

NORMAL PEOPLE



SALLY ROONEY

Author of CONVERSATIONS WITH FRIENDS

ff

NORMAL PEOPLE



SALLY ROONEY

Author of CONVERSATIONS WITH FRIENDS

fi

SALLY ROONEY

Normal People



FABER & FABER

It is one of the secrets in that change of mental poise which has been fitly named conversion, that to many among us neither heaven nor earth has any revelation till some personality touches theirs with a peculiar influence, subduing them into receptiveness.

George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*

Contents

1. [Title Page](#)
2. [Epigraph](#)
- 3.
4. [January 2011](#)
5. [Three Weeks Later \(February 2011\)](#)
6. [One Month Later \(March 2011\)](#)
7. [Six Weeks Later \(April 2011\)](#)
8. [Two Days Later \(April 2011\)](#)
9. [Four Months Later \(August 2011\)](#)
10. [Three Months Later \(November 2011\)](#)
11. [Three Months Later \(February 2012\)](#)
12. [Two Months Later \(April 2012\)](#)
13. [Three Months Later \(July 2012\)](#)
14. [Six Weeks Later \(September 2012\)](#)
15. [Four Months Later \(January 2013\)](#)
16. [Six Months Later \(July 2013\)](#)
17. [Five Months Later \(December 2013\)](#)
18. [Three Months Later \(March 2014\)](#)
19. [Four Months Later \(July 2014\)](#)
20. [Five Minutes Later \(July 2014\)](#)
21. [Seven Months Later \(February 2015\)](#)
- 22.
23. [Acknowledgements](#)
24. [About the Author](#)
25. [Also by the Author](#)
26. [Copyright](#)

January 2011

Marianne answers the door when Connell rings the bell. She's still wearing her school uniform, but she's taken off the sweater, so it's just the blouse and skirt, and she has no shoes on, only tights.

Oh, hey, he says.

Come on in.

She turns and walks down the hall. He follows her, closing the door behind him. Down a few steps in the kitchen, his mother Lorraine is peeling off a pair of rubber gloves. Marianne hops onto the countertop and picks up an open jar of chocolate spread, in which she has left a teaspoon.

Marianne was telling me you got your mock results today, Lorraine says.

We got English back, he says. They come back separately. Do you want to head on?

Lorraine folds the rubber gloves up neatly and replaces them below the sink. Then she starts unclipping her hair. To Connell this seems like something she could accomplish in the car.

And I hear you did very well, she says.

He was top of the class, says Marianne.

Right, Connell says. Marianne did pretty good too. Can we go?

Lorraine pauses in the untying of her apron.

I didn't realise we were in a rush, she says.

He puts his hands in his pockets and suppresses an irritable sigh, but suppresses it with an audible intake of breath, so that it still sounds like a sigh.

I just have to pop up and take a load out of the dryer, says Lorraine. And then we'll be off. Okay?

He says nothing, merely hanging his head while Lorraine leaves the room.

Do you want some of this? Marianne says.

She's holding out the jar of chocolate spread. He presses his hands down slightly further into his pockets, as if trying to store his entire body in his pockets all at once.

No, thanks, he says.

Did you get your French results today?

Yesterday.

He puts his back against the fridge and watches her lick the spoon. In school he and Marianne affect not to know each other. People know that Marianne lives in the white mansion with the driveway and that Connell's mother is a cleaner, but no one knows of the special relationship between these facts.

I got an A1, he says. What did you get in German?

An A1, she says. Are you bragging?

You're going to get six hundred, are you?

She shrugs. You probably will, she says.

Well, you're smarter than me.

Don't feel bad. I'm smarter than everyone.

Marianne is grinning now. She exercises an open contempt for people in school. She has no friends and spends her lunchtimes alone reading novels. A lot of people really hate her. Her father died when she was thirteen and Connell has heard she has a mental illness now or something. It's true she is the smartest person in school. He dreads being left alone with her like this, but he also finds himself fantasising about things he could say to impress her.

You're not top of the class in English, he points out.

She licks her teeth, unconcerned.

Maybe you should give me grinds, Connell, she says.

He feels his ears get hot. She's probably just being glib and not suggestive, but if she is being suggestive it's only to degrade him by association, since she is considered an object of disgust. She wears ugly thick-soled flat shoes and doesn't put make-up on her face. People have said she doesn't shave her legs or anything. Connell once heard that she spilled chocolate ice cream on herself in the school lunchroom, and she went to the girls' bathrooms and took her blouse off to wash it in the sink. That's a popular story about her, everyone has heard it. If she wanted, she could make a big show of saying hello to Connell in school. See you this afternoon, she could say, in front of everyone. Undoubtedly it would put him in an awkward position, which is the kind of thing she usually seems to enjoy. But she has never done it.

What were you talking to Miss Neary about today? says Marianne.

Oh. Nothing. I don't know. Exams.

Marianne twists the spoon around inside the jar.

Does she fancy you or something? Marianne says.

Connell watches her moving the spoon. His ears still feel very hot.

Why do you say that? he says.

God, you're not having an affair with her, are you?

Obviously not. Do you think it's funny joking about that?

Sorry, says Marianne.

She has a focused expression, like she's looking through his eyes into the back of his head.

You're right, it's not funny, she says. I'm sorry.

He nods, looks around the room for a bit, digs the toe of his shoe into a groove between the tiles.

Sometimes I feel like she does act kind of weird around me, he says. But I wouldn't say that to people or anything.

Even in class I think she's very flirtatious towards you.

Do you really think that?

Marianne nods. He rubs at his neck. Miss Neary teaches Economics. His supposed feelings for her are widely discussed in school. Some people are even saying that he tried to add her on Facebook, which he didn't and would never do. Actually he doesn't do or say anything to her, he just sits there quietly while she does and says things to him. She keeps him back after class sometimes to talk about his life direction, and once she actually touched the knot of his school tie. He can't tell people about the way she acts because they'll think he's trying to brag about it. In class he feels too embarrassed and annoyed to concentrate on the lesson, he just sits there staring at the textbook until the bar graphs start to blur.

People are always going on at me that I fancy her or whatever, he says. But I actually don't, at all. I mean, you don't think I'm playing into it when she acts like that, do you?

Not that I've seen.

He wipes his palms down on his school shirt unthinkingly. Everyone is so convinced of his attraction to Miss Neary that sometimes he starts to doubt his own instincts about it. What if, at some level above or below his own perception, he does actually desire her? He doesn't even really know what desire is supposed to feel like. Any time he has had sex in real life, he has found it so stressful as to be largely unpleasant, leading him to suspect that there's something wrong with him, that he's unable to be intimate with women, that he's somehow developmentally impaired. He lies there afterwards and thinks: I hated that so much that I feel sick. Is that just the way he is? Is the nausea he feels when Miss Neary leans over his desk actually his way of experiencing a sexual thrill? How would he know?

I could go to Mr Lyons for you if you want, says Marianne. I won't say you told me anything, I'll just say I noticed it myself.

Jesus, no. Definitely not. Don't say anything about it to anyone, okay?

Okay, alright.

He looks at her to confirm she's being serious, and then nods.

It's not your fault she acts like that with you, says Marianne. You're not doing anything wrong.

Quietly he says: Why does everyone else think I fancy her, then?

Maybe because you blush a lot when she talks to you. But you know, you blush at everything, you just have that complexion.

He gives a short, unhappy laugh. Thanks, he says.

Well, you do.

Yeah, I'm aware.

You're blushing now actually, says Marianne.

He closes his eyes, pushes his tongue against the roof of his mouth. He can hear Marianne laughing.

Why do you have to be so harsh on people? he says.

I'm not being harsh. I don't care if you're blushing, I won't tell anyone.

Just because you won't tell people doesn't mean you can say whatever you want.

Okay, she says. Sorry.

He turns and looks out the window at the garden. Really the garden is more like 'grounds'. It includes a tennis court and a large stone statue in the shape of a woman. He looks out at the 'grounds' and moves his face close to the cool breath of the glass. When people tell that story about Marianne washing her blouse in the sink, they act like it's just funny, but Connell thinks the real purpose of the story is something else. Marianne has never been with anyone in school, no one has ever seen her undressed, no one even knows if she likes boys or girls, she won't tell anyone. People resent that about her, and Connell thinks that's why they tell the story, as a way of gawking at something they're not allowed to see.

I don't want to get into a fight with you, she says.

We're not fighting.

I know you probably hate me, but you're the only person who actually talks to me.

I never said I hated you, he says.

That gets her attention, and she looks up. Confused, he continues looking away from her, but in the corner of his eye he still sees her watching. When he talks to Marianne he has a sense of total privacy between them. He could tell her anything about himself, even weird things, and she would never repeat them, he knows that. Being alone with her is like opening a door away from normal life and then closing it behind him. He's not frightened of her, actually she's a pretty relaxed person, but he fears being around her, because of the confusing way he finds himself behaving, the things he says that he would never ordinarily say.

A few weeks ago when he was waiting for Lorraine in the hall, Marianne came downstairs in a bathrobe. It was just a plain white bathrobe, tied in the normal way. Her hair was wet, and her skin had that glistening look like she had just been applying face cream. When she saw Connell, she hesitated on the stairs and said: I didn't know you were here, sorry. Maybe she seemed flustered, but not really badly or anything. Then she went back up to her room. After she left he stood there in the hall waiting. He knew she was probably getting dressed in her room, and whatever clothes she was wearing when she came back down would be the clothes she had chosen to put on after she saw him in the hall. Anyway Lorraine was ready to go before Marianne reappeared so he never did get to see what clothes she had put on. It wasn't like he deeply cared to know. He certainly didn't tell anyone in school about it, that he had seen her in a bathrobe, or that she looked flustered, it wasn't anyone's business to know.

Well, I like you, Marianne says.

For a few seconds he says nothing, and the intensity of the privacy between them is very severe, pressing in on him with an almost physical pressure on his face and body. Then Lorraine comes back into the kitchen, tying her scarf around her neck. She does a little knock on the door even though it's already open.

Good to go? she says.

Yeah, says Connell.

Thanks for everything, Lorraine, says Marianne. See you next week.

Connell is already heading out the kitchen door when his mother says: You can say goodbye, can't you? He turns to look over his shoulder but finds he cannot actually look Marianne in the eye, so he addresses himself to the floor instead. Right, bye, he says. He doesn't wait to hear her reply.

In the car his mother puts on her seatbelt and shakes her head. You could be a bit nicer to her, she says. She doesn't exactly have an easy time of it in school.

He puts the keys in the ignition, glances in the rear-view. I'm nice to her, he says.

She's actually a very sensitive person, says Lorraine.

Can we talk about something else?

Lorraine makes a face. He stares out the windshield and pretends not to see.

Three Weeks Later

(FEBRUARY 2011)

She sits at her dressing table looking at her face in the mirror. Her face lacks definition around the cheeks and jaw. It's a face like a piece of technology, and her two eyes are cursors blinking. Or it's reminiscent of the moon reflected in something, wobbly and oblique. It expresses everything all at once, which is the same as expressing nothing. To wear make-up for this occasion would be, she concludes, embarrassing. Without breaking eye contact with herself, she dips her finger in an open pot of clear lip balm and applies it.

Downstairs, when she takes her coat off the hook, her brother Alan comes out from the living room.

Where are you going? he says.

Out.

Where's out?

She puts her arms through the sleeves of her coat and adjusts the collar. She's beginning to feel nervous now and hopes her silence is communicating insolence rather than uncertainty.

Just out for a walk, she says.

Alan moves to stand in front of the door.

Well, I know you're not going out to meet friends, he says. Because you don't have any friends, do you?

No, I don't.

She smiles now, a placid smile, hoping that this gesture of submission will placate him and he'll move away from the door. Instead he says: What are you doing that for?

What? she says.

This weird smile you're doing.

He mimics her face, contorted into an ugly grin, teeth bared. Though he's grinning, the force and extremity of this impersonation make him look angry.

Are you happy that you don't have friends? he says.

No.

Still smiling, she takes two small steps backwards, and then turns and walks towards the kitchen, where there's a patio door onto the garden. Alan walks after her. He grabs her by the upper arm and tugs her back from the door. She feels her jaw tighten. His fingers compress her arm through her jacket.

If you go crying to Mam about this, says Alan.

No, says Marianne, no. I'm just going out for a walk now. Thank you.

He releases her and she slips out through the patio door, closing it behind her. Outside the air feels very cold and her teeth start to chatter. She walks around the side of the house, down the driveway and out into the street. Her arm is throbbing where he grabbed it. She takes her phone from a pocket and composes a text, repeatedly hitting the wrong key, deleting and retyping. Finally she sends it: On my way. Before she puts the phone back, she

receives a reply: cool see you soon.

*

At the end of last term, the school soccer team reached the final of some competition and everyone in the year had to take the last three classes off to go and watch them. Marianne had never seen them play before. She had no interest in sport and suffered anxiety related to physical education. In the bus on the way to the match she just listened to her headphones, no one spoke to her. Out the window: black cattle, green meadows, white houses with brown roof tiles. The football team were all together at the top of the bus, drinking water and slapping each other on the shoulders to raise morale. Marianne had the sense that her real life was happening somewhere very far away, happening without her, and she didn't know if she would ever find out where it was and become part of it. She had that feeling in school often, but it wasn't accompanied by any specific images of what the real life might look or feel like. All she knew was that when it started, she wouldn't need to imagine it anymore.

It stayed dry for the match. They had been brought there for the purpose of standing at the sidelines and cheering. Marianne was near the goalposts, with Karen and some of the other girls. Everyone other than Marianne seemed to know the school chants off by heart somehow, with lyrics she had never heard before. By half-time it was still nil-all, and Miss Keaney handed around boxes of juice and energy bars. For the second half, the ends changed around, and the school forwards were playing near where Marianne was standing. Connell Waldron was the centre forward. She could see him standing there in his football kit, the shiny white shorts, the school jersey with number nine on the back. He had very good posture, more so than any of the other players. His figure was like a long elegant line drawn with a brush. When the ball moved towards their end of the pitch he tended to run around and maybe throw one of his hands in the air, and then he went back to standing still. It was pleasurable to watch him, and she didn't think he knew or cared where she was standing. After school some day she could tell him she had been watching him, and he'd laugh at her and call her weird.

At seventy minutes Aidan Kennedy brought the ball up the left side of the pitch and crossed it over to Connell, who took a shot from the corner of the penalty area, over the heads of the defenders, and it spun into the back of the net. Everyone screamed, even Marianne, and Karen threw her arm around Marianne's waist and squeezed it. They were cheering together, they had seen something magical which dissolved the ordinary social relations between them. Miss Keaney was whistling and stamping her feet. On the pitch Connell and Aidan embraced like reunited brothers. Connell was so beautiful. It occurred to Marianne how much she wanted to see him having sex with someone; it didn't have to be her, it could be anybody. It would be beautiful just to watch him. She knew these were the kind of thoughts that made her different from other people in school, and weirder.

Marianne's classmates all seem to like school so much and find it normal. To dress in the same uniform every day, to comply at all times with arbitrary rules, to be scrutinised and monitored for misbehaviour, this is normal to them. They have no sense of the school as an oppressive environment. Marianne had a row with the History teacher, Mr Kerrigan, last year because he caught her looking out a window during class, and no one in the class took

her side. It seemed so obviously insane to her then that she should have to dress up in a costume every morning and be herded around a huge building all day, and that she wasn't even allowed to move her eyes where she wanted, even her eye movements fell under the jurisdiction of school rules. You're not learning if you're staring out the window daydreaming, Mr Kerrigan said. Marianne, who had lost her temper by then, snapped back: Don't delude yourself, I have nothing to learn from you.

Connell said recently that he remembered that incident, and that at the time he'd felt she was being harsh on Mr Kerrigan, who was actually one of the more reasonable teachers. But I see what you're saying, Connell added. About feeling a bit imprisoned in the school, I do see that. He should have let you look out the window, I would agree there. You weren't doing any harm.

After their conversation in the kitchen, when she told him she liked him, Connell started coming over to her house more often. He would arrive early to pick his mother up from work and hang around in the living room not saying much, or stand by the fireplace with his hands in his pockets. Marianne never asked why he came over. They talked a little bit, or she talked and he nodded. He told her she should try reading *The Communist Manifesto*, he thought she would like it, and he offered to write down the title for her so she wouldn't forget. I know what *The Communist Manifesto* is called, she said. He shrugged, okay. After a moment he added, smiling: You're trying to act superior, but like, you haven't even read it. She had to laugh then, and he laughed because she did. They couldn't look at each other when they were laughing, they had to look into corners of the room, or at their feet.

Connell seemed to understand how she felt about school; he said he liked hearing her opinions. You hear enough of them in class, she said. Matter-of-factly he replied: You act different in class, you're not really like that. He seemed to think Marianne had access to a range of different identities, between which she slipped effortlessly. This surprised her, because she usually felt confined inside one single personality, which was always the same regardless of what she did or said. She had tried to be different in the past, as a kind of experiment, but it had never worked. If she was different with Connell, the difference was not happening inside herself, in her personhood, but in between them, in the dynamic. Sometimes she made him laugh, but other days he was taciturn, inscrutable, and after he left she would feel high, nervous, at once energetic and terribly drained.

He followed her into the study last week while she was looking for a copy of *The Fire Next Time* to lend him. He stood there inspecting the bookshelves, with his top shirt button undone and school tie loosened. She found the book and handed it to him, and he sat down on the window seat looking at the back cover. She sat beside him and asked him if his friends Eric and Rob knew that he read so much outside school.

They wouldn't be interested in that stuff, he said.

You mean they're not interested in the world around them.

Connell made the face he always made when she criticised his friends, an inexpressive frown. Not in the same way, he said. They have their own interests. I don't think they'd be reading books about racism and all that.

Right, they're too busy bragging about who they're having sex with, she said.

He paused for a second, like his ears had pricked up at this remark but he didn't know exactly how to respond. Yeah, they do a bit of that, he said. I'm not defending it, I know they can be annoying.

Doesn't it bother you?

He paused again. Most of it wouldn't, he said. They do some stuff that goes a bit over the line and that would annoy me obviously. But at the end of the day they're my friends, you know. It's different for you.

She looked at him, but he was examining the spine of the book.

Why is it different? she said.

He shrugged, bending the book cover back and forth. She felt frustrated. Her face and hands were hot. He kept on looking at the book although he'd certainly read all the text on the back by then. She was attuned to the presence of his body in a microscopic way, as if the ordinary motion of his breathing was powerful enough to make her ill.

You know you were saying the other day that you like me, he said. In the kitchen you said it, when we were talking about school.

Yeah.

Did you mean like as a friend, or what?

She stared down into her lap. She was wearing a corduroy skirt and in the light from the window she could see it was flecked with pieces of lint.

No, not just as a friend, she said.

Oh, okay. I was wondering.

He sat there, nodding to himself.

I'm kind of confused about what I feel, he added. I think it would be awkward in school if anything happened with us.

No one would have to know.

He looked up at her, directly, with total attention. She knew he was going to kiss her, and he did. His lips were soft. His tongue moved into her mouth slightly. Then it was over and he was drawing away. He seemed to remember he was holding the book, and began to look at it again.

That was nice, she said.

He nodded, swallowed, glanced down at the book once more. His attitude was so sheepish, as if it had been rude of her even to make reference to the kiss, that Marianne started to laugh. He looked flustered then.

Alright, he said. What are you laughing for?

Nothing.

You're acting like you've never kissed anyone before.

Well, I haven't, she said.

He put his hand over his face. She laughed again, she couldn't stop herself, and then he was laughing too. His ears were very red and he was shaking his head. After a few seconds he stood up, holding the book in his hand.

Don't go telling people in school about this, okay? he said.

Like I would talk to anyone in school.

He left the room. Weakly she crumpled off the seat, down onto the floor, with her legs stretched out in front of her like a rag doll. While she sat there she felt as if Connell had been visiting her house only to test her, and she had passed the test, and the kiss was a communication that said: You passed. She thought of the way he'd laughed when she said she'd never kissed anyone before. For another person to laugh that way might have been cruel, but it wasn't like that with him. They'd been laughing together, at a shared situation

they'd found themselves in, though how to describe the situation or what was funny about it Marianne didn't know exactly.

The next morning before German class she sat watching her classmates shove each other off the storage heaters, shrieking and giggling. When the lesson began they listened quietly to an audio tape of a German woman speaking about a party she had missed. *Es tut mir sehr leid*. In the afternoon it started snowing, thick grey flakes that fluttered past the windows and melted on the gravel. Everything looked and felt sensuous: the stale smell of classrooms, the tinny intercom bell that sounded between lessons, the dark austere trees that stood like apparitions around the basketball court. The slow routine work of copying out notes in different-coloured pens on fresh blue-and-white lined paper. Connell, as usual, did not speak to Marianne in school or even look at her. She watched him across classrooms as he conjugated verbs, chewing on the end of his pen. On the other side of the cafeteria at lunchtime, smiling about something with his friends. Their secret weighed inside her body pleasurably, pressing down on her pelvic bone when she moved.

She didn't see him after school that day, or the next. On Thursday afternoon his mother was working again and he arrived early to pick her up. Marianne had to answer the door because no one else was home. He had changed out of his school uniform, he was wearing black jeans and a sweatshirt. When she saw him she had an instinct to run away and hide her face. Lorraine's in the kitchen, she said. Then she turned and went upstairs to her room and closed the door. She lay face down on the bed breathing into the pillow. Who was this person Connell anyway? She felt she knew him very intimately, but what reason did she have to feel that? Just because he had kissed her once, with no explanation, and then warned her not to tell anyone? After a minute or two she heard a knock on her bedroom door and she sat up. Come in, she said. He opened the door and, giving her an enquiring look as if to see whether he was welcome, entered the room and closed the door behind him.

Are you pissed off with me? he said.

No. Why would I be?

He shrugged. Idly he wandered over to the bed and sat down. She was sitting cross-legged, holding her ankles. They sat there in silence for a few moments. Then he got onto the bed with her. He touched her leg and she lay back against the pillow. Boldly she asked if he was going to kiss her again. He said: What do you think? This struck her as a highly cryptic and sophisticated thing to say. Anyway he did start to kiss her. She told him that it was nice and he just said nothing. She felt she would do anything to make him like her, to make him say out loud that he liked her. He put his hand under her school blouse. In his ear, she said: Can we take our clothes off? He had his hand inside her bra. Definitely not, he said. This is stupid anyway, Lorraine is right downstairs. He called his mother by her first name like that. Marianne said: She never comes up here. He shook his head and said: No, we should stop. He sat up and looked down at her.

You were tempted for a second there, she said.

Not really.

I tempted you.

He was shaking his head, smiling. You're such a strange person, he said.

Now she's standing in his driveway, where his car is parked. He texted her the address, it's number 33: a terraced house with pebble-dash walls, net curtains, a tiny concrete yard. She can see a light switched on in the upstairs window. It's hard to believe he really lives in there, a house she has never been inside or even seen before. She's wearing a black sweater, grey skirt, cheap black underwear. Her legs are shaved meticulously, her underarms are smooth and chalky with deodorant, and her nose is running a little. She rings the doorbell and hears his footsteps coming down the stairs. He opens the door. Before he lets her in he looks over her shoulder, to make sure that no one has seen her arrive.

One Month Later

(MARCH 2011)

They're talking about their college applications. Marianne is lying with the bedsheet pulled carelessly over her body, and Connell's sitting up with her MacBook in his lap. She's already applied for History and Politics in Trinity. He's put down Law in Galway, but now he thinks that he might change it, because, as Marianne has pointed out, he has no interest in Law. He can't even visually imagine himself as a lawyer, wearing a tie and so on, possibly helping to convict people of crimes. He just put it down because he couldn't think of anything else.

You should study English, says Marianne.

Do you think I should, or are you joking?

I think you should. It's the only subject you really enjoy in school. And you spend all your free time reading.

He looks at the laptop blankly, and then at the thin yellow bedsheet draped over her body, which casts a lilac triangle of shadow on her breast.

Not all my free time, he says.

She smiles. Plus the class will be full of girls, she says, so you'll be a total stud.

Yeah. I'm not sure about the job prospects, though.

Oh, who cares? The economy's fucked anyway.

The laptop screen has gone black now and he taps the trackpad to light it up again. The college applications webpage stares back at him.

*

After the first time they had sex, Marianne stayed the night in his house. He had never been with a girl who was a virgin before. In total he had only had sex a small number of times, and always with girls who went on to tell the whole school about it afterwards. He'd had to hear his actions repeated back to him later in the locker room: his errors, and, so much worse, his excruciating attempts at tenderness, performed in gigantic pantomime. With Marianne it was different, because everything was between them only, even awkward or difficult things. He could do or say anything he wanted with her and no one would ever find out. It gave him a vertiginous, lightheaded feeling to think about it. When he touched her that night she was so wet, and she rolled her eyes back into her head and said: God, yes. And she was allowed to say it, no one would know. He was afraid he would come then just from touching her like that.

In the hallway the next morning he kissed her goodbye and her mouth tasted alkaline, like toothpaste. Thanks, she said. Then she left, before he understood what he was being thanked for. He put the bedsheets in the washing machine and took fresh linen from the hot press. He was thinking about what a secretive, independent-minded person Marianne was, that she could come over to his house and let him have sex with her, and she felt no need to tell

anyone about it. She just let things happen, like nothing meant anything to her.

Lorraine got home that afternoon. Before she'd even put her keys on the table she said: Is that the washing machine? Connell nodded. She crouched down and looked through the round glass window into the drum, where his sheets were tossing around in the froth.

I'm not going to ask, she said.

What?

She started to fill the kettle, while he leaned against the countertop.

Why your bedclothes are in the wash, she said. I'm not asking.

He rolled his eyes just for something to do with his face. You think the worst of everything, he said.

She laughed, fixing the kettle into its cradle and hitting the switch. Excuse me, she said. I must be the most permissive mother of anyone in your school. As long as you're using protection, you can do what you want.

He said nothing. The kettle started to warm up and she took a clean mug down from the press.

Well? she said. Is that a yes?

Yes what? Obviously I didn't have unprotected sex with anyone while you were gone. Jesus.

So go on, what's her name?

He left the room then but he could hear his mother laughing as he went up the stairs. His life is always giving her amusement.

In school on Monday he had to avoid looking at Marianne or interacting with her in any way. He carried the secret around like something large and hot, like an overfull tray of hot drinks that he had to carry everywhere and never spill. She just acted the same as always, like it never happened, reading her book at the lockers as usual, getting into pointless arguments. At lunchtime on Tuesday, Rob started asking questions about Connell's mother working in Marianne's house, and Connell just ate his lunch and tried not to make any facial expressions.

Would you ever go in there yourself? Rob said. Into the mansion.

Connell jogged his bag of chips in his hand and then peered into it. I've been in there a few times, yeah, he said.

What's it like inside?

He shrugged. I don't know, he said. Big, obviously.

What's she like in her natural habitat? Rob said.

I don't know.

I'd say she thinks of you as her butler, does she?

Connell wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. It felt greasy. His chips were too salty and he had a headache.

I doubt it, Connell said.

But your mam is her housemaid, isn't she?

Well, she's just a cleaner. She's only there like twice a week, I don't think they interact much.

Does Marianne not have a little bell she would ring to get her attention, no? Rob said.

Connell said nothing. He didn't understand the situation with Marianne at that point. After he talked to Rob he told himself it was over, he'd just had sex with her once to see

what it was like, and he wouldn't see her again. Even as he was saying all this to himself, however, he could hear another part of his brain, in a different voice, saying: Yes you will. It was a part of his consciousness he had never really known before, this inexplicable drive to act on perverse and secret desires. He found himself fantasising about her in class that afternoon, at the back of Maths, or when they were supposed to be playing rounders. He would think of her small wet mouth and suddenly run out of breath, and have to struggle to fill his lungs.

That afternoon he went to her house after school. All the way over in the car he kept the radio on very loud so he didn't have to think about what he was doing. When they went upstairs he didn't say anything, he let her talk. That's so good, she kept saying. That feels so good. Her body was all soft and white like flour dough. He seemed to fit perfectly inside her. Physically it just felt right, and he understood why people did insane things for sexual reasons then. In fact he understood a lot of things about the adult world that had previously seemed mysterious. But why Marianne? It wasn't like she was so attractive. Some people thought she was the ugliest girl in school. What kind of person would want to do this with her? And yet he was there, whatever kind of person he was, doing it. She asked him if it felt good and he pretended he didn't hear her. She was on her hands and knees so he couldn't see her facial expression or read into it what she was thinking. After a few seconds she said in a much smaller voice: Am I doing something wrong? He closed his eyes.

No, he said. I like it.

Her breath sounded ragged then. He pulled her hips back against his body and then released her slightly. She made a noise like she was choking. He did it again and she told him she was going to come. That's good, he said. He said this like nothing could be more ordinary to him. His decision to drive to Marianne's house that afternoon suddenly seemed very correct and intelligent, maybe the only intelligent thing he had ever done in his life.

After they were finished he asked her what he should do with the condom. Without lifting her face off the pillow she said: You can just leave it on the floor. Her face was pink and damp. He did what she said and then lay on his back looking up at the light fixtures. I like you so much, Marianne said. Connell felt a pleasurable sorrow come over him, which brought him close to tears. Moments of emotional pain arrived like this, meaningless or at least indecipherable. Marianne lived a drastically free life, he could see that. He was trapped by various considerations. He cared what people thought of him. He even cared what Marianne thought, that was obvious now.

Multiple times he has tried writing his thoughts about Marianne down on paper in an effort to make sense of them. He's moved by a desire to describe in words exactly how she looks and speaks. Her hair and clothing. The copy of *Swann's Way* she reads at lunchtime in the school cafeteria, with a dark French painting on the cover and a mint-coloured spine. Her long fingers turning the pages. She's not leading the same kind of life as other people. She acts so worldly at times, making him feel ignorant, but then she can be so naive. He wants to understand how her mind works. If he silently decides not to say something when they're talking, Marianne will ask 'what?' within one or two seconds. This 'what?' question seems to him to contain so much: not just the forensic attentiveness to his silences that allows her to ask in the first place, but a desire for total communication, a sense that anything unsaid is an unwelcome interruption between them. He writes these things down, long run-on sentences with too many dependent clauses, sometimes connected with

breathless semicolons, as if he wants to recreate a precise copy of Marianne in print, as if he can preserve her completely for future review. Then he turns a new page in the notebook so he doesn't have to look at what he's done.

*

What are you thinking about? says Marianne now.

She's tucking her hair behind her ear.

College, he says.

You should apply for English in Trinity.

He stares at the webpage again. Lately he's consumed by a sense that he is in fact two separate people, and soon he will have to choose which person to be on a full-time basis, and leave the other person behind. He has a life in Carriclea, he has friends. If he went to college in Galway he could stay with the same social group, really, and live the life he has always planned on, getting a good degree, having a nice girlfriend. People would say he had done well for himself. On the other hand, he could go to Trinity like Marianne. Life would be different then. He would start going to dinner parties and having conversations about the Greek bailout. He could fuck some weird-looking girls who turn out to be bisexual. I've read *The Golden Notebook*, he could tell them. It's true, he has read it. After that he would never come back to Carriclea, he would go somewhere else, London, or Barcelona. People would not necessarily think he had done well; some people might think he had gone very bad, while others would forget about him entirely. What would Lorraine think? She would want him to be happy, and not care what others said. But the old Connell, the one all his friends know: that person would be dead in a way, or worse, buried alive, and screaming under the earth.

Then we'd both be in Dublin, he says. I bet you'd pretend you didn't know me if we bumped into each other.

Marianne says nothing at first. The longer she stays silent the more nervous he feels, like maybe she really would pretend not to know him, and the idea of being beneath her notice gives him a panicked feeling, not only about Marianne personally but about his future, about what's possible for him.

Then she says: I would never pretend not to know you, Connell.

The silence becomes very intense after that. For a few seconds he lies still. Of course, he pretends not to know Marianne in school, but he didn't mean to bring that up. That's just the way it has to be. If people found out what he has been doing with Marianne, in secret, while ignoring her every day in school, his life would be over. He would walk down the hallway and people's eyes would follow him, like he was a serial killer, or worse. His friends don't think of him as a deviant person, a person who could say to Marianne Sheridan, in broad daylight, completely sober: Is it okay if I come in your mouth? With his friends he acts normal. He and Marianne have their own private life in his room where no one can bother them, so there's no reason to mix up the separate worlds. Still, he can tell he has lost his footing in their discussion and left an opening for this subject to arise, though he didn't want it to, and now he has to say something.

Would you not? he says.

No.

Alright, I'll put down English in Trinity, then.

Really? she says.

Yeah. I don't care that much about getting a job anyway.

She gives him a little smile, like she feels she has won the argument. He likes to give her that feeling. For a moment it seems possible to keep both worlds, both versions of his life, and to move in between them just like moving through a door. He can have the respect of someone like Marianne and also be well liked in school, he can form secret opinions and preferences, no conflict has to arise, he never has to choose one thing over another. With only a little subterfuge he can live two entirely separate existences, never confronting the ultimate question of what to do with himself or what kind of person he is. This thought is so consoling that for a few seconds he avoids meeting Marianne's eye, wanting to sustain the belief for just a little longer. He knows that when he looks at her, he won't be able to believe it anymore.

Six Weeks Later

(APRIL 2011)

They have her name on a list. She shows the bouncer her ID. When she gets inside, the interior is low-lit, cavernous, vaguely purple, with long bars on either side and steps down to a dance floor. It smells of stale alcohol and the flat tinny ring of dry ice. Some of the other girls from the fundraising committee are sitting around a table already, looking at lists. Hi, Marianne says. They turn around and look at her.

Hello, says Lisa. Don't you scrub up well?

You look gorgeous, says Karen.

Rachel Moran says nothing. Everyone knows that Rachel is the most popular girl in school, but no one is allowed to say this. Instead everyone has to pretend not to notice that their social lives are arranged hierarchically, with certain people at the top, some jostling at mid-level, and others lower down. Marianne sometimes sees herself at the very bottom of the ladder, but at other times she pictures herself off the ladder completely, not affected by its mechanics, since she does not actually desire popularity or do anything to make it belong to her. From her vantage point it is not obvious what rewards the ladder provides, even to those who really are at the top. She rubs her upper arm and says: Thanks. Would anyone like a drink? I'm going to the bar anyway.

I thought you didn't drink alcohol, says Rachel.

I'll have a bottle of West Coast Cooler, Karen says. If you're sure.

Wine is the only alcoholic beverage Marianne has ever tried, but when she goes to the bar she decides to order a gin and tonic. The barman looks frankly at her breasts while she's talking. Marianne had no idea men really did such things outside of films and TV, and the experience gives her a little thrill of femininity. She's wearing a filmy black dress that clings to her body. The place is still almost empty now, though the event has technically started. Back at the table Karen thanks her extravagantly for the drink. I'll get you back, she says. Don't worry about it, says Marianne, waving her hand.

Eventually people start arriving. The music comes on, a pounding Destiny's Child remix, and Rachel gives Marianne the book of raffle tickets and explains the pricing system. Marianne was voted onto the Debs fundraising committee presumably as some kind of joke, but she has to help organise the events anyway. Ticket book in hand, she continues to hover beside the other girls. She's used to observing these people from a distance, almost scientifically, but tonight, having to make conversation and smile politely, she's no longer an observer but an intruder, and an awkward one. She sells some tickets, dispensing change from the pouch in her purse, she buys more drinks, she glances at the door and looks away in disappointment.

The lads are fairly late, says Lisa.

Of all the possible lads, Marianne knows who is specified: Rob, with whom Lisa has an on-again off-again relationship, and his friends Eric, Jack Hynes and Connell Waldron. Their lateness has not escaped Marianne's notice.

If they don't show up I will actually murder Connell, says Rachel. He told me yesterday they were definitely coming.

Marianne says nothing. Rachel often talks about Connell this way, alluding to private conversations that have happened between them, as if they are special confidants. Connell ignores this behaviour, but he also ignores the hints Marianne drops about it when they're alone together.

They're probably still pre-drinking in Rob's, says Lisa.

They'll be absolutely binned by the time they get here, says Karen.

Marianne takes her phone from her bag and writes Connell a text message: Lively discussion here on the subject of your absence. Are you planning to come at all? Within thirty seconds he replies: yeah jack just got sick everywhere so we had to put him in a taxi etc. on our way soon though. how are you getting on socialising with people. Marianne writes back: I'm the new popular girl in school now. Everyone's carrying me around the dance floor chanting my name. She puts her phone back in her bag. Nothing would feel more exhilarating to her at this moment than to say: They'll be on their way shortly. How much terrifying and bewildering status would accrue to her in this one moment, how destabilising it would be, how destructive.

*

Although Carricklea is the only place Marianne has ever lived, it's not a town she knows particularly well. She doesn't go drinking in the pubs on Main Street, and before tonight she had never been to the town's only nightclub. She has never visited the Knocklyon housing estate. She doesn't know the name of the river that runs brown and bedraggled past the Centra and behind the church car park, snagging thin plastic bags in its current, or where the river goes next. Who would tell her? The only time she leaves the house is to go to school, and the enforced Mass trip on Sundays, and to Connell's house when no one is home. She knows how long it takes to get to Sligo town – twenty minutes – but the locations of other nearby towns, and their sizes in relation to Carricklea, are a mystery to her. Coolaney, Skreen, Ballysadare, she's pretty sure these are all in the vicinity of Carricklea, and the names ring bells for her in a vague way, but she doesn't know where they are. She's never been inside the sports centre. She's never gone drinking in the abandoned hat factory, though she has been driven past it in the car.

Likewise, it's impossible for her to know which families in town are considered good families and which aren't. It's the kind of thing she would like to know, just to be able to reject it the more completely. She's from a good family and Connell is from a bad one, that much she does know. The Waldrons are notorious in Carricklea. One of Lorraine's brothers was in prison once, Marianne doesn't know for what, and another one got into a motorcycle crash off the roundabout a few years ago and almost died. And of course, Lorraine got pregnant at seventeen and left school to have the baby. Nonetheless Connell is considered quite a catch these days. He's studious, he plays centre forward in football, he's good-looking, he doesn't get into fights. Everybody likes him. He's quiet. Even Marianne's mother will say approvingly: That boy is nothing like a Waldron. Marianne's mother is a solicitor. Her father was a solicitor too.

Last week, Connell mentioned something called 'the ghost'. Marianne had never heard of

it before, she had to ask him what it was. His eyebrows shot up. The ghost, he said. The ghost estate, Mountain View. It's like, right behind the school. Marianne had been vaguely aware of some construction on the land behind the school, but she didn't know there was a housing estate there now, or that no one lived in it. People go drinking there, Connell added. Oh, said Marianne. She asked what it was like. He said he wished he could show her, but there were always people around. He often makes blithe remarks about things he 'wishes'. I wish you didn't have to go, he says when she's leaving, or: I wish you could stay the night. If he really wished for any of those things, Marianne knows, then they would happen. Connell always gets what he wants, and then feels sorry for himself when what he wants doesn't make him happy.

Anyway, he did end up taking her to see the ghost estate. They drove there in his car one afternoon and he went out first to make sure no one was around before she followed him. The houses were huge, with bare concrete facades and overgrown front lawns. Some of the empty window holes were covered over in plastic sheeting, which whipped around loudly in the wind. It was raining and she had left her jacket in the car. She crossed her arms, squinting up at the wet slate roofs.

Do you want to look inside? Connell said.

The front door of number 23 was unlocked. It was quieter in the house, and darker. The place was filthy. With the toe of her shoe Marianne prodded at an empty cider bottle. There were cigarette butts all over the floor and someone had dragged a mattress into the otherwise bare living room. The mattress was stained badly with damp and what looked like blood. Pretty sordid, Marianne said aloud. Connell was quiet, just looking around.

Do you hang out here much? she said.

He gave a kind of shrug. Not much, he said. Used to a bit, not much anymore.

Please tell me you've never had sex on that mattress.

He smiled absently. No, he said. Is that what you think I get up to at the weekend, is it?

Kind of.

He didn't say anything then, which made her feel even worse. He kicked a crushed can of Dutch Gold aimlessly and sent it skidding towards the French doors.

This is probably three times the size of my house, he said. Would you say?

She felt foolish for not realising what he had been thinking about. Probably, she said. I haven't seen upstairs, obviously.

Four bedrooms.

Jesus.

Just lying empty, no one living in it, he said. Why don't they give them away if they can't sell them? I'm not being thick with you, I'm genuinely asking.

She shrugged. She didn't actually understand why.

It's something to do with capitalism, she said.

Yeah. Everything is, that's the problem, isn't it?

She nodded. He looked over at her, as if coming out of a dream.

Are you cold? he said. You look like you're freezing.

She smiled, rubbed at her nose. He unzipped his black puffer jacket and put it over her shoulders. They were standing very close. She would have lain on the ground and let him walk over her body if he wanted, he knew that.

When I go out at the weekend or whatever, he said, I don't go after other girls or

anything.

Marianne smiled and said: No, I guess they come after you.

He grinned, he looked down at his shoes. You have a very funny idea of me, he said.

She closed her fingers around his school tie. It was the first time in her life she could say shocking things and use bad language, so she did it a lot. If I wanted you to fuck me here, she said, would you do it?

His expression didn't change but his hands moved around under her jumper to show he was listening. After a few seconds he said: Yeah. If you wanted to, yeah. You're always making me do such weird things.

What does that mean? she said. I can't make you do anything.

Yeah, you can. Do you think there's any other person I would do this type of thing with? Seriously, do you think anyone else could make me sneak around after school and all this?

What do you want me to do? Leave you alone?

He looked at her, seemingly taken aback by this turn in the discussion. Shaking his head, he said: If you did that ...

She looked at him but he didn't say anything else.

If I did that, what? she said.

I don't know. You mean, if you just didn't want to see each other anymore? I would feel surprised honestly, because you seem like you enjoy it.

And what if I met someone else who liked me more?

He laughed. She turned away crossly, pulling out of his grasp, wrapping her arms around her chest. He said hey, but she didn't turn around. She was facing the disgusting mattress with the rust-coloured stains all over it. Gently he came up behind her and lifted her hair to kiss the back of her neck.

Sorry for laughing, he said. You're making me insecure, talking about not wanting to hang out with me anymore. I thought you liked me.

She shut her eyes. I do like you, she said.

Well, if you met someone else you liked more, I'd be pissed off, okay? Since you ask about it. I wouldn't be happy. Alright?

Your friend Eric called me flat-chested today in front of everyone.

Connell paused. She felt his breathing. I didn't hear that, he said.

You were in the bathroom or somewhere. He said I looked like an ironing board.

Fuck's sake, he's such a prick. Is that why you're in a bad mood?

She shrugged. Connell put his arms around her belly.

He's only trying to get on your nerves, he said. If he thought he had the slightest chance with you, he would be talking very differently. He just thinks you look down on him.

She shrugged again, chewing on her lower lip.

You have nothing to worry about with your appearance, Connell said.

Hm.

I don't just like you for your brains, trust me.

She laughed, feeling silly.

He rubbed her ear with his nose and added: I would miss you if you didn't want to see me anymore.

Would you miss sleeping with me? she said.

He touched his hand against her hipbone, rocking her back against his body, and said

quietly: Yeah, a lot.

Can we go back to your house now?

He nodded. For a few seconds they just stood there in stillness, his arms around her, his breath on her ear. Most people go through their whole lives, Marianne thought, without ever really feeling that close with anyone.

*

Finally, after her third gin and tonic, the door bangs open and the boys arrive. The committee girls get up and start teasing them, scolding them for being late, things like that. Marianne hangs back, searching for Connell's eye contact, which he doesn't return. He's dressed in a white button-down shirt, the same Adidas sneakers he wears everywhere. The other boys are wearing shirts too, but more formal-looking, shinier, and worn with leather dress shoes. There's a heavy, stirring smell of aftershave in the air. Eric catches Marianne's eye and suddenly lets go of Karen, a move obvious enough that everyone else looks around too.

Look at you, Marianne, says Eric.

She can't tell immediately whether he's being sincere or mocking. All the boys are looking at her now except Connell.

I'm serious, Eric says. Great dress, very sexy.

Rachel starts laughing, leans in to say something in Connell's ear. He turns his face away slightly and doesn't laugh along. Marianne feels a certain pressure in her head that she wants to relieve by screaming or crying.

Let's go and have a dance, says Karen.

I've never seen Marianne dancing, Rachel says.

Well, you can see her now, says Karen.

Karen takes Marianne's hand and pulls her towards the dance floor. There's a Kanye West song playing, the one with the Curtis Mayfield sample. Marianne is still holding the raffle book in one hand, and she feels the other hand damp inside Karen's. The dance floor is crowded and sends shudders of bass up through her shoes into her legs. Karen props an arm on Marianne's shoulder, drunkenly, and says in her ear: Don't mind Rachel, she's in foul humour. Marianne nods her head, moving her body in time with the music. Feeling drunk now, she turns to search the room, wanting to know where Connell is. Right away she sees him, standing at the top of the steps. He's watching her. The music is so loud it throbs inside her body. Around him the others are talking and laughing. He's just looking at her and saying nothing. Under his gaze her movements feel magnified, scandalous, and the weight of Karen's arm on her shoulder is sensual and hot. She rocks her hips forward and runs a hand loosely through her hair.

In her ear Karen says: He's been watching you the whole time.

Marianne looks at him and then back at Karen, saying nothing, trying not to let her face say anything.

Now you see why Rachel's in a bad mood with you, says Karen.

She can smell the wine spritzer on Karen's breath when she speaks, she can see her fillings. She likes her so much at that moment. They dance a little more and then go back upstairs together, hand in hand, out of breath now, grinning about nothing. Eric and Rob are

pretending to have an argument. Connell moves towards Marianne almost imperceptibly, and their arms touch. She wants to pick up his hand and suck on his fingertips one after another.

Rachel turns to her then and says: You might try actually selling some raffle tickets at some point?

Marianne smiles, and the smile that comes out is smug, almost derisive, and she says: Okay.

I think these lads might want to buy some, says Eric.

He nods over at the door, where some older guys have arrived. They're not supposed to be here, the nightclub said it would be ticket-holders only. Marianne doesn't know who they are, someone's brothers or cousins maybe, or just men in their twenties who like to hang around school fundraisers. They see Eric waving and come over. Marianne looks in her purse for the cash pouch in case they do want to buy raffle tickets.

How are things, Eric? says one of the men. Who's your friend here?

That's Marianne Sheridan, Eric says. You'd know her brother, I'd say. Alan, he would've been in Mick's year.

The man just nods, looking Marianne up and down. She feels indifferent to his attention. The music is too loud to hear what Rob is saying in Eric's ear, but Marianne feels it has to do with her.

Let me get you a drink, the man says. What are you having?

No, thanks, says Marianne.

The man slips an arm around her shoulders then. He's very tall, she notices. Taller than Connell. His fingers rub her bare arm. She tries to shrug him off but he doesn't let go. One of his friends starts laughing, and Eric laughs along.

Nice dress, the man says.

Can you let go of me? she says.

Very low-cut there, isn't it?

In one motion he moves his hand down from her shoulder and squeezes the flesh of her right breast, in front of everyone. Instantly she jerks away from him, pulling her dress up to her collarbone, feeling her face fill with blood. Her eyes are stinging and she feels a pain where he grabbed her. Behind her the others are laughing. She can hear them. Rachel is laughing, a high fluting noise in Marianne's ears.

Without turning around, Marianne walks out the door, lets it slam behind her. She's in the hallway now with the cloakroom and can't remember whether the exit is right or left. She's shaking all over her body. The cloakroom attendant asks if she's alright. Marianne doesn't know anymore how drunk she is. She walks a few steps towards a door on the left and then puts her back against the wall and starts sliding down towards a seated position on the floor. Her breast is aching where that man grabbed it. He wasn't joking, he wanted to hurt her. She's on the floor now hugging her knees against her chest.

Up the hall the door comes open again and Karen comes out, with Eric and Rachel and Connell following. They see Marianne on the floor and Karen runs over to her while the other three stay standing where they are, not knowing what to do maybe, or not wanting to do anything. Karen hunches down in front of Marianne and touches her hand. Marianne's eyes are sore and she doesn't know where to look.

Are you alright? Karen says.

I'm fine, says Marianne. I'm sorry. I think I just had too much to drink.

Leave her, says Rachel.

Here, look, it was just a bit of fun, says Eric. Pat's actually a sound enough guy if you get to know him.

I think it was funny, says Rachel.

At this Karen snaps around and looks at them. Why are you even out here if you think it was so funny? she says. Why don't you go and pal around with your best friend Pat? If you think it's so funny to molest young girls?

How is Marianne *young*? says Eric.

We were all laughing at the time, says Rachel.

That's not true, says Connell.

Everyone looks around at him then. Marianne looks at him. Their eyes meet.

Are you okay, are you? he says.

Oh, do you want to kiss her better? says Rachel.

His face is flushed now, and he touches a hand to his brow. Everyone is still watching him. The wall feels cold against Marianne's back.

Rachel, he says, would you ever fuck off?

Karen and Eric exchange a look then, eyes wide, Marianne can see them. Connell never speaks or acts like this in school. In all these years she has never seen him behave at all aggressively, even when taunted. Rachel just tosses her head and walks back inside the club. The door falls shut heavily on its hinges. Connell continues rubbing his brow for a second. Karen mouths something at Eric, Marianne doesn't know what it is. Then Connell looks at Marianne and says: Do you want to go home? I'm driving, I can drop you. She nods her head. Karen helps her up from the floor. Connell puts his hands in his pockets as if to prevent himself touching her by accident. Sorry for making a fuss, Marianne says to Karen. I feel stupid. I'm not used to drinking.

It's not your fault, says Karen.

Thank you for being so nice, Marianne says.

They squeeze hands once more. Marianne follows Connell towards the exit then and around the side of the hotel, to where his car is parked. It's dark and cool out here, with the sound of music from the nightclub pulsing faintly behind them. She gets in the passenger seat and puts her seatbelt on. He closes the driver's door and puts his keys in the ignition.

Sorry for making a fuss, she says again.

You didn't, says Connell. I'm sorry the others were being so stupid about it. They just think Pat is great because he has these parties in his house sometimes. Apparently if you have house parties it's okay to mess with people, I don't know.

It really hurt. What he did.

Connell says nothing then. He just kneads the steering wheel with his hands. He looks down into his lap, and exhales quickly, almost like a cough. Sorry, he says. Then he starts the car. They drive for a few minutes in silence, Marianne cooling her forehead against the window.

Do you want to come back to my house for a bit? he says.

Is Lorraine not there?

He shrugs. He taps his fingers on the wheel. She's probably in bed already, he says. I mean we could just hang out for a bit before I drop you home. It's okay if you don't want

to.

What if she's still up?

Honestly she's pretty relaxed about this sort of stuff anyway. Like I really don't think she would care.

Marianne stares out the window at the passing town. She knows what he's saying: that he doesn't mind if his mother finds out about them. Maybe she already knows.

Lorraine seems like a really good parent, Marianne remarks.

Yeah. I think so.

She must be proud of you. You're the only boy in school who's actually turned out well as an adult.

Connell glances over at her. How have I turned out well? he says.

What do you mean? Everyone likes you. And unlike most people you're actually a nice person.

He makes a facial expression she can't interpret, kind of raising his eyebrows, or frowning. When they get back to his house the windows are all dark and Lorraine is in bed. In Connell's room he and Marianne lie down together whispering. He tells her that she's beautiful. She has never heard that before, though she has sometimes privately suspected it of herself, but it feels different to hear it from another person. She touches his hand to her breast where it hurts, and he kisses her. Her face is wet, she's been crying. He kisses her neck. Are you okay? he says. When she nods, he smooths her hair back and says: It's alright to be upset, you know. She lies with her face against his chest. She feels like a soft piece of cloth that is wrung out and dripping.

You would never hit a girl, would you? she says.

God, no. Of course not. Why would you ask that?

I don't know.

Do you think I'm the kind of person who would go around hitting girls? he says.

She presses her face very hard against his chest. My dad used to hit my mum, she says. For a few seconds, which seems like an unbelievably long time, Connell says nothing. Then he says: Jesus. I'm sorry. I didn't know that.

It's okay, she says.

Did he ever hit you?

Sometimes.

Connell is silent again. He leans down and kisses her on the forehead. I would never hurt you, okay? he says. Never. She nods and says nothing. You make me really happy, he says. His hand moves over her hair and he adds: I love you. I'm not just saying that, I really do. Her eyes fill up with tears again and she closes them. Even in memory she will find this moment unbearably intense, and she's aware of this now, while it's happening. She has never believed herself fit to be loved by any person. But now she has a new life, of which this is the first moment, and even after many years have passed she will still think: Yes, that was it, the beginning of my life.

Two Days Later

(APRIL 2011)

He stands at the side of the bed while his mother goes to find one of the nurses. Is that all you have on you? his grandmother says.

Hm? says Connell.

Is that jumper all you have on you?

Oh, he says. Yeah.

You'll freeze. You'll be in here yourself.

His grandmother slipped in the Aldi car park this morning and fell on her hip. She's not old like some of the other patients, she's only fifty-eight. The same age as Marianne's mother, Connell thinks. Anyway, it looks like his grandmother's hip is kind of messed up now and possibly broken, and Connell had to drive Lorraine into Sligo town to visit the hospital. In the bed across the ward someone is coughing.

I'm alright, he says. It's warm out.

His grandmother sighs, like his commentary on the weather is painful to her. It probably is, because everything he does is painful to her, because she hates him for being alive. She looks him up and down with a critical expression.

Well, you certainly don't take after your mother, do you? she says.

Yeah, he says. No.

Physically Lorraine and Connell are different types. Lorraine is blonde and has a soft face without edges. The guys in school think she's attractive, which they tell Connell often. She probably is attractive, so what, it doesn't offend him. Connell has darker hair and a hard-looking face, like an artist's impression of a criminal. He knows, however, that his grandmother's point is unrelated to his physical appearance and is meant as a remark on his paternity. So, okay, he has nothing to say on that.

No one except Lorraine knows who Connell's father is. She says he can ask any time he wants to know, but he really doesn't care to. On nights out his friends sometimes raise the subject of his father, like it's something deep and meaningful they can only talk about when they're drunk. Connell finds this depressing. He never thinks about the man who got Lorraine pregnant, why would he? His friends seem so obsessed with their own fathers, obsessed with emulating them or being different from them in specific ways. When they fight with their fathers, the fights always seem to mean one thing on the surface but conceal another secret meaning beneath. When Connell fights with Lorraine, it's usually about something like leaving a wet towel on the couch, and that's it, it's really about the towel, or at most it's about whether Connell is fundamentally careless in his tendencies, because he wants Lorraine to see him as a responsible person despite his habit of leaving towels everywhere, and Lorraine says if it was so important to him to be seen as responsible, he would show it in his actions, that kind of thing.

He drove Lorraine to the polling station to vote at the end of February, and on the way she asked who he was going to vote for. One of the independent candidates, he said

vaguely. She laughed. Don't tell me, she said. The communist Declan Bree. Connell, unprovoked, continued watching the road. We could do with a bit more communism in this country if you ask me, he said. From the corner of his eye he could see Lorraine smiling. Come on now, comrade, she said. I was the one who raised you with your good socialist values, remember? It's true Lorraine has values. She's interested in Cuba, and the cause of Palestinian liberation. In the end Connell did vote for Declan Bree, who went on to be eliminated in the fifth count. Two of the seats went to Fine Gael and the other to Sinn Féin. Lorraine said it was a disgrace. Swapping one crowd of criminals for another, she said. He texted Marianne: fg in government, fucks sake. She texted back: The party of Franco. He had to look up what that meant.

The other night Marianne told him that she thought he'd turned out well as a person. She said he was nice, and that everyone liked him. He found himself thinking about that a lot. It was a pleasant thing to have in his thoughts. *You're a nice person and everyone likes you.* To test himself he would try not thinking about it for a bit, and then go back and think about it again to see if it still made him feel good, and it did. For some reason he wished he could tell Lorraine what she'd said. He felt it would reassure her somehow, but about what? That her only son was not a worthless person after all? That she hadn't wasted her life?

And I hear you're off to Trinity College, his grandmother says.

Yeah, if I get the points.

What put Trinity into your head?

He shrugs. She laughs, but it's like a scoffing laugh. Oh, good enough for you, she says. What are you going to study?

Connell resists the impulse to take his phone from his pocket and check the time. English, he says. His aunts and uncles are all very impressed with his decision to put Trinity as his first choice, which embarrasses him. He'll qualify for the full maintenance grant if he does get in, but even at that he'll have to work full-time over the summer and at least part-time during term. Lorraine says she doesn't want him having to work too much through college, she wants him to focus on his degree. That makes him feel bad, because it's not like English is a real degree you can get a job out of, it's just a joke, and then he thinks he probably should have applied for Law after all.

Lorraine comes back into the ward now. Her shoes make a flat, clapping noise on the tiles. She starts to talk to his grandmother about the consultant who's on leave and about Dr O'Malley and the X-ray. She relays all this information very carefully, writing down the most important things on a piece of notepaper. Finally, after his grandmother kisses his face, they leave the ward. He disinfects his hands in the corridor while Lorraine waits. Then they go down the stairs and out of the hospital, into the bright, clammy sunshine.

*

After the fundraiser the other night, Marianne told him this thing about her family. He didn't know what to say. He started telling her that he loved her. It just happened, like drawing your hand back when you touch something hot. She was crying and everything, and he just said it without thinking. Was it true? He didn't know enough to know that. At first he thought it must have been true, since he said it, and why would he lie? But then he remembered he does lie sometimes, without planning to or knowing why. It wasn't the first

time he'd had the urge to tell Marianne that he loved her, whether or not it was true, but it was the first time he'd given in and said it. He noticed how long it took her to say anything in response, and how her pause had bothered him, as if she might not say it back, and when she did say it he felt better, but maybe that meant nothing. Connell wished he knew how other people conducted their private lives, so that he could copy from example.

The next morning they woke up to the sound of Lorraine's keys in the door. It was bright outside, his mouth was dry, and Marianne was sitting up and pulling her clothes on. All she said was: Sorry, I'm sorry. They must have fallen asleep without meaning to. He had been planning to drop her home the night before. She put her shoes on and he got dressed too. Lorraine was standing in the hallway with two plastic bags of groceries when they reached the stairs. Marianne was wearing her dress from the night before, the black one with the straps.

Hello, sweetheart, said Lorraine.

Marianne's face looked bright like a light bulb. Sorry to intrude, she said.

Connell didn't touch her or speak to her. His chest hurt. She walked out the front door saying: Bye, sorry, thanks, sorry again. She shut the door behind her before he was even down the stairs.

Lorraine pressed her lips together like she was trying not to laugh. You can help me with the groceries, she said. She handed him one of the bags. He followed her into the kitchen and put the bag down on the table without looking at it. Rubbing his neck, he watched her unwrapping and putting away the items.

What's so funny? he said.

There's no need for her to run off like that just because I'm home, said Lorraine. I'm only delighted to see her, you know I'm very fond of Marianne.

He watched his mother fold away the reusable plastic bag.

Did you think I didn't know? she said.

He closed his eyes for a few seconds and then opened them again. He shrugged.

Well, I knew someone was coming over here in the afternoons, said Lorraine. And I do work in her house, you know.

He nodded, unable to speak.

You must really like her, said Lorraine.

Why do you say that?

Isn't that why you're going to Trinity?

He put his face in his hands. Lorraine was laughing then, he could hear her. You're making me not want to go there now, he said.

Oh, stop that.

He looked in the grocery bag he had left on the table and removed a packet of dried spaghetti. Self-consciously he brought it over to the press beside the fridge and put it with the other pasta.

So is Marianne your girlfriend, then? said Lorraine.

No.

What does that mean? You're having sex with her but she's not your girlfriend?

You're prying into my life now, he said. I don't like that, it's not your business.

He returned to the bag and removed a carton of eggs, which he placed on the countertop beside the sunflower oil.

Is it because of her mother? said Lorraine. You think she'd frown on you?

What?

Because she might, you know.

Frown on me? said Connell. That's insane, what have I ever done?

I think she might consider us a little bit beneath her station.

He stared at his mother across the kitchen while she put a box of own-brand cornflakes into the press. The idea that Marianne's family considered themselves superior to himself and Lorraine, too good to be associated with them, had never occurred to him before. He found, to his surprise, that the idea made him furious.

What, she thinks we're not good enough for them? he said.

I don't know. We might find out.

She doesn't mind you cleaning their house but she doesn't want your son hanging around with her daughter? What an absolute joke. That's like something from nineteenth-century times, I'm actually laughing at that.

You don't sound like you're laughing, said Lorraine.

Believe me, I am. It's hilarious to me.

Lorraine closed the press and turned to look at him curiously.

What's all the secrecy about, then? she said. If not for Denise Sheridan's sake. Does Marianne have a boyfriend or something, and you don't want him to find out?

You're getting so intrusive with these questions.

So she does have a boyfriend, then.

No, he said. But that's the last question I'm answering from you.

Lorraine's eyebrows moved around but she said nothing. He crumpled up the empty plastic bag on the table and then paused there with the bag screwed up in his hand.

You're hardly going to tell anyone, are you? he said.

This is starting to sound very shady. Why shouldn't I tell anyone?

Feeling quite hard-hearted, he replied: Because there would be no benefit to you, and a lot of annoyance for me. He thought for a moment and added shrewdly: And Marianne.

Oh god, said Lorraine. I don't even think I want to know.

He continued waiting, feeling that she hadn't quite unambiguously promised not to tell anyone, and she threw her hands up in exasperation and said: I have more interesting things to gossip about than your sex life, okay? Don't worry.

He went upstairs then and sat on his bed. He didn't know how much time passed while he sat there like that. He was thinking about Marianne's family, about the idea that she was too good for him, and also about what she had told him the night before. He'd heard from guys in school that sometimes girls made up stories about themselves for attention, saying bad things had happened to them and stuff like that. And it was a pretty attention-grabbing story Marianne had told him, about her dad beating her up when she was a small child. Also, the dad was dead now, so he wasn't around to defend himself. Connell could see it was possible that Marianne had just lied to get his sympathy, but he also knew, as clearly as he knew anything, that she hadn't. If anything he felt like she'd been holding back on telling him how bad it really was. It gave him a queasy feeling, to have this information about her, to be tied to her in this way.

That was yesterday. This morning he was early to school, as usual, and Rob and Eric started fake-cheering when he came to put his books in his locker. He dumped his bag on

the floor, ignoring them. Eric slung an arm around his shoulder and said: Go on, tell us. Did you get the ride the other night? Connell felt in his pocket for his locker key and shrugged off Eric's arm. Funny, he said.

I heard you looked very cosy heading off together, said Rob.

Did anything happen? Eric said. Be honest.

No, obviously, said Connell.

Why is that obvious? Rachel said. Everyone knows she fancies you.

Rachel was sitting up on the windowsill with her legs swinging slowly back and forth, long and inky-black in opaque tights. Connell didn't meet her eye. Lisa was sitting on the floor against the lockers, finishing homework. Karen wasn't in yet. He wished Karen would come in.

I bet he did get a cheeky ride, said Rob. He'd never tell us anyway.

I wouldn't hold it against you, Eric said, she's not a bad-looking girl when she makes an effort.

Yeah, she's just mentally deranged, said Rachel.

Connell pretended to look for something in his locker. A thin white sweat had broken out on his hands and under his collar.

You're all being nasty, said Lisa. What has she ever done to any of you?

The question is what she's done to Waldron, said Eric. Look at him hiding in his locker there. Come on, spit it out. Did you shift her?

No, he said.

Well, I feel sorry for her, said Lisa.

Me too, said Eric. I think you should make it up to her, Connell. I think you should ask her to the Debs.

They all erupted in laughter. Connell closed his locker and walked out of the room carrying his schoolbag limply in his right hand. He heard the others calling after him, but he didn't turn around. When he got to the bathroom he locked himself in a cubicle. The yellow walls bore down on him and his face was slick with sweat. He kept thinking of himself saying to Marianne in bed: I love you. It was terrifying, like watching himself committing a terrible crime on CCTV. And soon she would be in school, putting her books in her bag, smiling to herself, never knowing anything. *You're a nice person and everyone likes you.* He took one deep uncomfortable breath and then threw up.

*

He indicates left coming out of the hospital to get back on the N16. A pain has settled behind his eyes. They drive along the Mall with banks of dark trees flanking them on either side.

Are you alright? says Lorraine.

Yeah.

You've got a look on you.

He breathes in, so his seatbelt digs into his ribs a little bit, and then exhales.

I asked Rachel to the Debs, he says.

What?

I asked Rachel Moran to go to the Debs with me.

They're about to pass a garage and Lorraine taps the window quickly and says: Pull in here. Connell looks over, confused. What? he says. She taps the window again, harder, and her nails click on the glass. Pull in, she says again. He hits the indicator quickly, checks the mirror, and then pulls in and stops the car. By the side of the garage someone is hosing down a van, water running off in dark rivers.

Do you want something from the shop? he says.

Who is Marianne going to the Debs with?

Connell squeezes the steering wheel absently. I don't know, he says. You hardly made me park here just to have a discussion, did you?

So maybe no one will ask her, says Lorraine. And she just won't go.

Yeah, maybe. I don't know.

On the walk back from lunch today he hung back behind the others. He knew Rachel would see him and wait with him, he knew that. And when she did, he screwed his eyes almost shut so the world was a whitish-grey colour and said: Here, do you have a date to the Debs yet? She said no. He asked if she wanted to go with him. Alright then, she said. I have to say, I was hoping for something a bit more romantic. He didn't reply to that, because he felt as if he had just jumped off a high precipice and fallen to his death, and he was glad he was dead, he never wanted to be alive again.

Does Marianne know you're taking someone else? says Lorraine.

Not as of yet. I will tell her.

Lorraine covers her mouth with her hand, so he can't make out her expression: she might be surprised, or concerned, or she might be about to get sick.

And you don't think maybe you should have asked her? she says. Seeing as how you fuck her every day after school.

That is vile language to use.

Lorraine's nostrils flare white when she inhales. How would you like me to put it? she says. I suppose I should say you've been using her for sex, is that more accurate?

Would you relax for a second? No one is using anyone.

How did you get her to keep quiet about it? Did you tell her something bad would happen if she told on you?

Jesus, he says. Obviously not. It was agreed, okay? You're getting it way out of proportion now.

Lorraine nods to herself, staring out the windshield. Nervously he waits for her to say something.

People in school don't like her, do they? says Lorraine. So I suppose you were afraid of what they would say about you, if they found out.

He doesn't respond.

Well, I'll tell what I have to say about you, Lorraine says. I think you're a disgrace. I'm ashamed of you.

He wipes his forehead with his sleeve. Lorraine, he says.

She opens the passenger door.

Where are you going? he says.

I'll get the bus home.

What are you talking about? Act normal, will you?

If I stay in the car, I'm only going to say things I'll regret.

What is this? he says. Why do you care if I go with someone or I don't, anyway? It's nothing to do with you.

She pushes the door wide and climbs out of the car. You're being so weird, he says. In response she slams the door shut, hard. He tightens his hands painfully on the steering wheel but stays quiet. It's my fucking car! he could say. Did I say you could slam the door, did I? Lorraine is walking away already, her handbag knocking against her hip with the pace of her stride. He watches her until she turns the corner. Two and a half years he worked in the garage after school to buy this car, and all he uses it for is driving his mother around because she doesn't have a licence. He could go after her now, roll the window down, shout at her to get back in. He almost feels like doing it, though she'd only ignore him. Instead he sits in the driver's seat, head tipped back against the headrest, listening to his own idiotic breathing. A crow on the forecourt picks at a discarded crisp packet. A family comes out of the shop holding ice creams. The smell of petrol infiltrates the car interior, heavy like a headache. He starts the engine.

Four Months Later

(AUGUST 2011)

She's in the garden, wearing sunglasses. The weather has been fine for a few days now, and her arms are getting freckled. She hears the back door open but doesn't move. Alan's voice calls from the patio: Annie Kearney's after getting five-seventy! Marianne doesn't respond. She feels in the grass beside her chair for the sun lotion, and when she sits up to apply it, she notices that Alan is on the phone.

Someone in your year got six hundred, hey! he yells.

She pours a little lotion into the palm of her left hand.

Marianne! Alan says. Someone got six A1s, I said!

She nods. She smooths the lotion slowly over her right arm, so it glistens. Alan is trying to find out who got six hundred points. Marianne knows right away who it must be, but she says nothing. She applies some lotion to her left arm and then, quietly, lies back down in the deckchair, face to the sun, and closes her eyes. Behind her eyelids waves of light move in green and red.

She hasn't eaten breakfast or lunch today, except two cups of sweetened coffee with milk. Her appetite is small this summer. When she wakes up in the morning she opens her laptop on the opposite pillow and waits for her eyes to adjust to the rectangle glow of the screen so she can read the news. She reads long articles about Syria and then researches the ideological backgrounds of the journalists who have written them. She reads long articles about the sovereign debt crisis in Europe and zooms in to see the small print on the graphs. After that she usually either goes back to sleep or gets in the shower, or maybe lies down and makes herself come. The rest of the day follows a similar pattern, with minor variations: maybe she opens her curtains, maybe not; maybe breakfast, or maybe just coffee, which she takes upstairs to her room so she doesn't have to see her family. This morning was different, of course.

Here, Marianne, says Alan. It's Waldron! Connell Waldron got six hundred points!

She doesn't move. Into the phone Alan says: No, she only got five-ninety. I'd say she's raging now someone did better than her. Are you raging, Marianne? She hears him but says nothing. Under the lenses of her sunglasses her eyelids feel greasy. An insect whirrs past her ear and away.

Is Waldron there with you, is he? says Alan. Put him on to me.

Why are you calling him 'Waldron' like he's your friend? Marianne says. You hardly know him.

Alan looks up from the phone, smirking. I know him well, he says. I saw him at Eric's gaff there the last day.

She regrets speaking. Alan is pacing up and down the patio, she can hear the gritty sound of his footsteps as he comes down towards the grass. Someone on the other end of the line starts talking, and Alan breaks into a bright, strained-looking smile. How are you now? he says. Fair play, congratulations. Connell's voice is quiet, so Marianne can't hear it. Alan is

still smiling the effortful smile. He always gets like this around other people, cringing and sycophantic.

Yeah, Alan says. She did well, yeah. Not as well as yourself! Five-ninety she got. Do you want me to put her on to you?

Marianne looks up. Alan is joking. He thinks Connell will say no. He can't think of any reason why Connell would want to speak to Marianne, a friendless loser, on the phone; particularly not on this special day. Instead he says yes. Alan's smile falters. Yeah, he says, no bother. He holds the phone out for Marianne to take it. Marianne shakes her head. Alan's eyes widen. He jerks his hand towards her. Here, he says. He wants to talk to you. She shakes her head again. Alan prods the phone into her chest now, roughly. He's on the phone for you, Marianne, says Alan.

I don't want to speak to him, says Marianne.

Alan's face takes on a wild expression of fury, with the whites of his eyes showing all around. He jabs the phone harder into her sternum, hurting her. Say hello, he says. She can hear Connell's voice buzzing in the receiver. The sun glares down onto her face. She takes the phone from Alan's hand and, with a swipe of her finger, hangs up the call. Alan stands over the deckchair staring. There is no sound in the garden for a few seconds. Then, in a low voice, he says: What the fuck did you do that for?

I didn't want to speak to him, she says. I told you.

He wanted to speak to you.

Yes, I know he did.

It's unusually bright today, and Alan's shadow on the grass has a vivid, stark quality. She's still holding out the phone, loose in the palm of her hand, waiting for her brother to accept it.

*

In April, Connell told her he was taking Rachel Moran to the Debs. Marianne was sitting on the side of his bed at the time, acting very cold and humorous, which made him awkward. He told her it wasn't 'romantic', and that he and Rachel were just friends.

You mean like we're just friends, said Marianne.

Well, no, he said. Different.

But are you sleeping with her?

No. When would I even have time?

Do you want to? said Marianne.

I'm not hugely gone on the idea. I don't feel like I'm that insatiable really, I do already have you.

Marianne stared down at her fingernails.

That was a joke, Connell said.

I don't get what the joke part was.

I know you're pissed off with me.

I don't really care, she said. I just think if you want to sleep with her you should tell me.

Yeah, and I will tell you, if I ever want to do that. You're saying that's what the issue is, but I honestly don't think that's what it is.

Marianne snapped: What is it, then? He just stared at her. She went back to looking at her

fingernails, flushed. He didn't say anything. Eventually she laughed, because she wasn't totally without spirit, and it obviously was kind of funny, just how savagely he had humiliated her, and his inability to apologise or even admit he had done it. She went home then and straight to bed, where she slept for thirteen hours without waking.

The next morning she quit school. It wasn't possible to go back, however she looked at it. No one else would invite her to the Debs, that was clear. She had organised the fundraisers, she had booked the venue, but she wouldn't be able to attend the event. Everyone would know that, and some of them would be glad, and even the most sympathetic ones could only feel a terrible second-hand embarrassment. Instead she stayed home in her room all day with the curtains closed, studying and sleeping at strange hours. Her mother was furious. Doors were slammed. On two separate occasions Marianne's dinner was scraped into the bin. Still, she was an adult woman, and no one could make her dress up in a uniform anymore and submit to being stared at or whispered about.

A week after she left school she walked into the kitchen and saw Lorraine kneeling on the floor to clean the oven. Lorraine straightened up slightly, and wiped her forehead with the part of her wrist exposed above her rubber glove. Marianne swallowed.

Hello, sweetheart, Lorraine said. I hear you've been out of school for a few days. Is everything okay?

Yeah, I'm fine, said Marianne. Actually I'm not going back to school. I find I get more done if I just stay at home and study.

Lorraine nodded and said: Suit yourself. Then she went back to scrubbing the inside of the oven. Marianne opened the fridge to look for the orange juice.

My son tells me you're ignoring his phone calls, Lorraine added.

Marianne paused, and the silence in the kitchen was loud in her ears, like the white noise of rushing water. Yes, she said. I am, I suppose.

Good for you, said Lorraine. He doesn't deserve you.

Marianne felt a relief so high and sudden that it was almost like panic. She put the orange juice on the counter and closed the fridge.

Lorraine, she said, can you ask him not to come over here anymore? Like if he has to collect you or anything, is it okay if he doesn't come in the house?

Oh, he's permanently barred as far as I'm concerned. You don't need to worry about that. I have half a mind to kick him out of my own house.

Marianne smiled, feeling awkward. He didn't do anything that bad, she said. I mean, compared to the other people in school he was actually pretty nice, to be honest.

At this Lorraine stood up and stripped off her gloves. Without speaking, she put her arms around Marianne and embraced her very tightly. In a strange, cramped voice Marianne said: It's okay. I'm fine. Don't worry about me.

It was true what she had said about Connell. He didn't do anything that bad. He had never tried to delude her into thinking she was socially acceptable; she'd deluded herself. He had just been using her as a kind of private experiment, and her willingness to be used had probably shocked him. He pitied her in the end, but she also repulsed him. In a way she feels sorry for him now, because he has to live with the fact that he had sex with her, of his own free choice, and he liked it. That says more about him, the supposedly ordinary and healthy person, than it does about her. She never went back to school again except to sit the exams. By then people were saying she had been in the mental hospital. None of that

mattered now anyway.

*

Are you angry he did better than you? says her brother.

Marianne laughs. And why shouldn't she laugh? Her life here in Carriclea is over, and either a new life will begin, or it won't. Soon she will be packing things into suitcases: woollen jumpers, skirts, her two silk dresses. A set of teacups and saucers patterned with flowers. A hairdryer, a frying pan, four white cotton towels. A coffee pot. The objects of a new existence.

No, she says.

Why wouldn't you say hello to him, then?

Ask him. If you're such good friends with him, you should ask him. He knows.

Alan makes a fist with his left hand. It doesn't matter, it's over. Lately Marianne walks around Carriclea and thinks how beautiful it is in sunny weather, white clouds like chalk dust over the library, long avenues lined with trees. The arc of a tennis ball through blue air. Cars slowing at traffic lights with their windows rolled down, music bleating from the speakers. Marianne wonders what it would be like to belong here, to walk down the street greeting people and smiling. To feel that life was happening here, in this place, and not somewhere else far away.

What does that mean? says Alan.

Ask Connell Waldron why we're not speaking anymore. Call him back now if you want to, I'd be interested to hear what he has to say.

Alan bites down on the knuckle of his index finger. His arm is shaking. In just a few weeks' time Marianne will live with different people, and life will be different. But she herself will not be different. She'll be the same person, trapped inside her own body. There's nowhere she can go that would free her from this. A different place, different people, what does that matter? Alan releases his knuckle from his mouth.

Like he fucking cares, says Alan. I'm surprised he even knows your name.

Oh, we used to be quite close actually. You can ask him about that too, if you want. Might make you a bit uncomfortable, though.

Before Alan can respond, they hear someone calling out from inside the house, and a door closing. Their mother is home. Alan looks up, his expression changes, and Marianne feels her own face moving around involuntarily. He glances down at her. You shouldn't tell lies about people, he says. Marianne nods, says nothing. Don't tell Mam about this, he says. Marianne shakes her head. No, she agrees. But it wouldn't matter if she did tell her, not really. Denise decided a long time ago that it is acceptable for men to use aggression towards Marianne as a way of expressing themselves. As a child Marianne resisted, but now she simply detaches, as if it isn't of any interest to her, which in a way it isn't. Denise considers this a symptom of her daughter's frigid and unlovable personality. She believes Marianne lacks 'warmth', by which she means the ability to beg for love from people who hate her. Alan goes back inside now. Marianne hears the patio door slide shut.

Three Months Later

(NOVEMBER 2011)

Connell doesn't know anyone at the party. The person who invited him isn't the same person who answered the door and, with an indifferent shrug, let him inside. He still hasn't seen the person who invited him, a person called Gareth, who's in his Critical Theory seminar. Connell knew going to a party on his own would be a bad idea, but on the phone Lorraine said it would be a good idea. I won't know anyone, he told her. And she said patiently: You won't get to know anyone if you don't go out and meet people. Now he's here, standing on his own in a crowded room not knowing whether to take his jacket off. It feels practically scandalous to be lingering here in solitude. He feels as if everyone around him is disturbed by his presence, and trying not to stare.

Finally, just as he decides to leave, Gareth comes in. Connell's intense relief at seeing Gareth triggers another wave of self-loathing, since he doesn't even know Gareth very well or particularly like him. Gareth puts his hand out and desperately, bizarrely, Connell finds himself shaking it. It's a low moment in his adult life. People are watching them shake hands, Connell is certain of this. Good to see you, man, says Gareth. Good to see you. I like the backpack, very nineties. Connell is wearing a completely plain navy backpack with no features to distinguish it from any of the other numerous backpacks at the party.

Uh, he says. Yeah, thanks.

Gareth is one of these popular people who's involved in college societies. He went to one of the big private schools in Dublin and people are always greeting him on campus, like: Hey, Gareth! Gareth, hey! They'll greet him from all the way across Front Square, just to get him to wave hello. Connell has seen it. People used to like me, he feels like saying as a joke. I used to be on my school football team. No one would laugh at that joke here.

Can I get you a drink? says Gareth.

Connell has a six-pack of cider with him, but he's reluctant to do anything that would draw attention to his backpack, in case Gareth might feel prompted to comment on it further. Cheers, he says. Gareth navigates over to the table at the side of the room and returns with a bottle of Corona. This okay? says Gareth. Connell looks at him for a second, wondering if the question is ironic or genuinely servile. Unable to decide, Connell says: Yeah, it'll do, thanks. People in college are like this, unpleasantly smug one minute and then abasing themselves to show off their good manners the next. He sips the beer while Gareth watches him. Without any apparent sarcasm Gareth grins and says: Enjoy.

This is what it's like in Dublin. All Connell's classmates have identical accents and carry the same size MacBook under their arms. In seminars they express their opinions passionately and conduct impromptu debates. Unable to form such straightforward views or express them with any force, Connell initially felt a sense of crushing inferiority to his fellow students, as if he had upgraded himself accidentally to an intellectual level far above his own, where he had to strain to make sense of the most basic premises. He did gradually start to wonder why all their classroom discussions were so abstract and lacking in textual

detail, and eventually he realised that most people were not actually doing the reading. They were coming into college every day to have heated debates about books they had not read. He understands now that his classmates are not like him. It's easy for them to have opinions, and to express them with confidence. They don't worry about appearing ignorant or conceited. They are not stupid people, but they're not so much smarter than him either. They just move through the world in a different way, and he'll probably never really understand them, and he knows they will never understand him, or even try.

He only has a few classes every week anyway, so he fills the rest of the time by reading. In the evenings he stays late in the library, reading assigned texts, novels, works of literary criticism. Not having friends to eat with, he reads over lunch. At the weekends when there's football on, he checks the team news and then goes back to reading instead of watching the build-up. One night the library started closing just as he reached the passage in *Emma* when it seems like Mr Knightley is going to marry Harriet, and he had to close the book and walk home in a state of strange emotional agitation. He's amused at himself, getting wrapped up in the drama of novels like that. It feels intellectually unserious to concern himself with fictional people marrying one another. But there it is: literature moves him. One of his professors calls it 'the pleasure of being touched by great art'. In those words it almost sounds sexual. And in a way, the feeling provoked in Connell when Mr Knightley kisses Emma's hand is not completely asexual, though its relation to sexuality is indirect. It suggests to Connell that the same imagination he uses as a reader is necessary to understand real people also, and to be intimate with them.

You're not from Dublin, are you? says Gareth.

No. Sligo.

Oh yeah? My girlfriend's from Sligo.

Connell isn't sure what Gareth expects him to say to this.

Oh, he replies weakly. Well, there you go.

People in Dublin often mention the west of Ireland in this strange tone of voice, as if it's a foreign country, but one they consider themselves very knowledgeable about. In the Workmans the other night, Connell told a girl he was from Sligo and she made a funny face and said: Yeah, you look like it. Increasingly it seems as if Connell is actually drawn towards this supercilious type of person. Sometimes on a night out, among a crowd of smiling women in tight dresses and perfectly applied lipstick, his flatmate Niall will point out one person and say: I bet you think she's attractive. And it will always be some flat-chested girl wearing ugly shoes and disdainfully smoking a cigarette. And Connell has to admit, yes, he does find her attractive, and he may even try to talk to her, and he will go home feeling even worse than before.

Awkwardly he looks around the room and says: You live here, do you?

Yeah, says Gareth. Not bad for campus accommodation, is it?

No, yeah. It's really nice actually.

Whereabouts are you living yourself?

Connell tells him. It's a flat near college, just off Brunswick Place. He and Niall have one box room between them, with two single beds pushed up against opposite walls. They share a kitchen with two Portuguese students who are never home. The flat has some problems with damp and often gets so cold at night that Connell can see his own breath in the dark, but Niall is a decent person at least. He's from Belfast, and he also thinks people in Trinity

are weird, which is reassuring. Connell half-knows some of Niall's friends by now, and he's acquainted with most of his own classmates, but no one he would have a proper conversation with.

Back home, Connell's shyness never seemed like much of an obstacle to his social life, because everyone knew who he was already, and there was never any need to introduce himself or create impressions about his personality. If anything, his personality seemed like something external to himself, managed by the opinions of others, rather than anything he individually did or produced. Now he has a sense of invisibility, nothingness, with no reputation to recommend him to anyone. Though his physical appearance has not changed, he feels objectively worse-looking than he used to be. He has become self-conscious about his clothes. All the guys in his class wear the same waxed hunting jackets and plum-coloured chinos, not that Connell has a problem with people dressing how they want, but he would feel like a complete prick wearing that stuff. At the same time, it forces him to acknowledge that his own clothes are cheap and unfashionable. His only shoes are an ancient pair of Adidas trainers, which he wears everywhere, even to the gym.

He still goes home at the weekends, because he works in the garage Saturday afternoons and Sunday mornings. Most people from school have left town now, for college or for work. Karen is living down in Castlebar with her sister, Connell hasn't seen her since the Leaving Cert. Rob and Eric are both studying Business in Galway and never seem to be in town. Some weekends Connell doesn't see anyone from school at all. He sits at home in the evening watching television with his mother. What's it like living on your own? he asked her last week. She smiled. Oh, it's fantastic, she said. No one leaving towels on the couch. No dirty dishes in the sink, it's great. He nodded, humourless. She gave him a playful little shove. What do you want me to say? she says. I'm crying myself to sleep at night? He rolled his eyes. Obviously not, he muttered. She told him she was glad he had moved away, she thought it would be good for him. What's good about moving away? he said. You've lived here all your life and you turned out fine. She gawked at him. Oh, and you're planning to bury me here, are you? she said. Jesus, I'm only thirty-five. He tried not to smile, but he did find it funny. I could move away tomorrow, thanks very much, she added. It would save me looking at your miserable face every weekend. He had to laugh then, he couldn't help it.

Gareth is saying something Connell can't hear now. *Watch the Throne* is playing very loudly over a tinny pair of speakers. Connell leans forward a little, towards Gareth, and says: What?

My girlfriend, you should meet her, says Gareth. I'll introduce you.

Glad of a break in the conversation, Connell follows Gareth out the main door and onto the front steps. The building faces the tennis courts, which are locked now for the night and look eerily cool in the emptiness, reddish under the street lights. Down the steps some people are smoking and talking.

Hey, Marianne, says Gareth.

She looks up from her cigarette, mid-sentence. She's wearing a corduroy jacket over a dress, and her hair is pinned back. Her hand, holding the cigarette, looks long and ethereal in the light.

Oh, right, says Connell. Hi.

Instantly, unbelievably, Marianne's face breaks into a gigantic smile, exposing her crooked front teeth. She's wearing lipstick. Everyone is watching her now. She had been

speaking, but she's stopped to stare at him.

Jesus Christ, she says. Connell Waldron! From beyond the grave.

He coughs and, in a panic to appear normal, says: When did you take up smoking?

To Gareth, to her friends, she adds: We went to school together. Fixing her gaze on Connell again, looking radiantly pleased, she says: Well, how are you? He shrugs and mumbles: Yeah, alright, good. She looks at him as if her eyes have a message in them. Would you like a drink? she says. He holds up the bottle Gareth gave him. I'll get you a glass, she says. Come on inside. She goes up the steps to him. Over her shoulder she says: Back in a second. From this remark, and from the way she was standing on the steps, he can tell that all these people at the party are her friends, she has a lot of friends, and she's happy. Then the front door shuts behind them and they're in the hallway, alone.

He follows her to the kitchen, which is empty and hygienically quiet. Matching teal surfaces and labelled appliances. The closed window reflects the lighted interior, blue and white. He doesn't need a glass but she takes one from the cupboard and he doesn't protest. Taking her jacket off, she asks him how he knows Gareth. Connell says they have classes together. She hangs her jacket on the back of a chair. She's wearing a longish grey dress, in which her body looks narrow and delicate.

Everyone seems to know him, she says. He's extroverted.

He's one of these campus celebrities, says Connell.

That makes her laugh, and it's like everything is fine between them, like they live in a slightly different universe where nothing bad has happened but Marianne suddenly has a cool boyfriend and Connell is the lonely, unpopular one.

He'd love that, says Marianne.

He seems to be on a lot of like, committees for things.

She smiles, she squints up at him. Her lipstick is very dark, a wine colour, and she's wearing make-up on her eyes.

I've missed you, she says.

This directness, coming so soon and so unexpectedly, makes him blush. He starts pouring the beer into the glass to divert his attention.

Yeah, you too, he says. I was kind of worried when you left school and all that. You know, I was pretty down about it.

Well, we never hung out much during school hours.

No. Yeah. Obviously.

And what about you and Rachel? says Marianne. Are you still together?

No, we broke up there during the summer.

In a voice just false enough to sound nearly sincere, Marianne says: Oh. I'm sorry.

*

After Marianne left school in April, Connell entered a period of low spirits. Teachers spoke to him about it. The guidance counsellor told Lorraine she was 'concerned'. People in school were probably talking about it too, he didn't know. He couldn't summon up the energy to act normal. At lunch he sat in the same place as always, eating sad mouthfuls of food, not listening to his friends when they spoke. Sometimes he wouldn't notice even when they called his name, and they would have to throw something at him or clip him on the

head to get his attention. Everyone must have known there was something wrong with him. He felt a debilitating shame about the kind of person he'd turned out to be, and he missed the way Marianne had made him feel, and he missed her company. He called her phone all the time, he sent her text messages every day, but she never replied. His mother said he was barred from visiting her house, though he didn't think he would have tried that anyway.

For a while he tried to get over it by drinking too much and having anxious, upsetting sex with other girls. At a house party in May he slept with Barry Kenny's sister Sinead, who was twenty-three and had a degree in Speech and Language Therapy. Afterwards he felt so bad he threw up, and he had to tell Sinead he was drunk even though he wasn't really. There was no one he could talk to about that. He was excruciatingly lonely. He had recurring dreams about being with Marianne again, holding her peacefully the way he used to when they were tired, and speaking with her in low voices. Then he'd remember what had happened, and wake up feeling so depressed he couldn't move a single muscle in his body.

One night in June he came home drunk and asked Lorraine if she saw Marianne much at work.

Sometimes, said Lorraine. Why?

And is she alright, or what?

I've already told you I think she's upset.

She won't reply to any of my texts or anything, he said. When I call her, like if she sees it's me, she won't pick up.

Because you hurt her feelings.

Yeah, but it's kind of overreacting, isn't it?

Lorraine shrugged and looked back at the TV.

Do you think it is? he said.

Do I think what?

Do you think it's overreacting, what she's doing?

Lorraine kept looking straight at the TV. Connell was drunk, he doesn't remember what she was watching. Slowly she said: You know, Marianne is a very vulnerable person. And you did something very exploitative there and you hurt her. So maybe it's good that you're feeling bad about it.

I didn't say I felt bad about it, he said.

He and Rachel started seeing each other in July. Everyone in school had known she liked him, and she seemed to view the attachment between them as a personal achievement on her part. As to the actual relationship, it mostly took place before nights out, when she would put make-up on and complain about her friends and Connell would sit around drinking cans. Sometimes he looked at his phone while she was talking and she would say: You're not even *listening*. He hated the way he acted around her, because she was right, he really didn't listen, but when he did, he didn't like anything she actually said. He only had sex with her twice, neither time enjoyable, and when they lay in bed together he felt a constricting pain in his chest and throat that made it difficult to breathe. He had thought that being with her would make him feel less lonely, but it only gave his loneliness a new stubborn quality, like it was planted down inside him and impossible to kill.

Eventually the night of the Debs came. Rachel wore an extravagantly expensive dress and Connell stood in her front garden while her mother took their photograph. Rachel kept mentioning that he was going to Trinity, and her father showed him some golf clubs. Then

they went to the hotel and ate dinner. Everyone got very drunk and Lisa passed out before dessert. Under the table Rob showed Eric and Connell naked photographs of Lisa on his phone. Eric laughed and tapped parts of Lisa's body on-screen with his fingers. Connell sat there looking at the phone and then said quietly: Bit fucked-up showing these to people, isn't it? With a loud sigh Rob locked the phone and put it back in his pocket. You've gotten awfully fucking gay about things lately, he said.

At midnight, sloppy drunk but hypocritically disgusted by the drunkenness of everyone around him, Connell wandered out of the ballroom and down a corridor into the smoking garden. He had lit a cigarette and was in the process of shredding some low-hanging leaves from a nearby tree when the door slid open and Eric came out to join him. Eric gave a knowing laugh on seeing him, and then sat on an upturned flowerpot and lit a cigarette himself.

Shame Marianne didn't come in the end, Eric said.

Connell nodded, hating to hear her name mentioned and unwilling to indulge it with a response.

What was going on there? said Eric.

Connell looked at him silently. A beam of white light was shining down from the bulb above the door and illuminating Eric's face with a ghostly pallor.

What do you mean? said Connell.

With herself and yourself.

Connell hardly recognised his own voice when he said: I don't know what you're talking about.

Eric grinned and his teeth glittered wetly in the light.

Do you think we don't know you were riding her? he said. Sure everyone knows.

Connell paused and took another drag on his cigarette. This was probably the most horrifying thing Eric could have said to him, not because it ended his life, but because it didn't. He knew then that the secret for which he had sacrificed his own happiness and the happiness of another person had been trivial all along, and worthless. He and Marianne could have walked down the school corridors hand in hand, and with what consequence? Nothing really. No one cared.

Fair enough, said Connell.

How long was that going on for?

I don't know. A while.

And what's the story there? said Eric. You were just doing it for the laugh, or what?

You know me.

He stubbed out his cigarette and went back inside to collect his jacket. After that he left without saying goodbye to anyone, including Rachel, who broke up with him shortly afterwards. That was it, people moved away, he moved away. Their life in Carricklea, which they had imbued with such drama and significance, just ended like that with no conclusion, and it would never be picked back up again, never in the same way.

*

Yeah, well, he says to Marianne. I wasn't that compatible with Rachel, I don't think.

Marianne smiles now, a coy little smile. Hm, she says.

What?

I probably could have told you that.

Yeah, you should have, he says. You weren't really replying to my texts at the time.

Well, I felt somewhat abandoned.

I felt a bit abandoned myself, didn't I? says Connell. You disappeared. And I never had anything to do with Rachel until ages after that, by the way. Not that it matters now or anything, but I didn't.

Marianne sighs and moves her head from side to side, ambivalently.

That wasn't really why I left school, she says.

Right. I suppose you were better off out of it.

It was more of a last-straw thing.

Yeah, he says. I wondered if that was what it was.

She smiles again, a lopsided smile like she's flirting. Really? she says. Maybe you're telepathic.

I did used to think I could read your mind at times, Connell says.

In bed, you mean.

He takes a sip from his glass now. The beer is cold but the glass is room temperature. Before this evening he didn't know how Marianne would act if he ever met her in college, but now it seems inevitable, of course it would be like this. Of course she would talk drolly about their sex life, like it's a cute joke between them and not awkward. And in a way he likes it, he likes knowing how to act around her.

Yeah, Connell says. And afterwards. But maybe that's normal.

It's not.

They both smile, a half-repressed smile of amusement. Connell puts the empty bottle on the countertop and looks at Marianne. She smooths down her dress.

You look really well, he says.

I know. It's classic me, I came to college and got pretty.

He starts laughing. He doesn't even want to laugh but something about the weird dynamic between them is making him do it. 'Classic me' is a very Marianne thing to say, a little self-mocking, and at the same time gesturing to some mutual understanding between them, an understanding that she is special. Her dress is cut low at the front, showing her pale collarbones like two white hyphens.

You were always pretty, he says. I should know, I'm a shallow guy. You're very pretty, you're beautiful.

She's not laughing now. She makes a kind of funny expression with her face and pushes her hair back off her forehead.

Oh well, she says. I haven't heard that one in a while.

Does Gareth not tell you you're beautiful? Or he's too busy with like, amateur drama or something.

Debating. And you're being very cruel.

Debating? says Connell. Jesus, don't tell me he's involved in this Nazi thing, is he?

Marianne's lips become a thin line. Connell doesn't read the campus papers much, but he has still managed to hear about the debating society inviting a neo-Nazi to give a speech. It's all over social media. There was even an article in *The Irish Times*. Connell hasn't commented on any of the Facebook threads, but he has liked several comments calling for

the invite to be rescinded, which is probably the most strident political action he has ever taken in his life.

Well, we don't see eye to eye on everything, she says.

Connell laughs, happy for some reason to find her being so uncharacteristically weak and unscrupulous.

I thought I was bad going out with Rachel Moran, he says. Your boyfriend's a Holocaust denier.

Oh, he's just into free speech.

Yeah, that's good. Thank god for white moderates. As I believe Dr King once wrote.

She laughs then, sincerely. Her little teeth flash again and she lifts a hand to cover her mouth. He swallows some more of the drink and takes in her sweet expression, which he has missed, and it feels like a nice scene between them, although later on he'll probably hate everything he said to her. Okay, she says, we've both failed on ideological purity. Connell considers saying: I hope he's really good in bed, Marianne. She would definitely find it funny. For some reason, probably shyness, he doesn't say it. She looks at him with narrowed eyes and says: Are you seeing anyone problematic at the moment?

No, he says. Not even anyone good.

Marianne gives a curious smile. Finding it hard to meet people? she says.

He shrugs and then, vaguely, nods his head. Bit different from home, isn't it? he says.

I have some girlfriends I could introduce you to.

Oh yeah?

Yeah, I have those now, she says.

Not sure I'd be their type.

They look at one another. She's a little flushed, and her lipstick is smudged just slightly on her lower lip. Her gaze unsettles him like it used to, like looking into a mirror, seeing something that has no secrets from you.

What does that mean? she says.

I don't know.

What's not to like about you?

He smiles and looks into his glass. If Niall could see Marianne, he would say: Don't tell me. You like her. It's true she is Connell's type, maybe even the originary model of the type: elegant, bored-looking, with an impression of perfect self-assurance. And he's attracted to her, he can admit that. After these months away from home, life seems much larger, and his personal dramas less significant. He's not the same anxious, repressed person he was in school, when his attraction to her felt terrifying, like an oncoming train, and he threw her under it. He knows she's acting funny and coy because she wants to show him that she's not bitter. He could say: I'm really sorry for what I did to you, Marianne. He always thought, if he did see her again, that's what he would say. Somehow she doesn't seem to admit that possibility, or maybe he's being cowardly, or both.

I don't know, he says. Good question, I don't know.

Three Months Later

(FEBRUARY 2012)

Marianne gets in the front seat of Connell's car and closes the door. Her hair is unwashed and she pulls her feet up onto the seat to tie her shoelaces. She smells like fruit liqueur, not in a bad way but not in a fully good way either. Connell gets in and starts the engine. She glances at him.

Is your seatbelt on? he says.

He's looking in the rear-view mirror like it's a normal day. Actually it's the morning after a house party in Swords and Connell wasn't drinking and Marianne was, so nothing is normal. She puts her seatbelt on obediently, to show that they're still friends.

Sorry about last night, she says.

She tries to pronounce this in a way that communicates several things: apology, painful embarrassment, some additional feigned embarrassment that serves to ironise and dilute the painful kind, a sense that she knows she will be forgiven or is already, a desire not to 'make a big deal'.

Forget about it, he says.

Well, I'm sorry.

It's alright.

Connell is pulling out of the driveway now. He has seemingly dismissed the incident, but for some reason this doesn't satisfy her. She wants him to acknowledge what happened before he lets her move on, or maybe she just wants to make herself suffer unduly.

It wasn't appropriate, she says.

Look, you were pretty drunk.

That's not an excuse.

And high out of your mind, he says, which I only found out later.

Yeah. I felt like an attacker.

Now he laughs. She pulls her knees against her chest and holds her elbows in her hands.

You didn't attack me, he says. These things happen.

*

This is the thing that happened. Connell drove Marianne to a mutual friend's house for a birthday party. They had arranged to stay the night there and Connell would drive her back the next morning. On the way they listened to Vampire Weekend and Marianne drank from a silver flask of gin and talked about the Reagan administration. You're getting drunk, Connell told her in the car. You know, you have a very nice face, she said. Other people have actually said that to me, about your face.

By midnight Connell had wandered off somewhere at the party and Marianne had found her friends Peggy and Joanna in the shed. They were drinking a bottle of Cointreau together and smoking. Peggy was wearing a beaten-up leather jacket and striped linen trousers. Her

hair was loose around her shoulders, and she was constantly throwing it to one side and raking a hand through it. Joanna was sitting on top of the freezer unit in her socks. She was wearing a long shapeless garment like a maternity dress, with a shirt underneath. Marianne leaned against the washing machine and retrieved her gin flask from her pocket. Peggy and Joanna had been talking about men's fashion, and in particular the fashion sense of their own male friends. Marianne was content just to stand there, allowing the washing machine to support most of her body weight, swishing gin around the inside of her mouth, and listening to her friends speaking.

Both Peggy and Joanna are studying History and Politics with Marianne. Joanna is already planning her final-year thesis on James Connolly and the Irish Trades Union Congress. She's always recommending books and articles, which Marianne reads or half-reads or reads summaries of. People see Joanna as a serious person, which she is, but she can also be very funny. Peggy doesn't really 'get' Joanna's humour, because Peggy's form of charisma is more terrifying and sexy than it is comic. At a party before Christmas, Peggy cut Marianne a line of cocaine in their friend Declan's bathroom, and Marianne actually took it, or most of it anyway. It had no appreciable effect on her mood, except that for days afterwards she felt alternately amused at the idea that she had done it and guilty. She hasn't told Joanna about that. She knows Joanna would disapprove, because Marianne herself also disapproves, but when Joanna disapproves of things she doesn't go ahead and do them anyway.

Joanna wants to work in journalism, while Peggy doesn't seem to want to work at all. So far this hasn't been an issue for her, because she meets a lot of men who like to fund her lifestyle by buying her handbags and expensive drugs. She favours slightly older men who work for investment banks or accounting agencies, twenty-seven-year-olds with lots of money and sensible lawyer girlfriends at home. Joanna once asked Peggy if she ever thought she herself might one day be a twenty-seven-year-old whose boyfriend would stay out all night taking cocaine with a teenager. Peggy wasn't remotely insulted, she thought it was really funny. She said she would be married to a Russian oligarch by then anyway and she didn't care how many girlfriends he had. It makes Marianne wonder what she herself is going to do after college. Almost no paths seem definitively closed to her, not even the path of marrying an oligarch. When she goes out at night, men shout the most outrageously vulgar things at her on the street, so obviously they're not ashamed to desire her, quite the contrary. And in college she often feels there's no limit to what her brain can do, it can synthesise everything she puts into it, it's like having a powerful machine inside her head. Really she has everything going for her. She has no idea what she's going to do with her life.

In the shed, Peggy asked where Connell was.

Upstairs, said Marianne. With Teresa, I guess.

Connell has been casually seeing a friend of theirs called Teresa. Marianne has no real problem with Teresa, but finds herself frequently prompting Connell to say bad things about her for no reason, which he always refuses to do.

He wears nice clothes, volunteered Joanna.

Not *really*, said Peggy. I mean, he has a look, but it's just tracksuits most of the time. I doubt he even owns a suit.

Joanna sought Marianne's eye contact again, and this time Marianne returned it. Peggy,

watching, took a performatively large mouthful of Cointreau and wiped her lips with the hand she was using to hold the bottle. What? she said.

Well, isn't he from a fairly working-class background? said Joanna.

That's so oversensitive, Peggy said. I can't criticise someone's dress sense because of their socio-economic status? Come on.

No, that's not what she meant, said Marianne.

Because you know, we're all actually very nice to him, said Peggy.

Marianne found she couldn't look at either of her friends then. Who's 'we'? she wanted to say. Instead she took the bottle of Cointreau from Peggy's hand and swallowed two mouthfuls, lukewarm and repulsively sweet.

Some time around two o'clock in the morning, after she had become extremely drunk and Peggy had convinced her to share a joint with her in the bathroom, she saw Connell on the third-storey landing. No one else was up there. Hey, he said. She leaned against the wall, drunk and wanting his attention. He was at the top of the stairs.

You've been off with Teresa, she said.

Have I? he said. That's interesting. You're completely out of it, are you?

You smell like perfume.

Teresa's not here, said Connell. As in, she's not at the party.

Then Marianne laughed. She felt stupid, but in a good way. Come here, she said. He came over to stand in front of her.

What? he said.

Do you like her better than me? said Marianne.

He tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

No, he said. To be fair, I don't know her very well.

But is she better in bed than I am?

You're drunk, Marianne. If you were sober you wouldn't even want to know the answer to that question.

So it's not the answer I want, she said.

She was engaging in this dialogue in a basically linear fashion, while at the same time trying to unbutton one of Connell's shirt buttons, not even in a sexy way, but just because she was so drunk and high. Also she hadn't managed to fully undo the button yet.

No, of course it's the answer you want, he said.

Then she kissed him. He didn't recoil like he was horrified, but he did pull away pretty firmly and said: No, come on.

Let's go upstairs, she said.

Yeah. We actually are upstairs.

I want you to fuck me.

He made a kind of frowning expression, which if she had been sober would have induced her to pretend she had only been joking.

Not tonight, he said. You're wasted.

Is that the only reason?

He looked down at her. She repressed a comment she had been saving up about the shape of his mouth, how perfect it was, because she wanted him to answer the question.

Yeah, he said. That's it.

So you otherwise would do it.

You should go to bed.

I'll give you drugs, she said.

You don't even— Marianne, you don't even have drugs. That's just one level of what's wrong with what you're saying. Go to bed.

Just kiss me.

He kissed her. It was a nice kiss, but friendly. Then he said goodnight and went downstairs lightly, with his light sober body walking in straight lines. Marianne went to find a bathroom, where she drank straight from the tap until her head stopped hurting and afterwards fell asleep on the bathroom floor. That's where she woke up twenty minutes ago when Connell asked one of the girls to find her.

*

Now he's flipping through the radio stations while they wait at a set of traffic lights. He finds a Van Morrison song and leaves it playing.

Anyway, I'm sorry, says Marianne again. I wasn't trying to make things weird with Teresa.

She's not my girlfriend.

Okay. But it was disrespectful of our friendship.

I didn't realise you were even close with her, he says.

I meant my friendship with you.

He looks around at her. She tightens her arms around her knees and tucks her chin into her shoulder. Lately she and Connell have been seeing a lot of each other. In Dublin they can walk down long stately streets together for the first time, confident that nobody they pass knows or cares who they are. Marianne lives alone in a one-bedroom apartment belonging to her grandmother, and in the evenings she and Connell sit in her living room drinking wine together. He complains to her, seemingly without reservation, about how hard it is to make friends in Trinity. The other day he lay on her couch and rolled the dregs of wine around in his glass and said: People here are such snobs. Even if they liked me I honestly wouldn't want to be friends with them. He put his glass down and looked at Marianne. That's why it's easy for you, by the way, he said. Because you're from a rich family, that's why people like you. She frowned and nodded, and then Connell started laughing. I'm messing with you, he said. Their eyes met. She wanted to laugh, but she didn't know if the joke was on her.

He always comes to her parties, though he says he doesn't really understand her friendship group. Her female friends like him a lot, and for some reason feel very comfortable sitting on his lap during conversations and tousling his hair fondly. The men have not warmed to him in the same way. He is tolerated through his association with Marianne, but he's not considered in his own right particularly interesting. He's not even smart! one of her male friends exclaimed the other night when Connell wasn't there. He's smarter than I am, said Marianne. No one knew what to say then. It's true that Connell is quiet at parties, stubbornly quiet even, and not interested in showing off how many books he has read or how many wars he knows about. But Marianne is aware, deep down, that that's not why people think he's stupid.

How was it disrespectful to our friendship? he says.

I think it would be difficult to stay friends if we started sleeping together.
He makes a devilish grinning expression. Confused, she hides her face in her arm.
Would it? he says.
I don't know.
Well, alright.

*

One night in the basement of Bruxelles, two of Marianne's friends were playing a clumsy game of pool while the others sat around drinking and watching. After Jamie won he said: Who wants to play the winner? And Connell put his pint down quietly and said: Alright, yeah. Jamie broke but didn't pot anything. Without engaging in any conversation at all, Connell then potted four of the yellow balls in a row. Marianne started laughing, but Connell was expressionless, just focused-looking. In the short time after his turn he drank silently and watched Jamie send a red ball spinning off the cushion. Then Connell chalked his cue briskly and resumed pocketing the final three yellows. There was something so satisfying about the way he studied the table and lined the shots up, and the quiet kiss of the chalk against the smooth surface of the cue ball. The girls all sat around watching him take shots, watching him lean over the table with his hard, silent face lit by the overhead lamp. It's like a Diet Coke ad, said Marianne. Everyone laughed then, even Connell did. When it was just the black ball left he pointed at the top right-hand pocket and, gratifyingly, said: Alright, Marianne, are you watching? Then he potted it. Everyone applauded.

Instead of walking home that night, Connell came back to stay at hers. They lay in her bed looking up at the ceiling and talking. Until then they had always avoided discussing what had happened between them the year before, but that night Connell said: Do your friends know about us?

Marianne paused. What about us? she said eventually.

What happened in school and all that.

No, I don't think so. Maybe they've picked up on something but I never told them.

For a few seconds Connell said nothing. She was attuned to his silence in the darkness.

Would you be embarrassed if they found out? he said.

In some ways, yeah.

He turned over then, so he wasn't looking up at the ceiling anymore but facing her. Why? he said.

Because it was humiliating.

You mean like, the way I treated you.

Well, yeah, she said. And just the fact that I put up with it.

Carefully he felt for her hand under the quilt and she let him hold it. A shiver ran along her jaw and she tried to make her voice sound light and humorous.

Did you ever think about asking me to the Debs? she said. It's such a stupid thing but I'm curious whether you thought about it.

To be honest, no. I wish I did.

She nodded. She continued looking up at the black ceiling, swallowing, worried that he could make out her expression.

Would you have said yes? he asked.

She nodded again. She tried to roll her eyes at herself but it felt ugly and self-pitying rather than funny.

I'm really sorry, he said. I did the wrong thing there. And you know, apparently people in school kind of knew about us anyway. I don't know if you heard that.

She sat up on her elbow and stared down at him in the darkness.

Knew what? she said.

That we were seeing each other and all that.

I didn't tell anyone, Connell, I swear to god.

She could see him wince even in the dark.

No, I know, he said. My point is more that it wouldn't have mattered even if you did tell people. But I know you didn't.

Were they horrible about it?

No, no. Eric just mentioned it at the Debs, that people knew. No one cared, really.

There was another short silence between them.

I feel guilty for all the stuff I said to you, Connell added. About how bad it would be if anyone found out. Obviously that was more in my head than anything. I mean, there was no reason why people would care. But I kind of suffer from anxiety with these things. Not that I'm making excuses, but I think I projected some anxiety onto you, if that makes sense. I don't know. I'm still thinking about it a lot, why I acted in such a fucked-up way.

She squeezed his hand and he squeezed back, so tightly it almost hurt her, and this small gesture of desperation on his part made her smile.

I forgive you, she said.

Thank you. I think I did learn from it. And hopefully I have changed, you know, as a person. But honestly, if I have, it's because of you.

They kept holding hands underneath the quilt, even after they went to sleep.

*

When they get to her apartment now she asks if he wants to come in. He says he needs to eat something and she says there are breakfast things in the fridge. They go upstairs together. Connell starts looking in the fridge while she goes to take a shower. She strips all her clothes off, turns the water pressure up as high as it goes and showers for nearly twenty minutes. Then she feels better. When she comes out, wrapped in a white bathrobe, her hair towelled dry, Connell has eaten already. His plate is clean and he's checking his email. The room smells like coffee and frying. She goes towards him and he wipes his mouth with the back of his hand, as if he's nervous suddenly. She stands at his chair and, looking up at her, he undoes the sash of her bathrobe. It's been nearly a year. He touches his lips to her skin and she feels holy, like a shrine. Come to bed, then, she says. He goes with her.

Afterwards she switches on the hairdryer and he gets in the shower. Then she lies down again, listening to the sound of the pipes. She's smiling. When Connell comes out he lies beside her, they face one another, and he touches her. Hm, she says. They have sex again, not speaking very much. After that she feels peaceful and wants to sleep. He kisses her closed eyelids. It's not like this with other people, she says. Yeah, he says. I know. She senses there are things he isn't saying to her. She can't tell whether he's holding back a desire to pull away from her, or a desire to make himself more vulnerable somehow. He

kisses her neck. Her eyes are getting heavy. I think we'll be fine, he says. She doesn't know or can't remember what he's talking about. She falls asleep.

Two Months Later

(APRIL 2012)

He's just come back from the library. Marianne has had friends over but they're heading off when he arrives, taking their jackets from the hooks in the hallway. Peggy is the only one still sitting at the table, draining a bottle of rosé into a huge glass. Marianne is wiping down the countertop with a wet cloth. The window over the kitchen sink shows an oblong of sky, denim-blue. Connell sits at the table and Marianne takes a beer out of the fridge and opens it for him. She asks if he's hungry and he says no. It's warm out and the cool of the bottle feels good. Their exams are starting soon, and he usually stays in the library now until the man comes around ringing the bell to say it's closing.

Can I just ask something? says Peggy.

He can tell she's drunk and that Marianne would like her to leave. He would like her to leave too.

Sure, says Marianne.

You guys are fucking each other, right? Peggy says. Like, you sleep together.

Connell says nothing. He runs his thumb over the label on the beer bottle, feeling for a corner to peel off. He has no idea what Marianne will come up with: something funny, he thinks, something that will make Peggy laugh and forget the question. Instead, unexpectedly, Marianne says: Oh, yeah. He starts smiling to himself. The corner of the beer label comes away from the glass under his thumb.

Peggy laughs. Okay, she says. Good to know. Everyone is speculating, by the way.

Well, yeah, says Marianne. But it's not a new thing, we used to hook up in school.

Oh really? Peggy says.

Marianne is pouring herself a glass of water. When she turns around, holding the glass, she looks at Connell.

I hope you don't mind me saying that now, she says.

He shrugs, but he's smiling at her, and she smiles back. They don't advertise the relationship, but his friends know about it. He doesn't like public displays, that's all. Marianne asked him once if he was 'ashamed' of her but she was just joking. That's funny, he said. Niall thinks I brag about you too much. She loved that. He doesn't really brag about her as such, though as it happens she is very popular and a lot of other men want to sleep with her. He might brag about her occasionally, but only in a tasteful way.

You actually make a very cute couple, says Peggy.

Thanks, Connell says.

I didn't say couple, says Marianne.

Oh, says Peggy. You mean like, you're not exclusive? That's cool. I wanted to try an open-relationship thing with Lorcan but he was really against it.

Marianne drags a chair back from the table and sits down. Men can be possessive, she says.

I know! says Peggy. It's crazy. You'd think they would jump at the idea of multiple

partners.

Generally I find men are a lot more concerned with limiting the freedoms of women than exercising personal freedom for themselves, says Marianne.

Is that true? Peggy says to Connell.

He looks at Marianne with a little nod, preferring her to continue. He has come to know Peggy as the loud friend who interrupts all the time. Marianne has other, preferable friends, but they never stay as late or talk as much.

I mean, when you look at the lives men are really living, it's sad, Marianne says. They control the whole social system and this is the best they can come up with for themselves? They're not even having fun.

Peggy laughs. Are you having fun, Connell? she says.

Hm, he says. A reasonable amount, I would say. But I agree with the point.

Would you rather live under a matriarchy? says Peggy.

Difficult to know. I'd give it a go anyway, see what it was like.

Peggy keeps laughing, as if Connell is being unbelievably witty. Don't you enjoy your male privilege? she says.

It's like Marianne was saying, he replies. It's not that enjoyable to have. I mean, it is what it is, I don't get much fun out of it.

Peggy gives a toothy grin. If I were a man, she says, I would have as many as three girlfriends. If not more.

The last corner of the label peels off Connell's beer bottle now. It comes off more easily when the bottle is very cold, because the condensation dissolves the glue. He puts the beer on the table and starts to fold the label up into a small square. Peggy goes on talking but it doesn't seem important to listen to her.

Things are pretty good between him and Marianne at the moment. After the library closes in the evening he walks back to her apartment, maybe picking up some food or a four-euro bottle of wine on the way. When the weather is good, the sky feels miles away, and birds wheel through limitless air and light overhead. When it rains, the city closes in, gathers around with mists; cars move slower, their headlights glowing darkly, and the faces that pass are pink with cold. Marianne cooks dinner, spaghetti or risotto, and then he washes up and tidies the kitchen. He wipes crumbs out from under the toaster and she reads him jokes from Twitter. After that they go to bed. He likes to get very deep inside her, slowly, until her breathing is loud and hard and she clutches at the pillowcase with one hand. Her body feels so small then and so open. Like this? he says. And she's nodding her head and maybe punching her hand on the pillow, making little gasps whenever he moves.

The conversations that follow are gratifying for Connell, often taking unexpected turns and prompting him to express ideas he had never consciously formulated before. They talk about the novels he's reading, the research she studies, the precise historical moment that they are currently living in, the difficulty of observing such a moment in process. At times he has the sensation that he and Marianne are like figure-skaters, improvising their discussions so adeptly and in such perfect synchronisation that it surprises them both. She tosses herself gracefully into the air, and each time, without knowing how he's going to do it, he catches her. Knowing that they'll probably have sex again before they sleep probably makes the talking more pleasurable, and he suspects that the intimacy of their discussions, often moving back and forth from the conceptual to the personal, also makes the sex feel

better. Last Friday, when they were lying there afterwards, she said: That was intense, wasn't it? He told her he always found it pretty intense. But I mean practically romantic, said Marianne. I think I was starting to have feelings for you there at one point. He smiled at the ceiling. You just have to repress all that stuff, Marianne, he said. That's what I do.

Marianne knows how he feels about her really. Just because he gets shy in front of her friends doesn't mean it's not serious between them – it is. Occasionally he worries he hasn't been sufficiently clear on this point, and after letting this worry build up for a day or so, wondering how he can approach the issue, he'll finally say something sheepish like: You know I really like you, don't you? And his tone will sound almost annoyed for some reason, and she'll just laugh. Marianne has a lot of other romantic options, as everyone knows. Politics students who turn up to her parties with bottles of Moët and anecdotes about their summers in India. Committee members of college clubs, who are dressed up in black tie very frequently, and who inexplicably believe that the internal workings of student societies are interesting to normal people. Guys who make a habit of touching Marianne casually during conversation, fixing her hair or placing a hand on her back. Once, when foolishly drunk, Connell asked Marianne why these people had to be so tactile with her, and she said: You won't touch me, but no one else is allowed to either? That put him in a terrible mood.

He doesn't go home at the weekends anymore because their friend Sophie got him a new job in her dad's restaurant. Connell just sits in an upstairs office at the weekends answering emails and writing bookings down in a big leather appointment book. Sometimes minor celebrities call in, like people from RTÉ and that kind of thing, but most weeknights the place is dead. It's obvious to Connell that the business is haemorrhaging money and will have to close down, but the job was so easy to come by that he can't work up any real anxiety about this prospect. If and when he's out of work, one of Marianne's other rich friends will just come up with another job for him to do. Rich people look out for each other, and being Marianne's best friend and suspected sexual partner has elevated Connell to the status of rich-adjacent: someone for whom surprise birthday parties are thrown and cushy jobs are procured out of nowhere.

Before term ended he had to give a class presentation on the *Morte Darthur*, and while he spoke his hands were shaking and he couldn't look up from the printouts to see if anyone was actually listening to him. His voice wavered several times and he had the sense that if he hadn't been seated, he would have fallen to the ground. Only later did he find out that this presentation was considered very impressive. One of his classmates actually called him 'a genius' to his face afterwards, in a dismissive tone of voice, like geniuses were slightly despicable people. It is generally known in their year group that Connell has received the highest grade in all but one module, and he finds he likes to be thought of as intelligent, if only because it makes his interactions with other people more legible. He likes when someone is struggling to remember the name of a book or an author, and he can provide it for them readily, not showing off, just remembering it. He likes when Marianne tells her friends – people whose fathers are judges and government ministers, people who went to inordinately expensive schools – that Connell is the smartest person they will 'ever meet'.

What about you, Connell? says Peggy.

He has not been listening, and all he can say in response is: What?

Tempted by the idea of multiple partners? she says.

He looks at her. She has an arch expression on her face.

Uh, he says. I don't know. What do you mean?

Do you not fantasise about having your own harem? says Peggy. I thought that was a universal thing for men.

Oh, right. No, not really.

Maybe just two, then, Peggy says.

Two what, two women?

Peggy looks at Marianne and makes a mischievous kind of giggling noise. Marianne sips her water calmly.

We can if you want to, says Peggy.

Wait, sorry, Connell says. We can what?

Well, whatever you call it, she says. A threesome or whatever.

Oh, he says. And he laughs at his own stupidity. Right, he says. Right, sorry. He folds the label over again, not knowing what else to say. I missed that, he adds. He can't do it. He's not indecisive on the question of whether he'd like to do it or not, he actually can't do it. For some reason, and he can't explain it to himself, he thinks maybe he could fuck Peggy in front of Marianne, although it would be awkward, and not necessarily enjoyable. But he could not, he's immediately certain, ever do anything to Marianne with Peggy watching, or any of her friends watching, or anyone at all. He feels shameful and confused even to think about it. It's something he doesn't understand in himself. For the privacy between himself and Marianne to be invaded by Peggy, or by another person, would destroy something inside him, a part of his selfhood, which doesn't seem to have a name and which he has never tried to identify before. He folds the damp beer label up one more time so it's very small and tightly folded now. Hm, he says.

Oh no, says Marianne. I'm much too self-conscious. I'd die.

Peggy says: Really? She says this in a pleasant, interested tone of voice, like she's just as happy discussing Marianne's self-consciousness as she would be engaging in group sex. Connell tries not to display any outward relief.

I have all kinds of hang-ups, says Marianne. Very neurotic.

Peggy compliments Marianne's appearance in a routine, effeminate way and asks what her hang-ups are about.

Marianne pinches her lower lip and then says: Well, I don't feel lovable. I think I have an unlovable sort of ... I have a coldness about me, I'm difficult to like. She gestures one of her long, thin hands in the air, like she's only approximating what she means rather than really nailing it.

I don't believe that, says Peggy. Is she cold with you?

Connell coughs and says: No.

She and Marianne continue talking and he rolls the folded label between his fingers, feeling anxious.

*

Marianne went home for a couple of days this week, and when she came back to Dublin last night she seemed quiet. They watched *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* together in her apartment. At the end Marianne cried, but she turned her face away so it looked like she wasn't crying. This unsettled Connell. The film had a pretty sad ending but he didn't really

see what there was to cry about. Are you okay? he said. She nodded, with her face turned, so he could see a white tendon in her neck pressing outwards.

Hey, he said. Is something upsetting you?

She shook her head but didn't turn around. He went to make her a cup of tea and by the time he brought it to her she had stopped crying. He touched her hair and she smiled, weakly. The character in the film had become pregnant unexpectedly, and Connell was trying to remember when Marianne had last had her period. The longer he thought about it, the longer ago it seemed to have been. Eventually, in a panic, he said: Hey, you're not pregnant or anything, are you? Marianne laughed. That settled his nerves.

No, she said. I got my period this morning.

Okay. Well, that's good.

What would you do if I was?

He smiled, he inhaled through his mouth. Kind of depends on what you would want to do, he said.

I admit I would have a slight temptation to keep it. But I wouldn't do that to you, don't worry.

Really? What would the temptation be? Sorry if that's insensitive to say.

I don't know, she said. In a way I like the idea of something so dramatic happening to me. I would like to upset people's expectations. Do you think I'd be a bad mother?

No, you'd be great, obviously. You're great at everything you do.

She smiled. You wouldn't have to be involved, she said.

Well, I would support you, whatever you decided.

He didn't know why he was saying he would support her, since he had virtually no spare income and no prospect of having any. It felt like the thing to say, that was all. Really he had never considered it. Marianne seemed like the kind of straightforward person who would arrange the whole procedure herself, and at most maybe he would go with her on the plane.

Imagine what they'd say in Carricklea, she said.

Oh, yeah. Lorraine would never forgive me.

Marianne looked up quickly and said: Why, she doesn't like me?

No, she loves you. I mean she wouldn't forgive me for doing that to you. She loves you, don't worry. You know that. She thinks you're much too good for me.

Marianne smiled again then, and touched his face with her hand. He liked that, so he moved towards her a little and stroked the pale underside of her wrist.

What about your family? he said. I guess they'd never forgive me either.

She shrugged, she dropped her hand back into her lap.

Do they know we're seeing each other now? he said.

She shook her head. She looked away, she held her hand against her cheek.

Not that you have to tell them, he said. Maybe they'd disapprove of me anyway. They probably want you going out with a doctor or a lawyer or something, do they?

I don't think they care very much what I do.

She covered her face using her flattened hands for a moment, and then she rubbed her nose briskly and sniffed. Connell knew she had a strained relationship with her family. He first came to realise this when they were still in school, and it didn't strike him as unusual, because Marianne had strained relationships with everyone then. Her brother Alan was a

few years older, and had what Lorraine called a 'weak personality'. Honestly it was hard to imagine him standing his ground in a conflict with Marianne. But now they're both grown up and still she almost never goes home, or she goes and then comes back like this, distracted and sullen, saying she had a fight with her family again, and not wanting to talk about it.

You had another falling-out with them, did you? Connell said.

She nodded. They don't like me very much, she said.

I know it probably feels like they don't, he said. But at the end of the day they're your family, they love you.

Marianne said nothing. She didn't nod or shake her head, she just sat there. Soon after that they went to bed. She was having cramps and she said it might hurt to have sex, so he just touched her until she came. Then she was in a good mood and making luxurious moaning noises and saying: God, that was so nice. He got out of bed and went to wash his hands in the en suite, a small pink-tiled room with a potted plant in the corner and little jars of face cream and perfume everywhere. Rinsing his hands under the tap, he asked Marianne if she was feeling better. And from bed she said: I feel wonderful, thank you. In the mirror he noticed he had a little blood on his lower lip. He must have brushed it with his hand by accident. He rubbed at it with the wet part of his knuckle, and from the other room Marianne said: Imagine how bitter I'm going to be when you meet someone else and fall in love. She often makes little jokes like this. He dried his hands and switched off the bathroom light.

I don't know, he said. This is a pretty good arrangement, from my point of view.

Well, I do my best.

He got back into bed beside her and kissed her face. She had been sad before, after the film, but now she was happy. It was in Connell's power to make her happy. It was something he could just give to her, like money or sex. With other people she seemed so independent and remote, but with Connell she was different, a different person. He was the only one who knew her like that.

*

Eventually Peggy finishes her wine and leaves. Connell sits at the table while Marianne sees her out. The outside door closes and Marianne re-enters the kitchen. She rinses her water glass and leaves it upside down on the draining board. He's waiting for her to look at him.

You saved my life, he says.

She turns around, smiling, rolling her sleeves back down.

I wouldn't have enjoyed it either, she says. I would have done it if you wanted, but I could see you didn't.

He looks at her. He keeps looking at her until she says: What?

You shouldn't do things you don't want to do, he says.

Oh, I didn't mean that.

She throws her hands up, like the issue is irrelevant. In a direct sense he understands that it is. He tries to soften his manner since anyway it's not like he's annoyed at her.

Well, it was a good intervention on your part, he says. Very attentive to my preferences.

I try to be.

Yeah, you are. Come here.

She comes to sit down with him and he touches her cheek. He has a terrible sense all of a sudden that he could hit her face, very hard even, and she would just sit there and let him. The idea frightens him so badly that he pulls his chair back and stands up. His hands are shaking. He doesn't know why he thought about it. Maybe he wants to do it. But it makes him feel sick.

What's wrong? she says.

He feels a kind of tingling in his fingers now and he can't breathe right.

Oh, I don't know, he says. I don't know, sorry.

Did I do something?

No, no. Sorry. I had a weird ... I feel weird. I don't know.

She doesn't get up. But she would, wouldn't she, if he told her to get up. His heart is pounding now and he feels dizzy.

Do you feel sick? she says. You've gone kind of white.

Here, Marianne. You're not cold, you know. You're not like that, not at all.

She gives him a strange look, screwing her face up. Well, maybe cold was the wrong word, she says. It doesn't really matter.

But you're not hard to like. You know? Everyone likes you.

I didn't explain it well. Forget about it.

He nods. He still can't breathe normally. Well, what did you mean? he says. She's looking at him now, and finally she does stand up. You look morbidly pale, she says. Are you feeling faint? He says no. She takes his hand and tells him it feels damp. He nods, he's breathing hard. Quietly Marianne says: If I've done something to upset you, I'm really sorry. He forces a laugh and takes his hand away. No, a weird feeling came over me, he says. I don't know what it was. I'm okay now.

Three Months Later

(JULY 2012)

Marianne is reading the back of a yoghurt pot in the supermarket. With her other hand she's holding her phone, through which Joanna is telling an anecdote about her job. When Joanna gets into an anecdote she can really monologue at length, so Marianne isn't worried about taking her attention off the conversation for a few seconds to read the yoghurt pot. It's a warm day outside, she's wearing a light blouse and skirt, and the chill of the freezer aisle raises goosebumps on her arms. She has no reason to be in the supermarket, except that she doesn't want to be in her family home, and there aren't many spaces in which a solitary person can be inconspicuous in Carricklea. She can't go for a drink alone, or get a cup of coffee on Main Street. Even the supermarket will exhaust its usefulness when people notice she's not really buying groceries, or when she sees someone she knows and has to go through the motions of conversation.

The office is half-empty so nothing really gets done, Joanna is saying. But I'm still getting paid so I don't mind.

Because Joanna has a job now, most of their conversations take place over the phone, even though they're both living in Dublin. Marianne's only home for the weekend, but that's Joanna's only time off work. On the phone Joanna frequently describes her office, the various characters who work there, the dramas that erupt between them, and it's as if she's a citizen of a country Marianne has never visited, the country of paid employment. Marianne replaces the yoghurt pot in the freezer now and asks Joanna if she finds it strange, to be paid for her hours at work – to exchange, in other words, blocks of her extremely limited time on this earth for the human invention known as money.

It's time you'll never get back, Marianne adds. I mean, the time is real.

The money is also real.

Well, but the time is more real. Time consists of physics, money is just a social construct.

Yes, but I'm still alive at work, says Joanna. It's still me, I'm still having experiences. You're not working, okay, but the time is passing for you too. You'll never get it back either.

But I can decide what I do with it.

To that I would venture that your decision-making is also a social construct.

Marianne laughs. She wanders out of the freezer aisle and towards the snacks.

I don't buy into the morality of work, she says. Some work maybe, but you're just moving paper around an office, you're not contributing to the human effort.

I didn't say anything about morality.

Marianne lifts a packet of dried fruit and examines it, but it contains raisins so she puts it back down and picks up another.

Do you think I judge you for being so idle? says Joanna.

Deep down I think you do. You judge Peggy.

Peggy has an idle mind, which is different.

Marianne clicks her tongue as if to scold Joanna for her cruelty, but not with any great investment. She's reading the back of a dried apple packet.

I wouldn't want you to turn into Peggy, says Joanna. I like you the way you are.

Oh, Peggy's not that bad. I'm going to the supermarket checkout now so I'm going to hang up.

Okay. You can call tomorrow after the thing if you feel like talking.

Thanks, says Marianne. You're a good friend. Bye.

Marianne makes her way to the self-service checkout, picking up a bottle of iced tea on the way and carrying the dried apples. When she reaches the row of self-service machines, she sees Lorraine unloading a basket of various groceries. Lorraine stops when she sees Marianne and says: Hello there! Marianne clutches the dried fruit against her ribcage and says hi.

How are you getting on? says Lorraine.

Good, thanks. And you?

Connell tells me you're top of your class. Winning prizes and all kinds of things. Doesn't surprise me, of course.

Marianne smiles. Her smile feels gummy and childish. She squeezes the package of dried fruit, feels it crackle under her damp grip, and scans it on the machine. The supermarket lights are chlorine-white and she's not wearing any make-up.

Oh, she says. Nothing major.

Connell comes around the corner, of course he does. He's carrying a six-pack of crisps, salt and vinegar flavour. He's wearing a white T-shirt and those sweatpants with the stripes down the side. His shoulders seem bigger now. And he looks at her. He's been in the supermarket the whole time; maybe he even saw her in the freezer aisle and walked past quickly to avoid making eye contact. Maybe he heard her talking on the phone.

Hello, says Marianne.

Oh, hey. I didn't know you were in town.

He glances at his mother, and then scans the crisps and puts them in the bagging area. His surprise at seeing Marianne seems genuine, or at least his reluctance to look at or speak to her does.

I hear you're very popular up there in Dublin, Lorraine says. See, I get all the gossip from Trinity now.

Connell doesn't look up. He's scanning the other items from the trolley: a box of teabags, a loaf of sliced pan.

Your son's just being kind, I'm sure, says Marianne.

She takes her purse out and pays for her items, which cost three euro eighty-nine. Lorraine and Connell are packing their groceries into reusable plastic bags.

Can we offer you a lift home? Lorraine says.

Oh, no, says Marianne. I'll walk. But thank you.

Walk! says Lorraine. Out to Blackfort Road? Do not. We'll give you a lift.

Connell takes both the plastic bags in his arms and cocks his head towards the door.

Come on, he says.

Marianne hasn't seen him since May. He moved home after the exams and she stayed in Dublin. He said he wanted to see other people and she said: Okay. Now, because she was never really his girlfriend, she's not even his ex-girlfriend. She's nothing. They all get in the

car together, Marianne sitting in the back seat, while Connell and Lorraine have a conversation about someone they know who has died, but an elderly person so it's not that sad. Marianne stares out the window.

Well, I'm delighted we bumped into you, says Lorraine. It's great to see you looking so well.

Oh, thank you.

How long are you in town for?

Just the weekend, says Marianne.

Eventually Connell indicates at the entrance to the Foxfield estate and pulls in outside his house. Lorraine gets out. Connell glances at Marianne in the rear-view mirror and says: Here, get in the front, will you? I'm not a taxi driver. Wordlessly Marianne complies. Lorraine opens the boot and Connell twists around in his seat. Leave the bags, he says. I'll bring them in when I'm back. She puts up her hands in surrender, shuts the boot and then waves them off.

It's a short drive from Connell's house to Marianne's. He takes a left out of the estate, towards the roundabout. Only a few months ago he and Marianne used to stay up all night together talking and having sex. He used to pull the blankets off her in the morning and get on top of her with this little smiling expression like: Oh hey, hello. They were best friends. He told her that, when she asked him who his best friend was. You, he said. Then at the end of May he told her he was moving home for the summer.

How are things, anyway? he says.

Fine, thanks. How are you?

I'm alright, yeah.

He changes gears with a domineering gesture of his hand.

Are you still working in the garage? she asks.

No, no. You mean where I used to work? That place is closed now.

Is it?

Yeah, he says. No, I've been working in the Bistro. Actually your mam was in the other night with her, uh. Her boyfriend or whatever it is.

Marianne nods. They are driving past the football grounds now. A thin veil of rain begins to fall on the windshield, and Connell turns the wipers on, so they scrape out a mechanical rhythm on their voyage from side to side.

*

When Connell went home for Reading Week in the spring, he asked Marianne if she would send him naked pictures of herself. I'll delete them whenever you want obviously, he said. You can supervise. This suggested to Marianne a whole erotic ritual she had never heard of. Why would I want you to delete them? she said. They were talking on the phone, Connell at home in Foxfield and Marianne lying on her bed in Merrion Square. He explained briefly the politics of naked pictures, not showing them to people, deleting them on request, and so on.

Do you get these photos from a lot of girls? she asked him.

Well, I don't have any now. And I've never actually asked for any before, but sometimes you do get sent them.

She asked if he would send her back photographs of himself in return, and he made a 'hm' noise.

I don't know, he said. Would you really want a picture of my dick?

Comically, she felt the inside of her mouth get wet.

Yes, she said. But if you sent one I would honestly never delete it, so you probably shouldn't.

He laughed then. No, I don't care whether you delete it, he said.

She uncrossed her ankles. I mean I'll take it to my grave, she said. Like I will look at it probably every day until I die.

He was really laughing then. Marianne, he said, I'm not a religious person but I do sometimes think God made you for me.

*

The sports centre flashes past the driver's-side window through the blur of rainfall. Connell looks at Marianne again, then back at the road.

And you're with this guy Jamie now, aren't you? he says. So I hear.

Yeah.

He's not a bad-looking guy.

Oh, she says. Well, okay. Thanks.

She and Jamie have been together for a few weeks now. He has certain proclivities. They have certain shared proclivities. Sometimes in the middle of the day she remembers something Jamie has said or done to her, and all her energy leaves her completely, so her body feels like a carcass, something immensely heavy and awful that she has to carry around.

Yeah, says Connell. I actually beat him in a game of pool once. You probably don't remember.

I do.

Connell nods and adds: He always liked you. Marianne stares out the windshield at the car ahead. It's true, Jamie always liked her. He sent her a text once implying that Connell wasn't serious about her. She showed Connell the text and they laughed about it. They were in bed together at the time, Connell's face illuminated by the lit display on her phone screen. You should be with someone who takes you seriously, the message read.

What about you, are you seeing anyone? she says.

Not really. Nothing serious.

Embracing the single lifestyle.

You know me, he says.

I did once.

He frowns. That's a bit philosophical, he says. I haven't changed much in the last few months.

Neither have I. Actually, yeah. I haven't changed at all.

*

One night in May, Marianne's friend Sophie threw a house party to celebrate the end of the

exams. Her parents were in Sicily or somewhere like that. Connell still had an exam left at the time, but he wasn't worried about it, so he came along too. All their friends were there, partly because Sophie had a heated swimming pool in her basement. They spent most of the night in their swimsuits, dipping in and out of the water, drinking and talking. Marianne sat at the side with a plastic cup of wine, while some of the others played a game in the pool. It seemed to involve people sitting on other people's shoulders and trying to knock each other into the water. Sophie got up onto Connell's shoulders for the second match, and said appreciatively: That's a nice solid torso you have. Marianne looked on, slightly drunk, admiring the way Sophie and Connell looked together, his hands on her smooth brown shins, and feeling a strange sense of nostalgia for a moment that was already in the process of happening. Sophie looked over at her then.

No need to worry, Marianne, she called. I'm not going to steal him away.

Marianne thought Connell would gaze off into the water, pretending not to hear, but instead he looked around at her and smiled.

She's not worried, he said.

She didn't know what that meant, really, but she smiled, and then the game began. She felt happy to be surrounded by people she liked, who liked her. She knew that if she wanted to speak, everyone would probably turn around and listen out of sincere interest, and that made her happy too, although she had nothing at all to say.

After the game was finished Connell came over to her, standing in the water where her legs were dangling. She looked down at him benignly. I was admiring you, she said. He pushed his wet hair back from his forehead. You're always admiring me, he said. She kicked her leg at him gently and he put his hand around her ankle and stroked it with his fingers. You and Sophie make an athletic team, she said. He kept stroking her leg under the water. It felt very nice. The others were calling him back to the deeper end then, they wanted to have another game. You're alright, he said. I'm having a break for this round. Then he hopped up onto the side of the pool, beside her. His body was glistening wet. He put his hand flat on the tiles behind her to steady himself.

Come here, he said.

He put his arm around her waist. He had never, ever touched her in front of anyone else before. Their friends had never seen them together like this, no one had. In the pool the others were still splashing and yelling.

That's nice, she said.

He turned his head and kissed her bare shoulder. She laughed again, shocked and gratified. He glanced back out at the water and then looked at her.

You're happy now, he said. You're smiling.

You're right, I am happy.

He nodded towards the pool, where Peggy had just fallen into the water, and people were laughing.

Is this what life is like? Connell said.

She looked at his face, but she couldn't tell from his expression if he was pleased or miserable. What do you mean? she said. But he only shrugged. A few days later he told her he was leaving Dublin for the summer.

You didn't tell me you were in town, he says now.

She nods slowly, like she's thinking about it, like it just now occurs to her that in fact she did not tell Connell she was in town, and it's an interesting thought.

So what, are we not friends anymore? he says.

Of course we are.

You don't reply to my messages very much.

Admittedly she has been ignoring him. She had to tell people what had happened between them, that he had broken up with her and moved away, and it mortified her. She was the one who had introduced Connell to everyone, who had told them all what great company he was, how sensitive and intelligent, and he had repaid her by staying in her apartment almost every night for three months, drinking the beer she bought for him, and then abruptly dumping her. It made her look like such a fool. Peggy laughed it off, of course, saying men were all the same. Joanna didn't seem to think the situation was funny at all, but puzzling, and sad. She kept asking what each of them had specifically said during the break-up, and then she would go quiet, as if she was re-enacting the scene in her mind to try and make sense of it.

Joanna wanted to know if Connell knew about Marianne's family. Everyone in Carriclea knows each other, Marianne said. Joanna shook her head and said: But I mean, does he know what they're like? Marianne couldn't answer that. She feels that even she doesn't know what her family are like, that she's never adequate in her attempts to describe them, that she oscillates between exaggerating their behaviour, which makes her feel guilty, or downplaying it, which also makes her feel guilty, but a different guilt, more inwardly directed. Joanna believes that she knows what Marianne's family are like, but how can she, how can anyone, when Marianne herself doesn't? Of course Connell can't. He's a well-adjusted person raised in a loving home. He just assumes the best of everyone and knows nothing.

I thought you would at least text me if you were coming home, he says. It's kind of weird running into you when I didn't know you were around.

At this moment she remembers leaving a flask in Connell's car the day they drove to Howth in April, and she never got the flask back. It might still be in his glovebox. She eyes the glovebox but doesn't feel she can open it, because he would ask what she was doing and she would have to bring up the trip to Howth. They went swimming in the sea that day and then parked his car somewhere out of sight and had sex in the back seat. It would be shameless to remind him of that day now that they're once again in the car together, even though she would really like her flask back, or maybe it's not about the flask, maybe she just wants to remind him he once fucked her in the back seat of the car they're now sitting in, she knows it would make him blush, and maybe she wants to force him to blush as a sadistic display of power, but that wouldn't be like her, so she says nothing.

What are you doing in town anyway? he says. Just visiting your family?

It's my father's anniversary Mass.

Oh, he says. He glances over at her, then back out the windshield. Sorry, he adds. I didn't realise. When is that, tomorrow morning?

She nods. Half ten, she says.

Sorry about that, Marianne. That was stupid of me.

It's alright. I didn't really want to come home for it but my mother kind of insists. I'm not

a big Mass person.

No, he says. Yeah.

He coughs. She stares out the windshield. They're at the top of her street now. She and Connell have never spoken much about her father, or about his.

Do you want me to come? Connell says. Obviously if you don't want me there I won't go. But I wouldn't mind going, if you want.

She looks at him, and feels a certain weakening in her body.

Thank you for offering, she says. That's kind of you.

I don't mind.

You really don't have to.

It's no bother, he says. I'd like to go, to be honest.

He indicates and pulls into her gravel driveway. Her mother's car isn't there, she's not at home. The huge white facade of the house glares down at them. Something about the arrangement of windows gives Marianne's house a disapproving expression. Connell switches the engine off.

Sorry I was ignoring your messages, says Marianne. It was childish.

It's alright. Look, if you don't want to be friends anymore, we don't have to be.

Of course I want to be friends.

He nods, tapping his fingers on the steering wheel. His body is so big and gentle, like a Labrador. She wants to tell him things. But it's too late now, and anyway it has never done her any good to tell anyone.

Alright, says Connell. I'll see you tomorrow morning at the church, then, will I?

She swallows. Do you want to come inside for a bit? she says. We could have a cup of tea or something.

Oh, I would, but there's ice cream in the boot.

Marianne looks around, remembering the shopping bags, and feels disorientated suddenly.

Lorraine would kill me, he says.

Sure. Of course.

She gets out of the car then. He waves out the window. And he will come, tomorrow morning, and he will be wearing a navy sweatshirt with a white Oxford shirt underneath, looking innocent as a lamb, and he will stand with her in the vestibule afterwards, not saying very much but catching her eye supportively. Smiles will be exchanged, relieved smiles. And they will be friends again.