreed that they would find an excuse to go to Dublin. Inside she felt blurred and sad, as though she were filling with a kind of acidic mist that obscured her and corroded her at the same time.

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In the event, they did not go to Dublin. On the first day of the mid-term break, Elaine was whisked away to the airport; a surprise holiday, courtesy of her father. She messaged Cass conspiracy theories from the airport, from the taxi, from the hotel reception. Then she went silent.

Cass thought about going on her own. She pictured herself walking the streets, gazing at Elaine's snowflake diagram, not resting till she had tracked the teacher down. Instead she spent the week at home. The atmosphere was hellish. Her mother railed at Dickie, when he was there; when he was not, she railed to the girls from Tidy Towns, or to Dennis the postman, or to her children. He with his books, Mr Trinity College, she would say. Letting on to be some great genius! But where's the evidence of this supposed genius? Do you know? Did anyone see light of it since? And she would bring her hand up to her brow, searching the horizon for the genius that Dickie had once had and then lost.

Cass still held out hope that the rumours might be false, and the teacher would somehow return after midterm. But then something happened. Ms Ogle's mother – who had enjoyed such a spectacular return to health since her daughter got sick – slipped on a guava while shopping in the exotic fruits section of the supermarket and hit her head. She died in hospital the next day.

Elaine arrived late to the funeral – she must have just got back. She didn't see Cass, though they were standing close by, and Cass didn't approach her. But Ms Ogle, who was out of her wheelchair, made a bee-line for the two of them. She spread her arms wide and embraced them both together. My girls! she exclaimed. They looked at each other, startled, over the teacher's sobbing head. Ms Ogle dabbed her eyes. Now, she said in a more businesslike voice. Tell me everything you've been doing in class while I was away.

Cass was struck dumb. How could they begin to describe those tumultuous weeks? How could they explain the elation and the heart-break, the sense of the future opening up before them and then closing down again? Again she looked at Elaine – ruefully, hopelessly. Elaine

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shrugged. She had a fresh tan and a bracelet Cass hadn't seen before, with a heart on it.

Nothing, she said. Just the stuff from the book.

When school resumed on Monday, Ms Ogle resumed with it. She stood at the top of the classroom, cheeks aglow. The supermarket had given her a huge cash payout as compensation for the tragedy, they had heard. She had already painted her front door a radiant guava-pink.

II

Since the closure of the garage in the next town over, her father had stopped saying things would get better. They knew how bad things were; the whole town knew. Old ladies would come up to Dickie after Mass, and tell him they had said a Novena for him and for the motor industry in general. Others steered clear, as if his failure might be catching. Sometimes when Cass walked into a shop now everything went quiet, and she felt shame prickle over her, like a hideous second skin, a new adversity arrived to take the place of her eczema.

The Crisis had transformed Main Street into a mouthful of cavities, businesses big and small shuttered in its aftermath. Yet the collapse of the garage was felt by the townsfolk to be of a different order. A fall as dizzying as the Barneses' couldn't come from simple economics. There had to be a moral element.

Many of them felt that Imelda was to blame. Dickie made a fortune and Imelda spent two – that was what people said. Imelda, with her cheekbones and her Italian leather boots, got up like the Queen of Sheba just to drive to the supermarket! Giving the poor manager an earful because they didn't have star anise or tamarind or whatever was supposedly all the rage in New York! It's a long way from tamarind she was reared, they told each other darkly. It's a long way from underfloor heating and orthodontists or any of that palaver. Well, look at her now.

Yes: look at Imelda. Nails chipped, roots showing, driving to Lidl first thing in the morning so she'd be sure not to run into anyone she knew; she spent her days excavating her walk-in wardrobe – laying out gloves,

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hats, scarves, blouses, dresses, jeans, skirts, gilets, stoles, pelisses on the bedroom floor and taking pictures of them from every angle, like a cop at a crime scene. In the evening, she sat at her laptop selling them off – cursing the online vultures who haggled over every penny like farmers at a mart, and when they finally paid, drove her mad with messages wanting to know why their purchases hadn't arrived.

Admittedly, sometimes they hadn't arrived because Imelda hadn't sent them; Cass had come into the kitchen more than once to find her mother with her arms flung around the cordless Dyson or the 'old' Dyson or the forty-eight-piece bone china dinner set she had never opened, bawling her eyes out like it was a beloved pony being sent to the knacker's yard.

Their father often worked late; it was as if the fewer cars the garage sold, the more time he had to spend there. But who could blame him? Whenever he came home, he faced the same tirade from Imelda: he had ruined them, he had betrayed them, she had been duped. Cass wished he'd defend himself, fight back! But he just sat there at the dinner table, head bowed, without saying a word, which of course only made Mam angrier.

It's okay for you, PJ said – whispering, as if Imelda would hear them, though downstairs she was roaring at the top of her voice. You're going to college. I'll still be stuck here.

Oh yeah, it's so great for me, Cass said. Doing my Leaving with all this going on.

In truth she told herself the same thing – that in a few months she'd be gone. She stayed up till midnight most nights now, revising – parabolas, modal verbs, yardangs, the Land League – fact after fact, filling her up. But it had become harder to believe in the future, to see it. The problems at home were so huge and omnivorous that the idea of escaping them, of *being somewhere else*, had come to seem impossible. Her dad – who had studied at Trinity himself when he was young, who'd been so excited when she told him her plans! – no longer reassured her that it would all work out. He rarely spoke to her at all now, about anything. As for her

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mother, she'd only say that Dublin was full of perverts and she didn't know why anyone would want to live there; she'd read something in the news about a man caught walking around TK Maxx with mirrors on his shoes so he could look up girls' skirts.

Worst of all, Cass no longer had Elaine.

It wasn't that they didn't get on: they still chatted every day at school, and sometimes they walked home together too. But Elaine no longer invited Cass to her house to study; she no longer asked for stories about Imelda; she no longer spoke about the life they would have up in Dublin. Was it because of the garage closing? Or what had happened with Miss Grehan? Cass had no clue – she only knew that Elaine's interests, these days, were elsewhere.

She told herself she wasn't sorry. Though it hurt almost beyond description, she did not want Elaine to have to share in her family's humiliation. Better that they should just drift apart.

Elaine's interests now lay, specifically, in boys. She threw herself into the pursuit of boys with the same comprehensive determination as she had poetry the term before. Though *pursuit* was the wrong word – Elaine was too good-looking ever to need to pursue anybody. It was more about controlling their pursuit of her. Boys for Elaine were not a challenge or an aspiration or an Other; they were more like a commodity, a resource to be managed. Her love life resembled stock inventory at a warehouse. When she told Cass she was no longer seeing Ryan Doyle because she was seeing Ciaran Teeling but that was just a temporary thing until Malachy Atkins broke up with Lucy O'Neill, which she had it on good authority that he very shortly would, Cass thought of the flow charts she had drawn up that directed them to Trinity and from there to Paris and New York.

She and her revolving cast of boys hung out in a pub in the town known as the Drain, and at school she surrounded herself with other girls who went to the same place, Holly Maguire, Jane Tan, Rachel McElligott. You should come along some night, she'd say to Cass. Cass knew Elaine knew she would say no. She preferred not to go out in town

any more than she could help; hellish as it was at home, being in town, with people looking at her and pitying her, was infinitely worse. Still, it was nice of her to ask, she thought.

She did wonder why her friend had chosen *now*, with the Leaving on the horizon, to start her new life as a party girl. Already her grades were down slightly. Sometimes when they talked Cass thought she detected an out-of-kilter quality to Elaine's conversation. But if something was wrong she wasn't going to confide in Cass.

Because Elaine was busy with other people, Cass found herself on her own at school. After a while, though, she realized that Sarah Jane Hinchy was often on her own with her. There was no great moment of bonding. It had just sort of happened, and at first she accepted it as another element of her fall. Sarah Jane Hinchy was a girl they had always looked down on. She was the class swot, and though she had historically been slightly higher than them in the class rankings, it was only because she worked so much harder. Being friends with her was a sort of vicious circle, because Elaine was visibly disgusted with Cass for associating with such a loser, which made her even less likely to want to associate with Cass herself. But after a couple of weeks of sitting in the park together at lunchtime, Cass couldn't remember quite why she and Elaine had disliked her so much. Yes, Sarah Jane had thick legs, and almost definitely cut her own hair. She lived on some sort of a farm up in the hills and there were rumours that her family were poor. But she was undeniably bright, and although she looked super-square, she knew about a lot of interesting things, from Harry Potter to A\$AP Rocky to Xeeon. Wow, Cass said, and then, What's Xeeon?

It's like the new Instagram, Sarah Jane Hinchy said, except not run as a Zuckerberg creepshow.

She often came out with statements like that, as if she had access to a reality Cass had never heard of. It was confusing. Elaine and Cass had always agreed that the only reason Sarah Jane Hinchy knew things was to make herself seem interesting. Yet what if the things she knew actually *were* interesting? What if the things she had chosen to make her seem

individualistic had actually made her into an individual? Like her rainbow badge. She still wore it, but on her blouse, under her school sweater, so you could hardly say it was for show. She told Cass that she didn't self-identify as gay, in fact she didn't believe that sexual orientation was fixed at all; she wore the rainbow as a sign of her belief in everyone's freedom to choose who they wanted to be and be with.

How had they found this problematic? Cass started to wonder whether the reason she and Elaine had thought Sarah Jane Hinchy was a loser was because *they* didn't understand what was cool – the same way the basics in the town might think Cass and Elaine were lame because they didn't wear GAA tops. It was an alarming thought.

Sarah Jane too was applying to Trinity. Have you thought about where you're going to live? she asked Cass. Cass kept her answer vague. It was one thing to talk to Sarah Jane Hinchy in school, quite another to make her part of her future. She still dreamed that after the exams Elaine would be restored to her – in college, on their own terms, far away from their families. She was not yet ready to sacrifice that.

Then one day Sarah Jane Hinchy told her about a grant she was applying for. Why would she need a grant, when college was free? Cass wondered. Rent's not free, Sarah Jane said. Food's not free. Books aren't. The grant would pay for all of that, even give you monthly pocket money. You should think about it, she told Cass.

Cass had never thought about who would pay for her accommodation, her books, her meals; she had never before thought that this might be an issue. The idea that she might need financial assistance was horrifying to her. Was that who they were now? Like the people she saw in anoraks queuing outside the post office on Wednesday mornings?

I can show you how to do it, if you want, Sarah Jane said. The application, I mean. If you come over to my house we can do it together. Then afterwards we could watch *Throne of Blood*.

It was an old Japanese film but it was based on *Macbeth*, which was the play they were doing for their exams. It might be interesting to see it from a non-Western perspective, Sarah Jane said.

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Cass hesitated. Going to Sarah Jane Hinchy's seemed like a leap, in terms of their friendship. But filling in a form together and maybe watching a movie didn't tie her to anything. And it might be nice to get out of the house; last night at dinner Imelda had thrown a box of Lidl cereal at Dickie's head.

Sarah Jane lived a few miles out of town, so to get there Cass would need someone to drive her. Her parents were fighting again, and she was waiting for the worst of it to be over before she asked them. Then she got a message.

It was from Elaine. **Hey bey-atch whats up???** it said.

Cass didn't reply straight away; she wasn't sure what it meant, like if Elaine was actually saying she was a bitch or if she intended it in a friendly way. While she was figuring it out another message came in.

Am in da Drain wid a boi sez he liiiikes u

This was even more puzzling, but before Cass could figure out what or who Elaine was talking about, another, simpler, message came in.

Get down here girl!!!!

Cass didn't know what to do. Elaine clearly expected her to come to the Drain. At the same time, it annoyed her that Elaine thought that after ignoring her for literally months she could click her fingers and Cass would come running. So she put her phone away without replying, and went down the stairs to see if she could get a lift. She met Dickie coming up the opposite way. Hey, Dad? she said. But he didn't seem to hear her. He had a beer can in his hand and breakfast cereal in his hair. He was wearing a ratty old anorak she had never seen before. An image flashed into her mind, of him and her and Sarah Jane Hinchy, queuing at the post office. So she called over her shoulder, I'm going out! and headed for the road into town.

The name on the sign was Doran's, but everyone called it the Drain. The reason was clear as soon as Cass stepped inside. People said that in the days when you could smoke you barely noticed it, but now even with the yard door left permanently open the stink was inescapable. No

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one knew exactly where it came from; it was structural. The PA played a non-stop barrage of 1980s metal, the pool table had a rip, and the Guinness tap frequently got infested with ants. But the barman never checked ID and so, apart from a handful of genuine rockers with greasy greying locks and upside-down pentagrams on their T-shirts, the place was full most nights with underage drinkers. It had been like that for a generation, with the result that even the most strait-laced mammy in town could tell you the line-up and running order of e.g. Slayer's *Seasons in the Abyss*.

The door faced the bar, where the elderly metallers sat on tall stools. A couple of them turned and looked at Cass resignedly as she came in. The barman was staring at his phone. Behind him there were rows and rows of spirits bottles and a black-and-white photo of a Spandex-clad man with a perm. In the spotted mirror she looked like a little grey child, a waif in a forest of dust.

Cass! Elaine waved at her. She was standing in the middle of a crowd – one or two girls from school, but mostly people Cass didn't recognize at all. She was wearing earrings Cass hadn't seen before. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes sparkled, she held a glass with ice cubes and a slice of lime in it. As Cass approached, she reached out for her and took her hand. This is Cass, she announced to the others. My best friend since for ever. She gazed at Cass with a smile of prideful approval. Then she dragged her off to the toilets to reapply her make-up.

Why does this place smell so bad? Cass said, looking into the mirror.

You get used to it, Elaine said. So Rowan Headley thinks you're hot.

Who's Rowan Headley?

He's Enda Frame's friend, Elaine said.

This threw no light on the matter as far as Cass was concerned.

Well, anyway, he must have seen you around, Elaine continued with a hint of impatience, because he said you were hot.

He used that word? Hot?

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I think so, Elaine said. Maybe I said it, I don't remember.

You said it?

I might have said I had a hot friend. It doesn't matter!

Does he even know who I am?

Elaine didn't reply. She zipped up her make-up bag and regarded Cass with dissatisfaction, like a baker confronted with a not wholly successful cake.

Cass followed her out to the smoking area, where Elaine promptly vanished into the crowd; and now a guy in a duffel coat came over to her. She realized she recognized him as one of the droopy boys that used to shout things at her outside the school gates. And she did recall now that some of the things had been complimentary, not that she was hot necessarily but that she had nice tits.

He was tall and pale, with dark curly hair. So you're Elaine's friend, he said.

Yes, Cass said. Cass, she said. The boy nodded to himself while looking away, as if this was just as he'd suspected.

You're Rowan? she said. He sniffed in an irritated manner. She wanted to point out that he had come over to her. Then he said, I'm going to the bar, do you want something?

Okay, she said.

Rowan pushed himself away from the pillar he'd been leaning against and stalked off inside. Cass wondered if she'd done something wrong. She huddled against the wall; she felt cold even though she was standing under a heater. She saw Elaine now, standing not far away with her back to Cass. She turned momentarily and glanced round at her, but turned back again before Cass could wave. Cass understood cloudily that Elaine wanted her to do something, that she had been brought here for a specific purpose. She blew on her fingers, listened to the horrific screeching noise that issued from the PA.

Rowan returned with two pints of lager. The beer here is piss, he said, handing one to her.

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Thanks, Cass said.

Do you play games? Rowan said.

What?

Video games.

Oh, she said. Angry Birds? He looked displeased by this, so she said, My brother's a major gamer.

Oh right? Rowan perked up. What games does he play?

Behind him, another boy, not as tall but slightly droopier, had started kissing Elaine. It was distracting; it seemed like she could hear it even over the metal, a squelching noise like walking on frogspawn. Rowan waited expressionlessly, like a soldier for his orders. Cass tried to focus. She and PJ used to play Donkey Kong together when they had the Wii. Now the games he played were like being trapped inside a food processor. Is there one about beavers? Or otters?

Otter Devastation, he said offhandedly. Yeah, it's pretty good. If he likes wipeout games tell him he should play Agents of Extinction.

Right, she said. There was a pause. From behind them, she heard Elaine make little cries of ecstatic pain.

So how do you know Elaine?

Oh, Cass said again, brightening, and she began to tell him the story of the Chemistry class. But before she even got to the iodine he had grabbed her face and was kissing her. She closed her eyes. His fingers were soft against her cheek, but his tongue was unexpectedly stiff, and thrashed around without a clear goal or direction – like something he was operating at a distance, by remote control, she thought. The wall-mounted heater was directly over her head, baking her hair but leaving the rest of her icy-cold. Every few seconds it switched itself off, then a few seconds later came to life again with a thunk, and she felt her hair fry. She told herself to stop being distracted. She leaned her body against him, and placed a hand on his chest. He had an arm around her waist; now his other hand slid up her tummy, which she instinctively sucked in, and remained there a moment, perfunctorily rubbing it up and down, before making the leap to her boob, where it squeezed happily in a way

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that brought to her mind the stress ball in her father's office. One of his salesmen had got it for him as a joke, back in the days before the crash, when there was nothing to be stressed about. It was red and printed on it were the words QUIT BUSTIN' MY BALLS!! He kept it on his desk, beside a black-and-white picture of his brother, Frank, a model of a 1953 VW Beetle, and another photograph of the four of them, that is, her and Mam and Dad and PJ, smiling in their Christmas jumpers on a visit to Funderland. Her mam was always saying could he not find a better picture for his office, but they all looked happy, even though PJ had got sick on the Crazy Cups; they *were* happy, even Mam. Cass must have been, what, ten? eleven? In the picture her chest was flat, no stress balls to squeeze, and her hand and wrist had a sleeve of eczema, she hadn't met Elaine yet, Elaine hadn't spilled iodine on her and cried outside the nurse's office, they hadn't joined pony club together, or built their Minecraft palace together, or had their adventure where they bunked off school and went into town dressed in tracksuits with their hair in ponytails, Elaine thought no one would recognize them because it was so far from their usual look, but they were spotted after twenty minutes, and grounded, and had their phones taken away, and she had pressed her hand to the glass of her bedroom window and wondered where Elaine was, and then known, like she knew her own name, that at that same moment Elaine had her hand pressed to *her* window, and that nothing would ever split them apart—

The tongue in her mouth, which had been thrashing about like a great blind beast, suddenly retracted. I have to pee, Rowan said, and wandered off.

Instantly, Elaine was back at her side. He's such a good kisser, isn't he, she said.

Yeah, said Cass, though it struck her as an odd thing to say. She started drinking the beer. It tasted like he did, or the other way around, she supposed. The glass seemed enormous, her body felt full, like there wasn't room in it for anything more – alcohol, tongues, even words. Somehow she was now in the centre of the group, who had all apparently

relocated themselves outside, listening to Elaine tell a story, which she realized with a start was about Sarah Jane Hinchy, or more specifically Sarah Jane Hinchy's sister.

Oh yeah, this is hilarious, said Rowan, who had returned. He sipped his beer and checked his phone.

So Sarah Jane's sister, Denise, is really smart, right? Elaine said. She was like three or four years ahead of us. And her dad – her dad sells livestock feed or something, and he's a total cheapskate. Like, legendarily stingy. But he tells her if she gets seven A1s in the Leaving he'll buy her a car. Like, he wants to encourage her, but he didn't think she'd get it, because she was smart but not that smart, okay?

So funny, Rowan said. He put his phone away and took Cass's hand.

But Denise studied really really hard and then in August the results came out and she gets seven A1s. She was, like, first in the county. So her dad has to get her the car. He's so mean that she's *sure* he's going to break his promise. But he doesn't. One day he takes her outside and there in the yard is a VW Golf. Not new, but not ancient, like eight years old maybe.

Nice, another girl said.

Yeah but wait, Elaine said. When she looks at the side of it, like the passenger side—

It was the door, Rowan said. The balls of Cass's fingers were sweating into his palm.

Right, on the door on the passenger side it's got scratched in big letters, CUNT.

Written on her car? Cass didn't understand. Her dad wrote on the car?

Someone had gouged it into the side with a key or whatever. And they'd tried to paint over it but you could still see it really clearly. Can you imagine giving your daughter a car with CUNT written on it?

Why would he do that? Cass's head was swimming. Above her the heater clicked on and off, and from the speaker a man was screaming, literally screaming, like the music was slicing him up.

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Well, he must have got it cheap. But he could say he held up his part of the deal.

I used to see her driving it around, one of the boys said. They live out near Naancross.

I didn't know Sarah Jane had a sister, Cass said.

She moved to London. She doesn't come back much, said the boy.

Who's Sarah Jane Hinchy? a girl said.

You know her, Elaine said. She's that girl with the lisp and the lazy eye and acne.

Answers to the name of Lucky, a different boy said.

She calls herself a lesbian, but it's just for attention, Elaine says.

This wasn't totally accurate, and Cass thought she should speak up: but when she tried to remember exactly how Sarah Jane had explained herself, like about fluidity and so on, she couldn't get it straight in her head, and then she realized she ought to have messaged Sarah Jane to say she wasn't coming to her house, and she felt a wave of annoyance at her, i.e. Sarah Jane, so she didn't say anything.

Didn't you say your dad said he'd buy you a car if you got your exams? Rowan said to Elaine.

Ugh, don't even mention that guy to me, Elaine said frostily.

Your dad has the garage, the new boy said to Cass. He had shaggy black eyebrows and quick eyes beneath them. You'll definitely get a car, even if you fail.

Duh, the garage is closed, you mongo, another boy said.

Elaine explained that the main one wasn't closed, only the one in the next town over. Right, Cass?

Cass nodded miserably.

Anyway, there's no way Cass could fail her exams, she's the smartest person I know, Elaine said. We're going to college together in the autumn, she added, and she took the hand that Rowan wasn't holding and gave it a firm but gentle shake, as a kindergarten teacher might ring a bell. Aren't we? she said.

Cass was too surprised to do anything more than nod; inside, she felt

a rush of joy so intense she thought she might catch fire and flame away to nothing, a burning girl-pyre there on the cement floor of the pub smoking area like something from one of the rockers' olden-days metal videos.

Later in the evening, Elaine asked her why she'd been avoiding her. Cass was speechless – could Elaine really have seen it that way? She told her it wasn't like that; she confessed that she'd been too embarrassed to talk to her because of what was happening to the family business. As she did she started to cry.

Elaine put a hand on her shoulder. That's your dad's fault, she said. Not yours.

Cass began to blub – the words were practically inaudible, and she barely knew what she was saying – something about how everyone saw her as Dickie's daughter, and so they blamed her too. Elaine was wise and calm. No one blames you, she told Cass. Everyone feels sorry for you. Your dad should never have let things get this bad. He's supposed to protect you, and he didn't. She reached her arm around Cass and drew her close. Fuck him, she said comfortingly.

After that, Cass went to the Drain a few nights a week. Her mocks were coming up; still, she had no problems getting out of the house. Dad was hardly ever there; her mother was either on the phone to the Tidy Towns girls lamenting, or upstairs bagging up her possessions. After months of work, areas of bareness had started to appear in the walk-in wardrobe, like patches of earth exposed by melted glaciers. She didn't notice when Cass shouted from the hall that she was going to Elaine's.

PJ noticed, of course: he had nothing better to do than notice things.

Why are you wearing make-up if you're going to study in Elaine's? he said.

She didn't think he would tell, but she didn't like him having power over her. So she started leaving her make-up, mostly purloined from her mother, in the old stone shed in the woods behind her house, with a mirror propped on a sill, and did her face using the torch on her phone.

The Bee Sting

The shed was right in the middle of the woods. She didn't know what it had been used for originally; it was empty now. When she was little, she had played here with her brother. They would bury pine cones and dig them up again; when Dad came roaring, they would squeal and laugh and go scurrying up a tree till they were too high for him to reach. Though sometimes she would pretend to stumble, and Dickie would throw his arms around her and lift her into the air, growling all the while, A squirrel! A squirrel for my dinner!

She thought of these times on her secret trips to the woods at night; they made it marginally less frightening to be out there on her own. Anyway, the fear was part of the enchantment. She learned to do her make-up in three minutes flat: then she would run – run! – through the trees to the new road, and from there into town, under the night sky, simultaneously terrified and free, until she came at last to the Drain, and felt the now-familiar stench and the barrage of dated noise hit her as she pushed through the door, like being jumped up on by two ancient, smelly dogs, and there would be Rowan in the yard vaping, and there, turning to greet her from the heart of the crowd, would be Elaine. And she would smile, and Cass would smile, feeling like she was full of starlight, the way a firefly is full of sparks.

In the Drain she spent most of her time kissing Rowan, while Elaine, never more than a few feet away, was doing the same with Jesse Farrell, initially, and then Fiachra O'Grady, and then Malachy Atkins, who had finally broken up with Lucy O'Neill. After the Drain, if it was dry, they sometimes went with takeout to the graveyard. Once, Rowan told them that the writer Mary Shelley had lost her virginity to Percy Shelley on top of her mother's grave. He looked at Cass meaningfully. Imagine having sex with someone called Percy, Elaine said. Do me, Percy! Cass chimed in. Take me harder, Percy! On the way home they stopped at the Topaz and bought three bags of crisps each, different flavours to cover over the smell of drink; crisps were much better than chewing gum, which was like an admission of guilt.

Purely on the basis of hours spent kissing, Cass felt justified in calling

Rowan her boyfriend. But on every other basis she had doubts. If they weren't actually kissing, he was generally aloof and silent, or else he talked about things Cass knew nothing about, such as video games, or hip-hop. He had conspiracy theories about everything and got annoyed when Cass didn't know about the events that he wanted to tell her were faked.

Sometimes she wondered if she even liked him, but usually she was too busy figuring out if he liked her. She drew up lists of reasons he might break up with her: her nose was pointy, he was still in love with Elaine. He didn't bother trying to hide the porn on his phone. He rarely sent her messages, and if he did it was just links to his Soundcloud beat tapes. One time she asked him, joking but not really, if he cared about her at all, and he shot right back, as if he'd been waiting for the question, I only care about dead rappers. He seemed to find most of the things she said tiresome; he oscillated between trying to have sex with her and almost total indifference, sometimes over a very short interval of time.

That's just what boys are like, Elaine told her. The way she explained it, you weren't supposed to like your boyfriend, not in the same way you did your friends; being with boys was something you did without necessarily enjoying it, the same way you drank beer though you didn't like the taste. Cass felt better after that.

And anyway, sometimes she did like him. His hair was shiny; his duffel coat was soft. He too planned to go to college in Dublin: his ambition was to be a professional DJ, but as a fallback he was applying to study Pharmacy at UCD. He was funny too. He invented a drinking game where you had to think of a stupid name – Wanda Suckling, Ulick Flange, Antonia Bumkiss – and then google it, and if there *wasn't* a match, you had to drink a shot. But most often there was: the world revealed itself to be a treasure-house of mortally embarrassing names. Who knew?

Sometimes after he'd drunk a couple of beers, he'd come out with crazy ideas. For instance: if a dog's sense of smell was fifty thousand times more powerful than a human's, that meant that instead of humans' binary

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perception of There/Gone, dogs must have a *spectrum* of thereness. Like, say you're here, then you go out. To me, you're gone. But to a dog you're still *mostly* here, because your smell lingers much longer, and that's their strongest sense. So they must have a whole different understanding of time, because for them the past is literally still around. When a dog looks at the world, it must see all of these presences gradually fading out. Like a sky full of jet contrails.

That's probably closer to how things really are, he said, like with the past and everything. It's kind of good, in a way, because it means the happy moments aren't just slipping away from you for ever. He looked at her when he said that: sidelong, like he didn't want her to notice.

Elaine said the drinking game was childish; she was no good at thinking up names. And she said his theories reminded her of Cass's brother. She was starting to cool on Rowan. She told Cass there were other boys interested in her, though when pressed she said this was more a general sense she had, rather than specific individuals.

Rowan began coming out to the shed so he and Cass could walk to the Drain together. He liked the woods; deciduous forests were rare in Ireland, he told her. Most of them had been cut down by the British to burn in their factories. The shed reminded him of Hitler's bunker, where the Führer hid with his staff and their families in the last days of the war. He told Cass that when the Nazis knew they would lose, they had given their children poison before shooting themselves. Then he tried to kiss her. She laughed.

He knew a lot about Nazis. Some Nazis had fled to Ireland after the war. The big Irish schoolbook company was founded by a Nazi. That was another reason the education system was bullshit. And Volkswagen was started by the Nazis, he said. So Cass shouldn't be sorry if her dad's business closed down.

When it got less cold he brought cans to the shed, or 'the Bunker' as he called it. It was okay for some people, he said. But he couldn't afford to drink in a pub all night. Another time he asked why they had

to go to the Drain at all. But Elaine is there, Cass said, confused. And the others.

Elaine, he repeated sardonically.

You don't like Elaine? Cass couldn't keep the shock from her voice.

Rowan said Elaine had a big head. She thinks she's so smart. But you're way smarter than her.

Cass told him that as a matter of fact she and Elaine got exactly the same grades.

That's because you don't want to be better than her, he said.

This conversation left her feeling conflicted. On the one hand, calling her smart was literally the only nice thing he had ever said about her. On the other, she did not want to be forced to choose between him and her friend. Elaine was going through a hard time. She didn't currently have a boyfriend, and had already kissed everyone who drank at the Drain, apart from the rockers obviously, who were old and un-kissable. Cass finished her can and told Rowan they should get moving or they'd be late.

That night a new rocker appeared in the pub. He was young and handsome – properly handsome, like someone from TV, with hair so black it was almost blue, and tattoos the length of his arms. He sat at the bar, drinking by himself. When he saw the girls looking at him, he raised his glass to them. Who is *that*? Elaine said.

Cass didn't know. She hadn't seen him before; she would have remembered.

He's like a good-looking Rowan, Elaine agreed. She went to talk to him. After a few minutes of animated conversation, she waved Cass over. This is Richard, she said. He interjected a sound that sounded like Richard but wasn't quite. He's from Poland, Elaine said, ignoring this. He literally just came to town.

Up close, the man was not so much handsome as beautiful, like a girl might be, with fine, white bones from which his black eyes peered as if through spyholes in a painting in a haunted house.