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## I

There was nothing to it. I swung and hit him and he dropped. A girl came flying forward and pushed me: What'd you do that for? The lad was lying there and I was standing over him and there were people all around me making noise. By the time I got away from the tussle, two Land Rovers had pulled up. A jaded-looking peeler with a receding hairline came towards me.

Is that blood? he said, pointing to a stain on my shirt that could've been anything. He took my name and number and told me he would be in touch.

I held my hands up and said that was no problem.

The lad came at me, I said. I didn't know what to do.

At the top of the street, the lad was put on a stretcher, and the stretcher was heaved into the back of an ambulance.

I think it's best you make your way home, the peeler said.

I decided he was a good peeler, a helpful peeler. We'll be in touch, he said, and I thanked him.

Thanks very much, I said.

Back at the flat, Ryan had his phone in his face and was pacing up and down the living room, looking for a party. But it was five o'clock in the morning and the birds were out. He pulled the blinds closed as if that would help and nearly took the window with him. The brightness. I grabbed the purple throw my ma had given us as a moving in present

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and pulled it over my head. I lay with my head on the pillow and stared through the space between the empty bottles. Ryan checked the fridge, the cupboard next to the fridge. He lifted a can from the counter and gave it a shake.

I give up, I said.

Give up? You haven't done fuck all.

I'm going to bed.

Fuck sake, Sean. Don't be leaving me hanging here.

I'm not leaving you anywhere, I'm in the next room.

Bounce into my bed sure. We'll watch a film.

We need to stop doing this.

Doing what? Come on.

The window above the bed was open and the breeze wafted through cold. I stripped down to my boxers and climbed under the covers but stayed on the outside so I could creep into my own bed as soon as Ryan passed out. The wall was black with mould and it made the room smell damp. There were clothes all over the place, takeaway cartons. Cups and glasses and empty cans. Ryan smoked too much weed, that's what it was. It made him lazy. It made him not give a ballicks. I said to him, You smoke too much of that shit, and took the spliff off him. He didn't care. He was sinking into it nicely, and he had his favourite film on: *The Shawshank Redemption*. He made me watch it every time we ended up like this. It gave him hope.

Watch this, he said.

It was that scene he loved, the one where Andy Dufresne arrives at the penitentiary and all the inmates are going mad, screaming at him. Calling him and the rest of the newcomers fresh fish.

*I didn't think much of Andy the first time I laid eyes on him . . .*

That was Ryan's favourite line, he thought it was brilliant. I did too. Never judge a book by its cover, that's what that means. Never judge anybody, because you never know.

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The next morning, or later that morning, whatever way you want to put it, somebody was at the door. I rolled on to my side and tried to go back to sleep, but Ryan was up, he was shaking me, and he was like, That doesn't sound good. I sat up on the edge of the bed, it was better to do these things in stages, and watched Ryan lean with his ear against the door.

Sounds like there's a few of them, he said.

Men?

Aye. Men.

I looked out the window and saw a car parked up out the front of the block. The driver's side door was open. I heard a radio. Not the kind that played music, the other one.

It's not the peelers, Ryan said.

How do you know?

Because they would've shouted. They always shout.

The knocking stopped. Footsteps echoed out the hall and were gone.

The living room was a state. There were feg butts everywhere, spilled drink. Some dirty bastard had been flicking ash into bottle caps and the bottle caps had fallen on the floor. I brushed and mopped and got rid of the empties, then I sat for a minute and looked out the window. We had a good view, the flat was on the fourth floor so we could see right over the rooftops to Casement Park. And the mountain, you can't miss the mountain. It's everywhere you go, every street and road in West Belfast, you can't get away from it. Whoever's writing those messages up there knows fine rightly as well, they couldn't have picked a better spot. Today it was a massive tricolour, and underneath it they had written the words:

#### END INTERNMENT

Who do you think it was? Ryan said.

Dunno. Dissidents?

Why would dissidents be calling here?

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I thought you meant the mountain.

Ryan looked out the window. That's not dissidents, ya rocket.

Who is it then?

Fuck knows. Could be anyone, he said, then he clapped his hands.

It's the Illuminati. The Illuminati have infiltrated the Ra.

He opened the fridge and stared at the empty shelves. The acne on his back was getting worse. The pimples had gone purple and bubbled under the skin. Six months in the gym will do that, and the steroids he made me inject into his arsecheek every other day. You could see it in his face, the puffiness. The jacked-up redness around his neck and shoulders.

We need food, he said.

Have you cash?

Do I fuck. Spunked everything last night.

Me too.

I boiled the kettle and brought it with me into the bathroom, filled the sink with hot water and topped it up with cold. The boiler was broke. There was no heat in the radiators, no hot water, and it wasn't like we could phone the landlord and ask him to sort it out; he went bankrupt and did a runner to Spain, leaving a load of properties to be repossessed. That's why we didn't answer the door that morning – it could've been someone looking to turf us out.

I started on my hair, giving it a good go with shampoo. I used a cup to rinse the suds and got to splashing my balls and torso. Then I sat on the edge of the bath and looked at my hand. The knuckles weren't swollen and my fingers were all intact. I made a fist and stared at it, then at my arm right up to the shoulder where the thin lines of my tribal tattoo were so black they looked blue.

I need to get out of this, I thought.

I didn't know what this was.

The quickest way to get to work was by train. There was a station at the top of the road. I sat on a bench in the middle of the platform and

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counted how much cash I had: nine quid to do me until the end of next week, and it was only Saturday. The train pulled up. I got on, but instead of taking a seat, I hid in the toilet from the ticket man then spoofed the cheapest fare when I got to the barrier in Central Station. El Divino was across the road. It was one of those places that used to be hard to get into. Now it was all students. That's how you know a nightclub is going downhill. It starts doing promotions five nights a week. The more exclusive clientele moves on somewhere else, the club starts tanking money, and within a few months, the shutters come down for good. We'd all be out of a job. We knew this, but we kept working there anyway; there was nowhere else that would take us.

There was a delivery waiting for me round the side of the building: five pallets. I lifted the Stanley blade that had been left on the windowsill and got to work cutting the plastic wrap and wheeling the crates one after another into the stockroom. Then I went up to the club, wrote everything I needed in my notebook, went back to the stockroom, and loaded the spirits and mixers into the hoist. It took three runs to empty the hoist and half an hour to stock the bar, which I stretched to forty-five minutes. I had arranged the bottles neatly, labels facing outwards, when a group of PR lads stepped out from behind the stage. They wore black body warmers with the club's logo stitched on the back, and they thought they were great strolling about the place in their beige chinos and Ralph Lauren T-shirts. One of them pressed the button for the smoke machine and smoke billowed across the dance floor. Our manager was with them. His name was Dee. He was young, only a few years older than me, and there was talk that his da, a millionaire property developer from Holywood, Co. Down, had given him the nightclub for his birthday. He had never worked a bar in his life. He hadn't a clue about anything, but he carried on like this was his show, he called the shots, even though we were the ones keeping the place going. He leaned with his elbow on the bar and watched as I filled the sink with hot water and cleaned the speed pours.

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What do you reckon? he said to me, nodding at the ground.

I leaned over the counter to see what he was on about: there was a wee black pug sitting at his feet.

Isn't he class?

Aye, brilliant.

He took a picture on his phone, showed me the picture, and then looked at me like I should be doing something. I got down on my knees and worked my way along the bar, cleaning out the shelves under the counter. There was a lot of dust down there and the bottoms of the bottles had got all gunky. I got the brush and scoop and cleared the bottle caps, and when I turned to get started on the fridges, the music stopped. I could hear the PR lads playing with the wee dog and the wee dog running across the floor.

Here, grab us a plastic bag there, Dee said.

I pulled one from the pile that was squeezed between the wall and the dishwasher and tried to give it to him, but he backed off with his hands held up and shook his head from side to side.

Sort it out for me, will you? he said.

Sort what out?

The shit. The wee bastard's only after taking a shit.

He patted the dog on the side and the wee dog fell over.

Seriously. Look.

I could see it, the little mound of coffee-coloured crap piled like stones in the middle of the dance floor.

I'm not cleaning that up, I said.

Are you not?

No chance, it's your dog.

Right, well. Get the fuck out of this club.

I stared. You serious?

I'm not joking, get your coat. You're sacked.

Fuck sake, Dee. Don't be at it.

Don't be at what? I told you to clean the shit, so clean the fucking shit.

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The PR lads had their T-shirts pulled up over their noses. I could tell by their eyes that they were laughing.

Hurry up, it's starting to smell.

I pulled the bag over my hand the way I had seen people do and scooped the shit up quickly, without looking at it, and was surprised by how warm it was, and heavy. Dee lifted the dog up into his arms as if to protect it from the sorry sight of me walking all the way downstairs and out the back of the club, with the bag held like a dirty sock, where I threw it without thinking as far as I could into the river. The bag popped up further downstream, towards the bridge. Starlings made shapes in the sky.

I looked at my phone. I still had half an hour to go.

I was supposed to work again that night, at ten. The only way I could think to fill the time between now and then was to find a table in the corner of the cordoned-off area outside Kelly's Cellars and sit for as long as I could over a pint of Guinness I could just about afford. There was a group of tourists sitting at the table across from me. Americans, by the looks of it. They were having a great time watching the long-haired lads playing fiddly-dee music out the front of the bar, but no matter how much they tapped their feet and muttered along to the words of every tune they thought they knew, their hearts weren't in it. They slung their bags over their shoulders and headed towards Castle Street, leaving a tableful of half-empty pints sweltering in the heat.

I rang Ryan. I told him where I was and what I was thinking and he said, Give me fifteen minutes. In the meantime, I slipped over to the table where the tourists had been sitting, poured the beer they had left into two empty pint glasses, and settled in. The sun wasn't as powerfully hot as it had been, the breeze tested the backs of the scantily dressed, but it was a decent night, people were in good form. I didn't watch them so much as try to catch them out. It's always the way, any time I'm on my own in a crowd like this, I think everybody's

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looking at me. That's where the nervousness comes from: not knowing what to do with myself, not knowing how to act. I need somebody to bounce off, otherwise I have to get on like I do this all the time. That's why I cracked up at Ryan for taking so long.

Where were you? You said fifteen minutes.

I'm here now, aren't I?

He was wearing denim shorts with aviator sunglasses and looked like the kind of holiday rep who would shake your hand and call you a legend while trying to ride your girlfriend. He swiped a Guinness from the table next to ours and took the seat facing me.

What's this I hear about you picking up dog shite? he said.

Who told you?

Nobody told me nothing, I just heard.

He was mates with those PR lads, he'd had them back to the flat a few times, and I knew that one of them, the one Ryan was closest to, was called Simon.

Was it him? I said, and Ryan laughed.

Simon's a good lad, he sorts the boys out.

He did, to be fair, and always with words in the ears of bouncers who had kicked us out. Not that we had been kicked out of a lot of places, but we had got into enough scrapes around town for us to have cultivated a bit of a reputation. The fact that we both worked for the same nightclub didn't help. Bar staff talked. Floor staff too. Bouncers even, but most of all managers. Managers gossiped like aul dolls at their front doors, they were all mates with each other, and that didn't bode well for anybody falling out of favour. The amount of people we knew who had been sacked from one place only to find there was no work anywhere else in town. Hardly anybody had a contract. The few people that did were the type to do whatever they had to do to keep themselves sweet, which was why I wanted to know who had opened their mouth: I wanted to make sure they kept it shut.

Ryan's eyebrows appeared from behind his sunglasses.

You hear anything about your man?

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What man?

The man, the fella you hit.

He wasn't a man. He was our age.

We're twenty-two, Sean. We're men.

Right enough, we were. But I couldn't work out why the word still felt wrong.

What're we gonna do? Ryan said.

Dunno, what do you wanna do?

We looked around. It had been a while since anybody had got up and left, and even longer since somebody had gone without necking their drink. And it was getting late. The shops were closing soon, and although we knew that the sensible thing to do would be to pack it in and head back to the other side of the town, to work, it seemed an awful shame to waste what was left of the good weather putting in a shift on a Saturday night, especially when the night before had ended the way it had, with no gear, no party, and the two of us in bed with each other rather than somebody else. We needed this, and the only way we could think to get to where we wanted to go was to follow the direction the ball was rolling, towards Ryan's granny's house, in Divis, where Ryan tapped her eighty quid he promised to pay back next week. His granny chucked the notes across the kitchen table.

This is the last time, she said.

I had known Ryan since I was a kid, we grew up together on the same street. We went to the same primary school as well, and the same secondary school, only Ryan left when he was sixteen. He did this because he had been told it was the only option for him, our school had steered him that way even though he was as smart as anybody. He could've stayed on and did his A Levels, no sweat. But because he acted out and struggled to pay attention, the school did what they always do and dumped him with the rest of the headcases in the bottom class. He got into fights, he lashed out at the teachers, and one day, when Mr O'Hare tried to make him stay behind after school, he

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threw a chair across the room and smashed a window. Then he stopped showing up, and I'm not just talking about going on the beek. He stopped going to school altogether. The school tried to tempt him back. They told him he didn't have to do eight GCSEs any more, that he could do three, the bare minimum. Ryan told them to shove their GCSEs up their hole and went to tech, got himself an apprenticeship, and started out as a plasterer.

Two years into his trade, the recession hit. Ryan was laid off. It was shite because he was doing well, he liked the work, and he only had a year to go before he was fully qualified. It made all those months he had trailed himself out of bed at seven o'clock in the morning for dick-all money feel like a waste of time. Sometimes, when his head was melted about how things had turned out, he talked about going to Australia. Loads of our mates were over there, having the time of their lives, and we were stuck in Belfast, working in a nightclub four nights a week, with no prospects, and no chance of anything better coming our way. The flat was good though. Not having to pay rent was a dream. But it was no Bondi Beach. It was no Gold Coast. It was a stroke of luck we made the most of every night we had enough cash for a bottle of vodka, but it was getting old. There's only so much partying you can do, and when there are fewer and fewer people to party with, it starts to feel like there's nowhere else to go. You're stuck in this hole with the same three or four faces for the rest of your life, drinking, taking gear, hanging around the local until there's no one left to talk to.

I stuck my hand out for a taxi at the top of Albert Street. It was one of those old clapped-out models that sounded more like a washing machine than a car, everything was rattling, and the sound it made as it went up an incline was like someone getting choked out. Black taxis were cheap though, and dead handy if you were stuck. Two quid gets you from the town right up to Twinbrook, and you can bounce out anywhere you want along the way. But it's always touch and go,

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you never know who you're going to end up sitting beside; anybody can wave a black taxi down, as long as there's space, and when there's five people squeezed into the back it can get a bit awkward, especially if one of those people have had a few pints and need to stick their head out the window. We were lucky that day. It was only us two, and two women who sat at either end of the back seat. One of them had a bunch of flowers. She knocked the glass partition between the front and back and got out at Milltown Cemetery. I watched her walk through the gates with the sun coming down behind her and wondered who she was going to visit.

Forty each then? Ryan said.

Aye, whatever you reckon.

He handed me two twenties from the eighty quid his granny had given him. I folded them up and put them in my wallet.

I'll get the meat, you get the swall, I said.

This wee girl's torturing me.

Who?

He showed me the messages on his phone. One of them said, *your mate's a scumbag*.

I laughed. She mates with your man?

Nah, she just knows him. Apparently they kept him in overnight, in the hospital.

Serious?

Aye, so she says anyway.

We got off at the Kennedy Way roundabout and walked over to Asda. It was packed. There were prams everywhere. Screaming babies. Wee girls in strappy tops burned to a cinder. At the fridges, I filled my basket with all sorts, steaks and all, then I headed for the pasta and the porridge, the milk, the ham and cheese, the packets of biscuits we'd go through in a day, and met Ryan at the self-checkouts. He nodded at the kid keeping watch. He looked about sixteen.

Wee buns, he said.

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The trick was to start with the cheapest items first: I scanned a loaf of bread, a carton of milk, a jar of jam, and set them into the bag in the bagging area, as you do. Then I lifted a steak, seven quid a touch, and pretended to scan it by turning the barcode away from the scanner, and dropped it into the bag.

I heard Ryan's station behind me:

*Unexpected item in the bagging area . . .*

The kid keeping watch did what every member of staff would do and swiped his card across Ryan's screen without checking what the unexpected item was. The message stopped. He did the same with my station a second later and I thanked him. The station next to mine went off too, and before the kid could go back to his spot, Ryan's went off again, then mine. A man at the top of the queue asked for a Bag for Life. I dropped half a kilo of chicken. The kid stomped over and swiped his card. It was that easy, and in the end we walked out of there with fifty quid's worth of shopping we paid less than twenty quid for. The security guards hadn't a clue. They were too busy watching the cameras for people picking things up and putting them straight into their bags. That's what made it so good. Even if you were to get caught, all you'd have to do was act stupid and say you thought you'd scanned the things you were swiping, it was right there on CCTV, and there was nothing they could do. They had to let you go.

When we got back to the flat, Ryan pulled the litre bottle of vodka out of his bag. It still had the security tag on it. I fancied myself as a bit of a schemer, but he was on another level. He demonstrated this with the lie he told our manager to get us out of going to work that night.

Dee, you're not gonna believe this, someone broke into our flat –

It was a masterclass, that's all I can say. A real performance. The way he came out with it, like he had just walked into the flat and seen the state of the place, the shock in his voice. Our manager lapped it up.

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Give me a ring if you need anything, he said.

We knocked that litre bottle into us. Then Ryan hooked his phone up to the Bluetooth speaker. Green Velvet had just dropped ‘Bigger Than Prince’ and he turned it up full whack. We strutted around the living room with our chests pushed out, stomping our feet, hyping ourselves up for a big night. It’s the best thing about going on a mad one, getting ready, listening to tunes, asking does this look sweet or what? We took our time as well, it was important that we looked our best, and that meant ironing our shirts, washing ourselves over the sink, having a shave.

At ten o’clock, Finty McKenna picked us up in a taxi. On the motorway, the arguments started: we hadn’t decided where we were going. Finty was barred from the Box. Ryan was barred from the Beachclub. All three of us had to steer clear of Limelight since that night we got into a scuffle with a crowd of metalheads who couldn’t take a joke. And we couldn’t go near Thompson’s – too many people knew our manager. It was a toss-up then between M-Club and Mono. Both places were rough as toast, but the drink was cheap and the tunes were good, and there was always a few loose ones floating about, looking for a party. Ryan said Mono. Finty said M-Club. I said, Is there nowhere else?

There’s the Bot, Ryan said.

That was it, settled. We went to Mono.

There was a lot of smoke, a lot of bass. Every tune was a banger and that was the problem. Big drop after big drop, it didn't help that every track sounded the same, that even when the drop came, it did so with the effect of having already happened. Even the girls flicking their hair next to the DJ booth wondered if it was worth the blisters. They winced as they took their heels off, stared vacantly across the club. By midnight, I could hardly see who was standing in front of me, only a white shirt: Ryan in the middle of a group of lads singing oi, oi, oi fucking oi. I tried to get him to go somewhere else, this place was a shithole, but he was having none of it. I couldn't for the life of me work out why, then an arm came around my neck. Finty McKenna planted his lips on the side of my face.

Got you a wee present, he said, and dragged me into the toilets.

It was a bag of gear. Pure gear too. The kind of stuff that goes through you faster than a bullet.

Lethal, isn't it? Finty said.

Aye, mate. Brilliant.

The smoking area was supposed to give me respite, it was supposed to clear my head, but as soon as the air hit me, something slipped; I dropped my drink. It was a plastic cup, so it didn't break, but my vodka splashed all over some girl's feet. She looked at me like I better get down on my hands and knees and lick it off.

Are you fucking serious? she said.

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I told her I was sorry, it was an accident, and she turned to her mate.

This place is full of dickheads, she said, and that brought it all back. The argument the night before. The girl who pushed me, who sounded exactly like this one who was having a go at me now, uppity as fuck, and proper stuck up her own arse, in that way they are, like they could say anything. I had to walk away. I went over to the other side of the smoking area to talk myself down, and as I was standing there looking at the crowds of people huddled around the heat lamps, this one beefcake with a flicked-up fringe barging about the place with his shoulders squared, it dawned on me: I couldn't remember what the lad I hit looked like. I tried my best to think but all I could see was the shape of him on the ground. Blue lights. If he came up to me now, I wouldn't know any different. I would drop my head and step out of the way like I did with everybody else.

Ryan emerged from the crowd with a baggie of white powder pinched between his index finger and thumb.

Couple of keys, if you please?

I felt like I'd been doing this half my life. Padding myself full of vodka, tooting keys in cubicles, throwing it on to girls who looked at me like I was dirt, and rightly so. I shifted my weight and tried to snap out of it, but everywhere I looked I saw people I didn't want to be around, and it tired me out. Being constantly on edge, constantly watchful. Moving out of the way of that fella with the flicked-up fringe before he barged into me. All he needed was for me to say something, and God I wanted to say something. I wanted to smash a bottle over his fucking head.

I was halfway down the stairs, gunning for the doors, when somebody grabbed me by the arm. I panicked and tried to pull away, but they clung on to me, and they were saying my name.

Sean. Sean, where are you going? It's me. It's Mairéad.

I stopped. Stared at her.

Mairéad? Mairéad Riley?

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She laughed. Threw her arms around my neck and hugged me.

What're you doing here? This place is a shithole, she said.

Ryan's idea, what's your excuse?

You're still knocking about with Ryan? Jesus Christ.

The crowd had bunched up around us. People were pushing and shoving. Mairéad took my hand and brought me over to the bar. She knew someone working there and got us sorted with vodkas we didn't have to pay for, then she led me to a booth at the back of the club. We sat next to each other because the music was loud; Mairéad's voice was gravelly and she struggled to shout. She looked well though. She suited the shorter hair; the fringe that used to come down to her eyebrows had been trimmed back. There was more of her face now. She leaned with her elbow on the table and asked me about Liverpool. I told her I moved back home last September, as soon as I graduated, and she slapped me on the arm.

Why didn't you message me?

I didn't think you'd be arsed.

She had gone to Queen's. Her social media was filled with pictures of her hanging around beer gardens with a different kind of crowd. I said this to her, and she made a face.

I can have more than one set of friends, she said.

She said friends instead of mates. I don't know why that stood out for me, it wasn't like she was speaking another language.

Surely there are better places to go on a Saturday night? she said.

She said *surely* just like that, like *surely* I should know.

Finty's here, I said, defensively. He can't get in anywhere else.

Finty McKenna? Oh my God.

What?

Nothing, it's just –

She drank her drink and looked away. Something was off, the music was too loud, and there were these silences, when everything sort of slowed. All this madness was happening around us and the two of us sat there like spectators, watching it. When we finished our drinks, I

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asked if she wanted another one, fully expecting her to say no. She plucked an ice cube out of her glass and sucked it.

Get me a double, she said.

I asked for two doubles, and when the barman turned his back, a couple of girls squeezed into the space beside me. One of them looked at me and I looked at her and her eyes narrowed. She whispered something to her mate and her mate gave me a dirty look. I apologized and stepped out of the way, thinking I was taking up too much space.

You were at that party last night, weren't you?

What party?

You attacked our friend. You punched him in the face.

Punched who? What're you on about?

I was there. I saw you.

She was short this girl, no higher than my shoulder in heels, yet the fury in her face rooted me to the floor.

Your head's lit, love. I wasn't at any parties.

Don't call me love, ya fucking dickhead.

Heads turned. Conversations were cut short. People were watching. The girls sensed this and started ramping it up, screaming at me. Backing me into the corner with their pointed fingers.

You could've killed him, you know that? He could've died!

I'm sorry, I said. I didn't mean to . . .

Then Ryan came whaling in, blocked out of his head, telling them to get away and leave me alone. The girls went nuts.

He attacked my friend. He snuck up behind him and punched him.

So fuck, Ryan said. He deserved it, now fuck off.

One of the girls pushed him. The other tried to throw her drink over him and missed. Finty moved to calm the situation, but it was too late: Ryan tipped his pint over the short girl's head. There was an uproar. Some lad who had nothing to do with anything got chivalrous and swung a dig. Ryan dipped his head and tackled him into the bar. One of the girls dived on Ryan's back. I tried to pull her off, but her mate was on him, scratching his face with lethal-looking nails.

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Bouncers came rocking in. They grabbed the girls by the arms while Ryan and the other lad were stuck in headlocks. I thought I was sweet, I didn't throw a punch, and then an arm came around my neck. I saw light bending through smoke, an exit sign above a door, and suddenly I was on the ground, in an alley out the back.

Ryan's nose was bleeding, but you could flick Ryan's nose and it would bleed. It had been like that his whole life and he still didn't know how to stop it. What was all that about? he said.

They were at that party last night.

The cheek of them. He wiped his nose with the back of his arm and smiled bloody teeth. Thompson's? he said.

No chance. You'll not get in.

Who won't?

You won't. Look at the state of your shirt.

He looked down and frowned. My favourite shirt too, he said.

Mairéad was standing with Finty at the top of the alley. Ryan didn't recognize her. He thought she was just some girl I had pulled; he had no reason to talk to her. Then he did a double take.

Mairéad Riley, what the fuck? Has she been with us all night?

I'm standing right here, you can talk to me, Mairéad said.

But Ryan was too hyped up, the adrenaline was horsing through him, and the coke. He had taken a lot of coke. He bought a bottle of water from the burger van outside Mono and used it to wash the blood off his face. Then he put Finty's jacket on to hide the blood on his shirt and checked his reflection in the windows of the Urban Outfitters round the back of Victoria Square. He was laughing, shaking his head, recounting every detail about what had happened. Thankfully, he left out the part about those girls being at that house party the night before, and he didn't say a word about the fella I hit. He kept that on the shy. Not because he was trying to keep me sweet; he was just too busy boasting about his own scrap to care about mine.

Mairéad looked at her phone. Have you any plans? I said.

Nah, not really. I need to eat.

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Me too. Do you wanna grab something?

Aye, why not?

We walked with Ryan and Finty round to Thompson's. It took ages, they kept stopping for another key. Ryan held one out for me, but I said, No, I've had enough. He looked at me like, what? Then he did the whole eyebrows raised, nod in Mairéad's direction thing. You two have a lovely night sure, he said, and headed on down the alley.

Mairéad looked at me quizzically. He's a dick, I said, and she agreed.

He's always been a dick, she said.

I let that one go. It wasn't worth the hassle.

Where do you wanna go then? I said.

Dunno, where's open?

McDonald's?

Aye, may as well, she said.

The white lights were ruthless, everybody looked like they had been dragged through a ditch, and there was a real gnarly atmosphere, cruel, like the canteen in school, except everybody's steaming and thinks they're a geg. Those poor bastards at the tills got it the worst. I actually felt sorry for them. It isn't like working on a bar, you don't have the music to block it all out, and people can be dicks when they're drunk. They don't mean any harm, most of them are just trying to have a laugh, but when you've been on your feet since noon and it's two o'clock in the morning, the last thing you want is some drunken arse-hole winding you up about how long they've been waiting for their Big Mac. Witnessing it is enough to make you hate people.

Then we saw something class. The security guards tried to kick a homeless man out and everybody stood up and was like, No, leave him alone, he's not doing any harm, and the security guards backed off. That was enough to restore my faith in humanity, but not enough to persuade Mairéad and me to eat in McDonald's itself. We took our grub round to that stupid onion ring sculpture they had built in the

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middle of Arthur Square where all the buskers and street performers played music at the weekend. We sat there, on the base, and talked about university.

Mairéad had studied English Lit, like me, but did a joint honours with Film Studies, which was what she was really into. All those mad art house films with subtitles, she loved that stuff, it was what she wanted to do. But it wasn't an easy trade to get into, not if you didn't know anybody. And if you couldn't afford to get by with no wages, there was no point going for an internship or anything like that – they didn't pay, and that left Mairéad with no choice but to keep working in a clothes shop in town. She had been there since she started at Queen's, and although it was destroying her soul, she only had to do it for another few months, then she was moving to Berlin.

I was surprised. People we knew went to America or Australia. They got working visas and stayed there for a year. Some of them came back. Most didn't. In that way, Berlin didn't make sense to me. I pretended it did.

That's class, fair play, I said.

Aye, well, there's nothing for me here so.

She dipped a chicken nugget into that sweet curry dip they do and ate it whole, without nibbling off the batter like I did with every single nugget.

You're like a wee mouse, she said.

I stuck my front teeth out and she giggled, held the chip carton up over her mouth and drank the crumbs. She had the same jet-black hair, the same grey eyes, but she dressed like somebody who listened to a lot of live music, all in black with Doc Martens and a mandala tattoo on the back of her left hand. Her arm was completely covered. She caught me staring and pulled her vest top down to show me her shoulder.

What's yours? she said.

I rolled my sleeve up to show her my tribal tattoo.

I've a Celtic cross on my back as well, I said.

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