



## I

I've always considered myself to be, basically, a lucky person. I don't mean I'm one of those people who pick multi-million-euro lotto numbers on a whim, or show up seconds too late for flights that go on to crash with no survivors. I just mean that I managed to go through life without any of the standard misfortunes you hear about. I wasn't abused as a kid, or bullied in school; my parents didn't split up or die or have addiction problems or even get into any but the most trivial arguments; none of my girlfriends ever cheated on me, at least as far as I know, or dumped me in traumatic ways; I never got hit by a car or caught anything worse than chickenpox or even had to wear braces. Not that I spent much time thinking about this, but when it occurred to me, it was with a satisfying sense that everything was going exactly as it should.

And of course there was the Ivy House. I don't think anyone could convince me, even now, that I was anything other than lucky to have the Ivy House. I know it wasn't that simple, I know all the reasons in intimate, serrated detail; I can lay them out in a neat line, stark and runic as black twigs on snow, and stare at them till I almost convince myself; but all it takes is one whiff of the right smell – jasmine, lapsang souchong, a specific old-fashioned soap that I've never been able to identify – or one sideways shaft of afternoon light at a particular angle, and I'm lost, in thrall all over again.

Not long ago I actually rang my cousins about it – it was almost Christmas, I was a little drunk on mulled wine from some godawful work party, or I would never have rung them, or at any rate not to ask their opinions, or their advice, or whatever it is I thought I was looking for. Susanna clearly felt it was a silly question – 'Well, yeah, obviously we were lucky. It was an amazing place.' And into my silence: 'If you're getting hung up on all the other stuff, then personally' – long deft slice of scissors through paper, choirboys

sweet and buoyant in the background, she was wrapping presents – ‘I wouldn’t. I know that’s easier said, but seriously, Toby, picking at it after how many years, what’s the point? But you do you.’ Leon, who at first had sounded genuinely pleased to hear from me, tightened up instantly: ‘How am I supposed to know? Oh, listen, while I have you, I meant to email you, I’m thinking of coming home for a bit at Easter, are you going to be—’ I got mildly belligerent and demanded an answer, which I knew perfectly well has always been the wrong way to deal with Leon, and he pretended his reception had gone and hung up on me.

And yet; and yet. It matters; matters, as far as I can see – for whatever that’s worth, at this point – more than anything. It’s taken me this long to start thinking about what luck can be, how smoothly and deliciously deceptive, how relentlessly twisted and knotted in on its own hidden places, and how lethal.

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That night. I know there are an infinite number of places to begin any story, and I’m well aware that everyone else involved in this one would take issue with my choice – I can just see the wry lift at the corner of Susanna’s mouth, hear Leon’s snort of pure derision. But I can’t help it: for me it all goes back to that night, the dark corroded hinge between before and after, the slipped-in sheet of trick glass that tints everything on one side in its own murky colours and leaves everything on the other luminous, aching close, untouched and untouchable. Even though it’s demonstrably nonsense – the skull had already been tucked away in its cranny for years by that point, after all, and I think it’s pretty clear that it would have resurfaced that summer regardless – I can’t help believing, at some level deeper than logic, that none of this would ever have happened without that night.

It started out feeling like a good night; a great night, actually. It was a Friday in April, the first day that had really felt like spring, and I was out with my two best mates from school. Hogan’s was buzzing, all the girls’ hair softened to flightiness by the day’s warmth and the guys’ sleeves rolled up, layers of talk and laughter packing the air till the music was just a subliminal cheery reggae boom boom

boom coming up from the floor into your feet. I was high as a kite – not on coke or anything; there had been a bit of hassle at work earlier that week, but that day I had sorted it all out and the triumph was making me a little giddy, I kept catching myself talking too fast or knocking back a swallow of my pint with a flourish. An extremely pretty brunette at the next table was checking me out, giving me just a second too much smile when my eye happened to land on her; I wasn't going to do anything about it – I had a really great girlfriend and no intention of cheating on her – but it was fun to know I hadn't lost my touch.

'She fancies you,' Declan said, nodding sideways at the brunette, who was throwing her head back extravagantly as she laughed at her friend's joke.

'She's got good taste.'

'How's Melissa?' Sean asked, which I thought was unnecessary. Even if it hadn't been for Melissa, the brunette wasn't my type; she had dramatic curves barely contained by a tight retro red dress, and she looked like she would have been happier in some Gauloise-ridden bistro watching several guys have a knife fight over her.

'Great,' I said, which was true. 'As always.' Melissa was the opposite of the brunette: small, sweet-faced, with ruffled blond hair and a sprinkle of freckles, drawn by nature towards things that made her and everyone around her happy – bright flowered dresses in soft cotton, baking her own bread, dancing to whatever came on the radio, picnics with cloth napkins and ridiculous cheeses. It had been days since I'd seen her and the thought of her made me crave everything about her, her laugh, her nose burrowing into my neck, the honeysuckle smell of her hair.

'She is great,' Sean told me, a little too meaningfully.

'She is, yeah. I'm the one who just said she's great. I'm the one going out with her; I know she's great. She's great.'

'Are you speeding?' Dec wanted to know.

'I'm high on your company. You, dude, you're the human equivalent of the purest, whitest Colombian—'

'You are speeding. Share. You stingy bastard.'

'I'm clean as a baby's arse. You scrounging git.'

'Then what are you doing eyeing up your woman?'

‘She’s beautiful. A man can appreciate a thing of beauty without—’

‘Too much coffee,’ Sean said. ‘Get more of that down you; that’ll sort you out.’

He was pointing at my pint. ‘Anything for you,’ I said, and sank most of what was left. ‘Ahhh.’

‘She is only gorgeous,’ Dec said, eyeing the brunette wistfully. ‘What a waste.’

‘Go for it,’ I said. He wouldn’t; he never did.

‘Right.’

‘Go on. While she’s looking over.’

‘She’s not looking at me. She’s looking at you. As usual.’ Dec was stocky and tightly wound, with glasses and a mop of unruly copper hair; he was actually OK-looking, but somewhere along the way he had convinced himself that he wasn’t, with predictable consequences.

‘Hey,’ Sean said, mock-wounded. ‘Birds look at me.’

‘They do, yeah. They’re wondering if you’re blind, or if you’re wearing that shirt on a dare.’

‘Jealousy,’ Sean said sadly, shaking his head. Sean was a big guy, six foot two, with a broad open face and his rugby muscle only starting to soften; he did in fact get plenty of female attention, although that was wasted too, since he had been happily with the same girl since school. ‘It’s an ugly thing.’

‘Don’t worry,’ I reassured Dec. ‘It’s all about to change for you. With the . . .’ I nodded subtly in the direction of his head.

‘The what?’

‘You know. Those.’ I darted a quick point at my hairline.

‘What’re you on about?’

Leaning in discreetly across the table, keeping my voice down: ‘The plugs. Fair play to you, man.’

‘I don’t have fucking hair plugs!’

‘They’re nothing to be ashamed of. All the big stars are getting them these days. Robbie Williams. Bono.’

Which of course outraged Dec even more. ‘There’s nothing wrong with my bleeding hair!’

‘That’s what I’m saying. They look great.’

‘They’re not obvious,’ Sean reassured him. ‘Not saying they’re obvious. Just nice, you know?’

‘They’re not obvious because they don’t *exist*. I don’t *have*—’

‘Come on,’ I said. ‘I can see them. Here, and—’

‘Get off me!’

‘I know. Let’s ask your woman what she thinks.’ I started to signal to the brunette.

‘No. No no no. Toby, I’m serious, I’m going to actually kill you—’ Dec was grabbing at my waving hand. I dodged.

‘It’s the perfect conversation starter,’ Sean pointed out. ‘You didn’t know how to get talking to her, right? Here’s your chance.’

‘Fuck you,’ Dec told us, abandoning the attempt to catch my hand and standing up. ‘You’re a pair of shitehawks. Do you know that?’

‘Ah, Dec,’ I said. ‘Don’t leave us.’

‘I’m going to the jacks. To give you two a chance to pull yourselves together. You, Chuckles’ – to Sean – ‘it’s your round.’

‘Checking that they’re all in place,’ Sean told me, aside, motioning to his hairline. ‘You messed them up. See that one there, it’s gone all—’ Dec gave us both the finger and started off through the crowd towards the jacks, trying to stay dignified as he edged between buttocks and waving pints, and concentrating hard on ignoring both our burst of laughter and the brunette.

‘He actually fell for that, for a minute there,’ Sean said. ‘Eejit. Same again?’ and he headed up to the bar.

While I had a moment to myself I texted Melissa: *Having a few with the guys. Ring you later. Love you.* She texted me back straight-away: *I sold the mad steampunk armchair!!! and a bunch of firework emojis. The designer was so happy she cried on the phone and I was so happy for her I almost did too :-)* Say hi to the guys from me. I love you too xxx. Melissa ran a tiny shop in Temple Bar that sold quirky Irish-designed stuff, funny little sets of interconnected china vases, cashmere blankets in zingy neon colours, hand-carved drawer knobs shaped like sleeping squirrels or spreading trees. She had been trying to sell that armchair for years. I texted her back *Congratulations! You sales demon you.*

Sean came back with the pints and Dec came back from the jacks, looking a lot more composed but still intently avoiding the brunette's eye. 'We asked your woman what she thinks,' Sean told him. 'She says the plugs are lovely.'

'She says she's been admiring them all night,' I said.

'She wants to know can she touch them.'

'She wants to know can she lick them.'

'Stick it up your holes. I'll tell you why she keeps looking over at you, anyway, fuckfeatures,' Dec said to me, pulling up his stool. 'It's not because she fancies you. It's only because she saw your smarmy mug in the paper, and she's trying to remember were you in there for conning a granny out of her savings or shagging a fifteen-year-old.'

'Which she wouldn't care about either way unless she fancied me.'

'In your dreams. Fame's gone to your head.'

My picture had been in the paper a couple of weeks earlier – the social pages, which had netted me a ferocious amount of slagging – because I had happened to be chatting to a long-serving soap actress at a work thing, an exhibition opening. At the time I did the PR and marketing for a medium-sized, fairly prestigious art gallery in the centre of town, just a few laneways and short cuts away from Grafton Street. It wasn't what I'd had in mind when I was finishing college; I had been planning on one of the big PR firms, I'd only gone to the interview for the practice. Once I got there, though, I found myself unexpectedly liking the place, the tall barely-renovated Georgian house with all the floors at weird angles, Richard the owner peering at me through his lopsided glasses and inquiring about my favourite Irish artists (luckily I had prepped for the interview, so I could actually come up with semi-sensible answers, and we had a long happy conversation about le Brocquy and Pauline Bewick and various other people I had barely heard of before that week). I liked the idea of having a free hand, too. In a big firm I would have spent my first couple of years huddled in front of a computer obediently watering and pruning other people's ideas of brilliant social media campaigns, dithering over whether to delete racist troll comments about some horrifying new flavour of crisp or leave them up to generate buzz; at the gallery I could try out

whatever I wanted and patch up my learner's mistakes on the fly, without anyone hanging over my shoulder – Richard wasn't entirely sure what Twitter was, although he knew he really should have some, and he clearly wasn't the micromanaging type. When, to my faint surprise, I was offered the job, I barely hesitated. A few years, I figured, a few nice publicity coups to make my CV sparkle, and I could make the leap to one of the big firms at a level I would actually enjoy.

It had been five years now, and I was starting to put out feelers, to a gratifying level of response. I was going to miss the gallery – I had ended up enjoying not just the freedom but the work itself, the artists with their goofy levels of perfectionism, the satisfaction of gradually picking up enough to understand why Richard leaped on one artist and turned another one down flat. But I was twenty-eight, Melissa and I were talking about getting a place together, the gallery paid OK but nowhere near as well as the big firms; I felt like it was time to get serious.

All of that had come pretty close to going up in smoke, over the past week, but my luck had held. My mind was bouncing and dashing like a border collie and it was infectious, Sean and Dec were bent over the table laughing – we were planning a guys' holiday for that summer but couldn't decide where, *Thailand? hang on, when's the monsoon season?*, phones coming out, *when's the coup season?* – Dec kept insisting on Fiji for some reason, *has to be Fiji, we'll never get another chance, not after*— and a fake-subtle tilt of his head at Sean. Sean was getting married at Christmas, and while after twelve years it was hardly unexpected, it still felt like a startling and gratuitous thing to do and the mention of it inevitably led into slaggings: *The minute you say 'I do' you're on borrowed time, man, before you know it you'll have a kid and then that's it, your life's over . . . Here's to Sean's last holiday! Here's to Sean's last night out! Here's to Sean's last blowie!* Actually Dec and I both liked Audrey a lot, and the wry grin on Sean – mock-annoyed, secretly pleased as punch with himself – got me thinking about Melissa and we'd been together three years now and maybe I should think about proposing, and all that talk of last chances made me glance across at the brunette who was telling



some anecdote and using her hands a lot, scarlet nails, and something in the angle of her neck told me she knew perfectly well that I was looking and that it had nothing to do with the newspaper picture— *We'll get you seen to in Thailand, Sean, don't worry— Here's to Sean's first ladyboy!*

After that my memory of the evening gets patchy for a while. Of course in its aftermath I went over it a million times, obsessively, combing every thread to find the knot that set the pattern changing beyond recovery; hoping there was just one detail whose significance I'd missed, the tiny keystone around which all the pieces would slot into place and the whole would flash jackpot rings of multicoloured light while I leaped up shouting *Eureka!* The missing chunks didn't help matters (very common, the doctors said reassuringly, completely normal, oh so very very normal): a lot came back along the way and I picked what I could from Sean's memory and Dec's, laboriously pieced the evening together like an old fresco from husbanded fragments and educated inferences, but how could I know for sure what was in the blank spaces? Did I shoulder someone at the bar? Did I talk too loudly, riding high in my euphoria balloon, or throw out an arm in some expansive gesture and catch someone's pint? Was the brunette's roid-rat ex snarling in some unnoticed corner? I had never thought of myself as the kind of person who goes looking for trouble, but nothing seemed out of the question, not any more.

Long buttery streaks of light on dark wood. A girl in a floppy red velvet hat leaning on the bar when I went up for my round, chatting to the barman about some gig, Eastern European accent, wrists bending like a dancer's. A trodden flier on the floor, green and yellow, faux-naïf sketch of a lizard biting its tail. Washing my hands in the jacks, smell of bleach, chill air.

I do remember my phone buzzing, in the middle of an uproarious argument about whether the next *Star Wars* film was inevitably going to be worse than the last one, based on some intricate algorithm Dec had come up with. I jumped for it – I thought it might be something to do with the work situation, Richard wanting an update or maybe Tiernan finally returning my calls – but it was just

some Facebook birthday-party invitation. ‘Story?’ Sean wanted to know, raising his eyebrows at my phone, and I realised I had grabbed at it a little too urgently.

‘Nothing,’ I said, putting the phone away. ‘And anyway how about the *Taken* series, the daughter started out as the victim and next time she turned into the sidekick—’ and we went back to the film argument, which by this point had gone off on so many tangents that none of us remembered what anyone’s original stance had been. This was what I had needed from the night, this, Dec leaning forwards over the table gesticulating, Sean throwing out his hands in incredulity, all of us trying to shout each other down about Hagrid—I pulled my phone back out and set it to silent.

The trouble at work hadn’t been my fault, actually, or at least only very tangentially. It stemmed from Tiernan, the guy in charge of exhibitions, a lank, long-chinned hipster with vintage horn-rimmed glasses and two main topics of conversation: obscure Canadian alt-folk bands, and the injustice of the fact that his art (meticulous oil portraits of ravers with mindlessly glaring pigeons’ heads, that kind of thing, produced in his parent-funded studio) hadn’t achieved the prominence it deserved. The year before all this, Tiernan had come up with the idea of a group show of representations of urban spaces by disadvantaged youths. Richard and I had both leaped on it – the only way that could have been easier to publicise was if some of the disadvantaged youths were also Syrian refugees and ideally trans, and Richard, despite his general air of unworldly vagueness and ragged tweed, was well aware that the gallery needed both status and funding in order to stay open. Only a few days after Tiernan first floated the idea – offhandedly, at the monthly meeting, picking crumbs of doughnut sugar off his napkin – Richard told him to get started.

The whole thing went like a dream. Tiernan scoured the dodgiest schools and council flats he could find (in one place a bunch of eight-year-olds pounded his fixie bike into Dalí with a lump hammer, in front of him) and came up with a collection of satisfyingly scuzzy youths with low-grade criminal records and scruffy-edged drawings involving syringes and tattered blocks of flats and the

occasional horse. To be fair, not all of it was that predictable: there was one girl who made small, sinister models of her various foster homes out of materials she had pilfered from derelict sites – a tarpaulin rag-doll man slouched on a sofa chipped from a lump of concrete, with his arm draped around a tarpaulin little girl’s shoulders in a way I found kind of disturbing; another kid made Pompeii-esque plaster casts of objects he found in the stairwell of his block of flats, a crushed lighter, a pair of child-sized glasses with one twisted earpiece, an intricately knotted plastic bag. I had taken it for granted that this show would be trading entirely on its moral superiority, but a few things in there were actually pretty good.

Tiernan was especially proud of one discovery, an eighteen-year-old known as Gouger. Gouger refused to talk to anyone but Tiernan, give us his real name or, frustratingly, do any interviews – he had been in and out of the juvenile system for most of his life and had developed complicated networks of enemies, who he was afraid would come after him if they saw him getting rich and famous – but he was good. He layered things, spray paint, photographs, pen and ink, with a ferocious slapdash skill that gave them a sense of urgency, look fast and hard before something comes roaring in from the side and smashes the picture to shards of colour and scrawl. His *pièce de résistance* – an enormous whirl of howling charcoal teenagers around a spray-paint bonfire, heads thrown back, neon arcs of booze flying from waved cans – was called *BoHeroin Rhapsody* and had already had interest from several collectors, after I put it up on our Facebook page.

The Arts Council and Dublin City Council practically threw money at us. The media gave us even more coverage than I had expected. Tiernan brought in his youths to shuffle around the gallery, nudging each other and sniping in undertones and giving long unreadable stares to the ‘Divergences’ show of mixed-media abstracts. Various distinguished guests responded to our invitation saying that they would be delighted to come to the opening. Richard pottered around the gallery smiling, humming bits of light opera interspersed with bizarre stuff he’d picked up somewhere (Kraftwerk??). Only then I went into Tiernan’s office without knocking, one afternoon, and

found him crouched on the floor touching up the detail on Gouger's latest masterwork.

After the first stunned second I started to laugh. Partly it was the look on Tiernan's face, the mixture of scarlet guilt and puffy defensiveness as he flailed for a plausible excuse; partly it was at myself, for having bounced cheerfully along through all of this without a single suspicion, when of course I should have copped months earlier (since when were underprivileged youths even on Tiernan's horizon?). 'Well well well,' I said, still laughing. 'Look at you.'

'Shhh,' Tiernan hissed, hands coming up, darting his eyes at the door.

'My man Gouger. In the flesh.'

'Jesus shut *up*, please, Richard's—'

'You're better-looking than I expected.'

'Toby. Listen. No no listen—' He had his arms half-spread in front of the painting so that it looked ridiculously as if he was trying to hide it, *painting? what painting?* 'If this gets out, I'm *dead*, I'm, no one will ever—'

'Jesus,' I said. 'Tiernan. Calm down.'

'The pictures are good, Toby. They're *good*. But this is the only way, no one'll ever look twice if they come from me, I went to *art* school—'

'Is it just the Gouger stuff? Or more of them?'

'Just Gouger. I swear.'

'Huh,' I said, peering over his shoulder. The picture was classic Gouger, a thick layer of black paint with two savagely grappling boys sgraffitoed into it, through them a wall of minutely pencilled balconies with a tiny vivid scene unfolding on each one. It must have taken forever. 'How long have you been planning this?'

'A while, I don't—' Tiernan blinked at me. He was very agitated. 'What are you going to do? Are you . . . ?'

Presumably I should have gone straight to Richard and told him the whole story, or at least found an excuse to pull Gouger's work from the show (his enemies were on his trail, something like that – giving him an OD would just have made him even more of a draw). To be honest, I didn't even consider it. Everything was going

beautifully, everyone involved was happy as a clam; pulling the plug would have ruined a lot of people's day for, as far as I could see, no good reason at all. Even if you wanted to get into the ethics of it, I was basically on Tiernan's side: I've never got the self-flagellating middle-class belief that being poor and having a petty crime habit magically makes you more worthy, more deeply connected to some wellspring of artistic truth, even more real. As far as I was concerned, the exhibition was exactly the same as it had been ten minutes ago; if people wanted to ignore the perfectly good pictures right in front of their eyes and focus instead on the gratifying illusion somewhere behind them, that was their problem, not mine.

'Relax,' I said – Tiernan was in such a state that leaving him there any longer would have been cruelty. 'I'm not going to do anything.'

'You're not?'

'Cross my heart.'

Tiernan blew out a long, shaky breath. 'OK. OK. Wow. Got a fright there.' He straightened up and surveyed the painting, patting the top edge of it as if he were soothing a spooked animal. 'They are good,' he said. 'They are, aren't they?'

'You know what you should do,' I said. 'Do more of the bonfire ones. Make it a series.'

Tiernan's eyes lit up. 'I could,' he said. 'That's not a bad idea, you know, from the building of the bonfire right up to the, when it's going down to ashes, dawn—' and he turned to his desk, fumbling for paper and pencil, his mind already brushing the whole episode away. I left him to it.

After that little wobble, the show went back to rolling smoothly towards its opening. Tiernan worked flat out on Gouger's bonfire series, to the point where I was pretty sure he wasn't sleeping more than a couple of hours a night, but if anyone noticed his dazed, grimy look and constant yawning, they had no reason to connect them with the pictures that he lugged in with triumphant regularity. I spun Gouger's anonymity into a sub-Banksy enigma, with plenty of fake Twitter accounts arguing in semi-literate text speak over whether he was your man from down the flats who had stabbed Mixie that time, because if so Mixie was looking for him;

the media dived on it and our followers skyrocketed. Tiernan and I did discuss, semi-seriously, getting an authentic skanger to be the face of the product, in exchange for enough cash to support his habit (obviously we would need one with a habit, for maximum gritty authenticity), but we decided against it on the grounds that a junkie skanger would be too short-sighted for reliability: sooner or later he would either start blackmailing us or start wanting creative control, and things would get messy.

I suppose I should have been worrying about what if it all went wrong – there were so many ways it could have, a journalist getting all investigative, me screwing up the slang on Gouger’s Twitter account – but I wasn’t. Worrying had always seemed to me like a laughable waste of time and energy; so much simpler to go happily about your business and deal with the problem when it arose, if it did, which it mostly didn’t. So it caught me completely off guard when, a month before the exhibition was scheduled to open and just four days before that night, Richard found out.

I’m still not sure how, exactly. Something about a phone call, from what little I could gather (pressed against my office door, staring at the dinged-up white paint, heart rate building slowly to an uncomfortable thump at the base of my throat), but Richard threw Tiernan out so fast and on such a searing gust of fury that we didn’t get a chance to talk. Then he came into my office – I jumped back just in time to avoid a door to the face – and told me to get out and not come back till Friday, when he would have decided what to do about me.

One look at him – white-faced, collar rucked up, jaw tight as a fist – and I had more sense than to say anything, even if I had had a chance to come up with anything coherent before the door slammed behind him with a bang that spun papers off my desk. I packed up my stuff and left, avoiding Aideen the accountant’s round avid eyes through her door-crack, trying to keep my footsteps easy and jaunty on my way down the stairs.

I spent the next three days being bored, mainly. Telling anyone what had happened would have been idiotic, when there was a good chance that the whole thing would blow over. I had been startled by just how angry Richard was – I would have expected him to

be annoyed, of course, but the depth of his fury seemed totally out of proportion, and I was pretty sure he had just been having a bad day and would have settled down by the time I went back to work. So I was stuck at home all day, in case anyone spotted me out and about when I shouldn't have been. I couldn't even ring anyone. I couldn't spend the night at Melissa's place or ask her over to mine, in case she wanted to walk in to work together in the morning – her shop was only five minutes beyond the gallery, so we mostly did walk in after a night together, holding hands and chattering like a pair of teenagers. I told her I had a cold, convinced her not to come over and look after me in case she caught it, and thanked God she wasn't the type to decide I was cheating on her. I played an awful lot of Xbox, and put on work clothes when I went to the shops, just in case.

Luckily I didn't live in the kind of place where I swapped cheery waves with my neighbours on our way out to work every morning, and if I missed a day someone would call round with cookies to make sure I was OK. My apartment was on the ground floor of a slabby, red-brick 1970s block, jammed eye-jarringly between beautiful Victorian mansions in an extremely nice part of Dublin. The street was broad and airy, lined with enormous old trees whose roots rucked up big patches of the pavement, and the architect had at least had enough sensitivity to respond to that; my living room had great floor-to-ceiling windows and glass doors on two sides, so that in summer the whole room was a glorious, disorientating tumble of sunshine and leaf-shadows. Apart from that one stroke of inspiration, though, he had done a pretty lousy job: the outside was sourly utilitarian and the corridors had the hallucinatory, liminal vibe of an airport hotel, long line of brown carpet stretching off into the distance, long line of textured beige wallpaper and cheap wooden doors on either side, dirty cut-glass wall sconces giving off a curdled yellowish glow. I never, ever saw the neighbours. I heard the occasional muffled thump when someone dropped something on the floor above me, and one time I had held the door for an accountant-looking guy with acne and a lot of M&S shopping bags, but apart from that I might have had the whole block to myself. No

one was about to notice, or care, that instead of going to work I was at home blowing up emplacements and inventing cute gallery stories to tell Melissa on the phone that evening.

I did do a certain amount of panicking, off and on. Tiernan wasn't answering his phone, even when I rang from my unlisted landline, so I had no way of knowing how thoroughly he had ratted me out, although the lack of contact didn't feel like a good sign. I told myself that if Richard had been planning to fire me he would have done it straight out, the same way he had to Tiernan; most of the time this made total, comforting sense, but every now and then there was a moment (middle of the night, mostly, eyes snapping open to the slant of pale light sweeping ominously across my bedroom ceiling as a car passed near-silently outside) when the full potential of the thing thumped down on top of me. If I lost my job, how would I hide it from people – my friends, my parents, oh God *Melissa* – until I could get a new one? In fact, what if I couldn't get a new one? All the big firms I had been carefully cultivating would notice my sudden departure from the gallery, notice how the star of the big hyped summer show had abruptly dematerialised at the exact same time, and that would be it: if I wanted a new job I would have to leave the country, and even that might not do me much good. And on the subject of leaving the country: could Tiernan and I be arrested for fraud? We hadn't sold any of Gouger's paintings, thank God, and it wasn't like we had been claiming they were by Picasso, but we had taken funding under false pretences, that had to be some kind of crime . . .

Like I said, I wasn't used to worrying, and the intensity of those moments took me aback. In facile hindsight it's tempting to see them as a premonition gone awry, a wild danger signal propelled to me by the force of its own urgency and then scrambled, ever so slightly but fatally, by the limitations of my mind. At the time I just saw them as a nuisance, one that I had no intention of allowing to freak me out. After a few minutes of spiralling panic I would get up, shock my mind out of its loop with thirty seconds under a freezing shower, shake like a dog and then go back to whatever I had been doing.



On Friday morning I was a little jumpy, enough that it took me several tries to find an outfit that felt like it sent the right message (sober, repentant, ready to get back to work) – eventually I settled on my dark-grey tweed suit, with a plain white shirt and no tie. All the same, when I knocked on Richard’s door I was feeling fairly confident. Even his curt ‘Come’ didn’t put me on edge.

‘Me,’ I said, putting my head diffidently around the door.

‘I know. Sit down.’

Richard’s office was a riotous nest of carved antelopes, sand dollars, Matisse prints, things he’d picked up on his travels, all precariously balanced on shelves and stacks of books and each other. He was sifting aimlessly through a large pile of papers. I pulled up a chair to his desk, at an angle, like we were going to be looking through brochure proofs together.

He said, when he had waited for me to settle, ‘I don’t need to tell you what this is about.’

Playing innocent would have been a bad mistake. ‘Gouger,’ I said.

‘Gouger,’ Richard said. ‘Yes.’ He picked up a sheet from his pile, gazed at it blankly for a second and let it drop. ‘When did you find out?’

Crossing my fingers that Tiernan had kept his mouth shut: ‘A few weeks ago. Two. Maybe three.’ It had been a lot longer than that.

Richard looked up at me then. ‘And you didn’t tell me.’

Cold undertow in his voice. He was furious, really furious, still; it hadn’t worn off at all. I dialled up the intensity a few notches. ‘I almost did. But by that time, by the time I found out, it had just gone too far, you know? Gouger’s stuff was out there, on the website, it was on the *invitation* – I know for a fact he was the reason the *Sunday Times* said yes, and the ambassador—’ I was talking too fast, gabbling, it made me sound guilty. I slowed down. ‘All I could think was how suspicious it would look if he vanished so close to the show. It could have cast doubt on the whole thing. The whole gallery.’ Richard’s eyes closed for a second against that. ‘And I didn’t want to throw the responsibility onto you. So I just—’

‘It’s on me now. And you’re right, it’s going to look incredibly suspicious.’

‘We can fix it. Honestly. I’ve spent the last three days working it all out. We can have it sorted by the end of today.’ *We, we*: we’re still a team. ‘I’ll get on to all the guests and the critics, explain that we’ve had a slight change in the lineup and we thought they might want to know. I’ll tell them Gouger got cold feet – he thinks his enemies might be sniffing around, he needs to keep a low profile for a while. I’ll say we’re very optimistic that he’ll sort out his personal problems soon and bring his work back to us – we need to keep them hopeful, let them down gradually. I’ll explain that this is a risk you take when you work with people from that kind of background, and while we’re obviously sorry it’s gone wrong, we don’t regret giving him a chance. It would take a monster to have a problem with that.’

‘You’re very good at this,’ Richard said wearily. He took off his glasses and pressed the bridge of his nose between finger and thumb.

‘I need to be. I need to make it up to you.’ He didn’t react. ‘We’ll lose a few of the critics, and maybe a couple of guests, but not enough to matter. I’m pretty sure we’re in time to stop the programme going to press; we can redo the cover, put Chantelle’s sofa assemblage on it—’

‘All of that would have been much easier to do three weeks ago.’

‘I know. I know. But it’s not too late. I’ll talk to the media, make sure they keep it low-key, explain we don’t want to scare him off for good—’

‘Or,’ Richard said. He put his glasses back on. ‘We could send out a press release explaining that we discovered Gouger was an impostor.’

He looked up at me, mild blue eyes magnified and unblinking.

‘Well,’ I said carefully. I was heartened by the ‘we’, but this was a really awful idea and I needed to make sure he got that. ‘We could. But it would almost definitely mean cancelling the whole show. I mean, I suppose I could try to find a way to angle it, maybe highlight the fact that we pulled his work as soon as we knew, but it’s still going to make us look gullible, and that’s going to raise questions about the rest of the—’

‘All right,’ Richard said, turning his face away and raising a hand to stop me. ‘I know all that. We’re not going to do it. God knows I’d love to, but we’re not. Go do the other thing, all the stuff you talked about. Get it done fast.’

‘Richard,’ I said, from the heart. Looking at him, the sudden tide of fatigue dragging at his body, I felt terrible. Richard had always been good to me, he had taken a chance on grass-green me when the other woman at the final interview had had years of experience; if I’d had any idea it would hit him this hard I would never have let things go this far, never— ‘I’m so sorry.’

‘Are you?’

‘God, yes, I am. It was an awful thing to do. I just . . . the pictures are so good, you know? I wanted people to see them. I wanted us to show them. I got carried away. I’ll never make that mistake again.’

‘All right. That’s good.’ He still wasn’t looking at me. ‘Go make your phone calls.’

‘I’ll sort it out. I swear.’

‘I’m sure you will,’ Richard said flatly, ‘now go,’ and he went back to rearranging his pieces of paper.

I took the stairs down to my office at a run, jubilant, already mapping out the storm of speculation and doom-mongering from Gouger’s Twitter followers. Richard was obviously still pissed off with me, but that would wear off once he saw everything fixed and back on track, or at the very latest once the exhibition went off beautifully. It was a shame about Tiernan’s pictures – I couldn’t see any way for them to do anything but moulder in his studio, after this, although I wasn’t ruling out the possibility that I’d come up with something down the line – but he could always make more.

I needed a pint, in fact I needed a few pints; in fact, I needed a full-on night out. I was missing Melissa – we usually spent at least three nights a week together – but what I needed was the guys, the slagging and the impassioned ridiculous debates and one of those endless sessions we hadn’t been having as much lately, where everyone crashes out on someone’s sofa around dawn after eating everything in his fridge. I had some really nice hash at home – I had been tempted to break it out a few times that week, but I didn’t

really like getting drunk or high when things weren't going well, in case it just made me feel worse; so I had saved my stash for the happy-ending celebration, as a gesture of faith that there would be one, and I had been right.

And so: Hogan's, checking out beaches in Fiji on our phones, reaching over now and then to tug on one of Dec's hair plugs ('Fuck off!'). I hadn't been planning on mentioning the week's events, but I was light-headed and bubbling with relief and somewhere around the fifth pint I found myself telling them the whole story, only skipping the late-night flashes of panic – which, in retrospect, had been even sillier than they had felt at the time – and throwing in extra flourishes here and there for laughs.

'You gobshite,' Sean said, at the end, but he was shaking his head and smiling a little wryly. I was slightly relieved; I've always cared about Sean's opinion, and Richard's reaction had left a residue of unease at the back of my mind.

'You are a gobshite,' Dec told me, more pointedly. 'That could've blown up in your face.'

'It did blow up in my face.'

'No. Like properly blown up. Like losing your job. Maybe even getting arrested.'

'Well, it didn't,' I said, irritated – that was the last thing I wanted to think about right then, and Dec should have realised that. 'What world do you live in, anyway, where the cops care whether a picture is by some random nobody in a tracksuit or some random nobody in a fedora?'

'The show could've been shut down. Your boss could've pulled the plug.'

'And he didn't. And even if he had, it wouldn't exactly have been the end of the world.'

'Not for you, maybe. What about the kids doing the art? There they are, pouring their hearts out, and you're taking the piss out of their lives like they're a joke—'

'How was I taking the piss?'

'—their one big chance has finally come along, and you're risking it all for a laugh—'

‘Oh for God’s sake.’

‘If you’d scuppered it, that would’ve been them stuck in the muck, for the rest of their—’

‘What are you talking about? They could have gone to *school*. Instead of spending their time sniffing glue and breaking the wing mirrors off cars. They could have got *jobs*. The recession’s over; there’s no reason for anyone to be stuck in the muck unless they actually choose to be.’

Dec was staring at me, wide-eyed and incredulous, like I’d poked a finger up my nose. ‘You haven’t got a clue, man.’

Dec got into our school on a scholarship; his dad drove a bus and his mother worked in Arnotts and none of them had ever been arrested or addicted, so he had no more in common with the exhibition kids than I did, but occasionally he liked to play up the wrong-side-of-the-tracks angle, when he wanted an excuse to get chippy and self-righteous. He was still in a snit about the hair-plug thing. I could have pointed out that he was living proof that his own sanctimonious bullshit was just that – he wasn’t huddled in a squat huffing shoplifted spray paint, instead he had put in the time and effort and ended up with an excellent IT career, QED – but I wasn’t in the mood for playing along with him, not that night. ‘It’s your round.’

‘You actually haven’t got a clue.’

‘It’s actually your round. Are you going to go up and get it, or do you need me to sub you because of your deprived background?’

He kept up the stare for another moment, but so did I, and eventually he shook his head ostentatiously and went up to the bar. He didn’t even bother dodging the brunette this time, not that she noticed.

‘What the fuck?’ I demanded, when he was out of earshot. ‘What was that all about?’

Sean shrugged. I had brought back a few packets of peanuts with the last round – I hadn’t had dinner, disentangling the Gouger situation had kept me too late at the office – and he had found one with something dubious on it; most of his attention seemed to be on that.

‘I didn’t *hurt* anybody. Nobody got *hurt*. He’s acting like I punched

his *granny*.' I had reached the earnest stage of the night; I was leaning forwards across the table, maybe a little too far forwards, I couldn't tell. 'And anyway look who's talking, for Christ's sake. He's done stupid stuff before. Plenty of times.'

Sean shrugged again. 'He's stressed out,' he said, through the peanut.

'He's always stressed out.'

'He was talking about getting back with Jenna.'

'Oh Jesus,' I said. Jenna was Dec's most recent ex, a noticeably crazy schoolteacher several years older than us who had once rubbed my thigh under a pub table and, when I glanced over astonished, winked at me and stuck her tongue out.

'Yeah. He hates being single, though. He says he's getting too old for first dates and he can't handle all this Tinder crap, and he doesn't want to be the forty-year-old saddo who gets invited to dinner parties out of pity and sat next to the divorced one who spends the whole night bitching about her ex.'

'Well, he doesn't need to take it out on me,' I said. I could in fact see Dec ending up exactly like that, but it would be his own fault if he did, and as far as I was concerned right then, he deserved it.

Sean was settled back in his seat, watching me with an expression that could have been amusement or just mild interest. Sean has always had this air of comfortable detachment, of being – without either effort or smugness – a little more on top of the situation than anyone else. I always vaguely attributed it to the fact that his mother died when he was four – a fact that I regarded with a mixture of recoil, embarrassment and awe – but it could just have been because he was such a big guy: in any situation involving alcohol, Sean was inevitably going to be the least drunk person there.

When he didn't answer: 'What? Do you think I'm some kind of evil Thatcherite Fagin bastard now, too?'

'Honestly?'

'Yeah. Honestly.'

Sean shook the last of the peanut dust into his palm. He said, 'I think it's kid stuff.'

I couldn't work out whether to be insulted or not – was he

dissing my job, reassuring me that this was no big deal, what? ‘What are you talking about?’

‘Fake Twitter accounts,’ Sean said. ‘Imaginary skanger wars. Sneaking stuff in behind the boss’s back, keeping your fingers crossed it’ll all be grand. Kid stuff.’

This time I was genuinely injured, at least a little bit. ‘For fuck’s sake. It’s bad enough Dec giving me hassle. Don’t you start.’

‘I’m not. Just . . .’ He shrugged and upended his glass. ‘I’m getting married in a few months, dude. Me and Audrey, we’re talking about having a baby next year. It’s hard for me to get too excited about you pulling the same old stunts.’ And when I drew my eyebrows down sharply: ‘You’ve done stuff like this ever since I knew you. Got caught sometimes. Sorted it out every time. This is the same old same old.’

‘No. No. This is—’ I made a wide, slicing arm motion that ended in a dramatic finger-snap; it felt like a pure and complete statement in itself, but Sean was still looking at me inquisitively. ‘This is different. From those other times. This is not the same thing. At all.’

‘How is it different?’

I was miffed by this; I knew there was a difference, and I felt it was ungenerous of Sean to demand that I explain it after this many pints. ‘Never mind. Forget I said anything.’

‘I’m not giving you hassle. I’m asking.’

He hadn’t moved, but there was something new and sharpened in his face, an unblinking intentness, as if there was something important he wanted from me; and I felt an obscure urge to explain myself to him after all, explain about Melissa and being twenty-eight and the big firms and getting serious, tell him how occasionally these days – I would never have admitted it in front of Dec, had never mentioned it even to Melissa – I pictured a tall white Georgian house overlooking Dublin Bay, me and Melissa snug under one of her cashmere throws in front of a roaring fire, maybe even two or three little blond kids tumbling with a golden retriever on the hearthrug. A couple of years earlier the image would have given me the screaming heebie-jeebies; now it didn’t actually seem like a bad idea.

I wasn’t really in the right state to describe incipient epiphanies

to Sean – there was no way I could even have pronounced ‘incipient epiphanies’ – but I did my best. ‘OK,’ I said. ‘OK. All the other times you’re talking about, yeah, that was kid stuff. For the laugh, or because I wanted free pizza or a chance at snogging Lara Mulvane. But we’re not kids any more. I know that. I get that. I mean, we’re not like *adult* adults, but we’re definitely heading that way – well, Jesus, who am I telling? I know we were taking the piss out of you there, but honest to God, what you and Audrey have, it’s great. You’re going to be . . .’ I had lost my train of thought. The bar was getting louder and the acoustics couldn’t handle it, all the sounds were blurring into one sourceless stuttering roar. ‘Yeah. And that’s what this was all about, the Gouger thing. That’s what it was *for*. I’m going after the big stuff now. Not free pizza. The real stuff. *That’s* the difference.’

I sat back and looked at Sean hopefully.

‘Right,’ he said, after what felt like half a second too long. ‘Fair enough. Good luck with it, man. I hope you get what you’re after.’

Maybe it was my imagination or the heaving noise all around us, but he sounded remote, almost disappointed, although why? He even looked farther away, as if he had deliberately receded a few steps down some long passageway, although I was pretty sure that had to do with the booze.

The part he didn’t seem to be getting, frustratingly, was that the Gouger stuff really had been precisely about making those changes – the better the show did, the better my chances with those big firms, the better a place I could afford to get with Melissa, and so on and so on – but before I could find a way to articulate that, Dec was back with the pints. ‘Do you know what you are?’ he asked me, setting the glasses down and managing to slop only a bit onto the table.

‘He’s a gobshite,’ Sean said, tossing a beer mat onto the spillage. That sudden gleam of intensity was gone; he was back to his usual placid, easy self. ‘We established that earlier.’

‘No. I’m asking him. Do you know what you are?’

Dec was grinning, but the note had changed; there was an unreliable, staticky glitter to him. ‘I’m a prince among men,’ I said, leaning back spread-legged in my seat and grinning right back at him.



‘There you go.’ He pointed at me triumphantly, like he’d somehow scored. ‘That’s what I’m talking about.’ And when I didn’t take him up on it, he demanded – pulling his stool closer to the table, settling in for the fight – ‘What would’ve happened to me, if I’d pulled a stupid fucking stunt like that at work?’

‘You’d be out on your ear.’

‘I would, yeah. I’d be ringing my mum right now, asking if I could move back home till I got a new gig and could afford rent again. Why aren’t you?’

Sean sighed heavily and sank a good third of his pint. We both knew Dec in this mood: he was going to keep needling away at me more and more aggressively, jab jab jab, till he either got to me or got drunk enough that we had to load him into a taxi and give the driver his address and his fare.

‘Because I’m a charmer,’ I said. Which was sort of true – people tended to like me, and that did tend to get me out of trouble – but it was totally beside the point and I was only saying it to annoy Dec. ‘And you’re not.’

‘Nah nah nah. You know why it is? It’s because you’re not renting. Your parents bought you the gaff.’

‘No they didn’t. They put down the deposit. I pay the mortgage. What the hell does that have to do with—’

‘And if you were really up against it, they’d pay your mortgage for a couple of months. Wouldn’t they?’

‘I haven’t got a clue. I’ve never needed—’

‘Ah, they would. Your ma and da are lovely.’

‘I don’t *know*. And anyway, so what if they would?’

‘So’ – Dec was pointing at me, still smiling, a smile that could have passed for friendly if I hadn’t known better – ‘so that’s why your boss didn’t give you the heave-ho. Because you didn’t go in desperate. You didn’t go in panicking. You went in knowing that, no matter what happened, you’d be grand. And so you were grand.’

‘I was *grand* because I went in there and apologised and told him how I could fix it. And because I’m good at my job and he doesn’t want to lose me.’

‘Just like in school.’ Dec was really into this: leaning over the

table at me, pint forgotten. Sean had taken out his phone and was swiping, checking the news headlines. 'Like when you and me robbed the toupee off Mr McManus. The pair of us did it. The pair of us got spotted. The pair of us got brought in to Armitage. Right? And what happened to us?'

I rolled my eyes. I had no idea, actually; I remembered leaning over banisters to hook the toupee, McManus's panicky bleat fading below us as we hurtled away laughing, toupee swinging from my dad's fishing rod, but I couldn't remember what had happened after that.

'You don't even remember.'

'I don't *care*.'

'I got *suspended*. Three days. You got detention. One day.'

'Are you serious?' I gave him an incredulous stare. I was getting sick of this; the air was leaking out of my shiny happy balloon of relief, and I felt like I deserved to hang on to it for at least one evening, after the week I'd had. 'That was like fourteen *years* ago. You're still pissed off about it?'

Dec was waving a finger at me, shaking his head. 'Not the point. The point is, you got a slap on the wrist and the scholarship kid got a kicking. No, hear me out, I'm talking here' – when I flopped back in my seat, eyes to the ceiling. 'I'm not saying Armitage did that out of badness. I'm saying I went in there petrified that I was going to get kicked out, wind up down the shithole community school. You went in there knowing that even if you were expelled, your ma and da would just find you another lovely school. That's the difference.'

He was getting loud. The brunette was losing interest in me – too much electricity in the air around me, too much hassle, on which I totally agreed with her. 'So,' Dec said. 'What are you?'

'I don't even know what you're *talking* about any more.'

'Get it over with,' Sean said, not glancing up from his phone. 'For fuck's sake.'

Dec said, 'You're a lucky little prick, is what you are. That's all. Just a lucky little prick.'

I was looking for a smart retort when all of a sudden it caught me, warm and buoying and irresistible as a thermal current: he was

right, he was speaking the absolute truth, and it was nothing to get annoyed about, it was pure joy. I took what felt like my deepest breath in days; it came out in a rush of laughter. ‘I am,’ I said. ‘That’s exactly what I am. I am one lucky bastard.’

Dec was eyeing me, not done yet, deciding where to take this next. ‘Amen,’ said Sean, putting his phone down and raising his glass. ‘Here’s to lucky little pricks, and to just plain little pricks,’ and he tilted his glass at Dec.

I started laughing all over again and clinked my glass against his, and after a moment Dec laughed loudest of all and clashed his glass against both of ours, and we went back to arguing over where to go for our holiday.

I’d gone right off the idea of bringing them home with me, though. When Dec was in this mode he got unpredictable as well as aggressive – he wasn’t brave enough to do anything really disastrous, but still, I wasn’t in the mood. Things still felt a bit precarious, wobbly at the joints, as if they shouldn’t be prodded too hard. I wanted to lie back on my sofa and smoke my hash and melt nicely into a giggly puddle, not keep an eye on Dec while he buzzed around my living room collecting things to use in a makeshift game of bowling and I tried not to glance at anything fragile in case it gave him ideas. Deep down I still hold this against him: twenty-eight is old enough to have outgrown that particular brand of stupid crap, and if Dec had managed to do that, he and Sean would have come home with me and and and.

After that things go fuzzy again. The next thing I remember with any clarity is saying goodbye to the guys outside the pub, closing time, loose noisy clumps of people arguing over where to go next, heads bending to cigarette lighters, girls teetering on their heels, yellow-lit taxi signs cruising past – ‘Listen,’ Dec was telling me, with hyperfocused drunken sincerity, ‘no, listen. Joking aside. I’m delighted that it all worked out for you. I am. You’re a good person. Toby, I’m serious, I’m over the moon that it—’ He would have gone on like that indefinitely, only Sean flagged down a taxi and steered Dec into it with a hand between his shoulder blades, and then gave me a nod and a wave and strolled off towards Portobello and Audrey.

I could have taken a taxi, but it was a nice night, still and cool, with a soft easy edge that promised more spring in the morning. I was drunk but not to the point of unsteadiness; home was less than a half-hour walk away. And I was starving; I wanted a takeaway, something spicy and pungent and enormous. I buttoned my overcoat and started walking.

A flame-juggler at the top of Grafton Street whipping up his straggly crowd to a rhythmic clap, drunk guys roaring unintelligible encouragement or distraction. A homeless guy curled in a doorway, wrapped in a blue sleeping bag, out cold through the whole thing. While I walked I rang Melissa; she wouldn't go to bed until we'd had our good-night phone call and I didn't want to keep her up any later, and anyway I couldn't wait till I got home. 'I miss you,' I said, when she answered. 'You're lovely.'

She laughed. 'So are you. Where are you?'

The sound of her voice made me press the phone closer to my ear. 'Stephen's Green. I was in Hogan's with the lads. Now I'm walking home and thinking about how lovely you are.'

'So come over.'

'I can't. I'm drunk.'

'I don't care.'

'No. I'll stink of booze and I'll snore in your ear, and you'll dump me and go off with some smooth-talking billionaire who has a pod machine to purify his blood when he comes home from the pub.'

'I don't know any smooth-talking billionaires. I promise.'

'Oh, you do. They're always there. They just don't swoop until they see their chance. Like mosquitoes.'

She laughed again. The sound of it warmed me all over. I had hardly expected her to sulk or pout or hang up on me for neglecting her, but the ready sweetness of her was another reminder that Dec was right, I was a lucky bastard. I remembered listening with slightly self-congratulatory awe to his stories of elaborate drama with exes, people locking themselves or each other into or out of various unlikely places while everyone sobbed and/or yelled and/or pleaded – none of that stuff would even occur to Melissa. 'Can I come over tomorrow? As soon as I'm human again?'

‘Course! If it’s nice again, we can have lunch out in the garden and fall asleep in the sun and snore together.’

‘You don’t snore. You make happy little purry noises.’

‘Ew. Attractive.’

‘It is. It’s lovely. You’re lovely. Did I mention you’re lovely?’

‘You are drunk, silly.’

‘I told you.’ The real reason I didn’t want to go over to Melissa’s – actually I did want to, very badly, but the reason I wasn’t going to – was, of course, that I was drunk enough that I might find myself telling her about the Gouger episode. I wasn’t worried that she would dump me, or anything extreme like that, but it would have bothered her, and I cared a lot about not bothering Melissa.

I wanted as much of her as I could get before I hung up, though. ‘Who bought the steampunk armchair?’

‘Oh, Toby, I wish you could have seen them! This couple in their forties, all in yacht-club gear, she had one of those stripy Breton tops, you’d never expect— I thought *maybe* a blanket, if the colours weren’t too wild for them, but they went straight for the armchair. I think it must have reminded them of something; they kept looking at each other and laughing, and after about five minutes they decided they didn’t care whether it went with anything else in their house, they had to have it. I love when people are unexpected.’

‘We’ll have to celebrate tomorrow. I’ll bring prosecco.’

‘Yes! Bring the one we had last time, the—’ A yawn caught her off guard. ‘Sorry, it’s not the company! I’m just—’

‘It’s late. You shouldn’t have waited up for me.’

‘I don’t mind. I like saying good night.’

‘Me too. Now go to sleep. I love you.’

‘I love you too. Night-night.’ She blew me a kiss.

‘Night-night.’

For some reason this is the mistake – hardly a mistake, really, what’s wrong with having a few pints on a Friday night after a stressful week, what’s wrong with wanting the girl you love to think the best of you? – this is the choice to which I return over and over, picking at it compulsively as if I could somehow peel it off and throw it away: one less shot of whiskey with the lads, one less pint, a sandwich

at my desk as I re-jigged the exhibition programme, and I would have been sober enough that I would have trusted myself to go over to Melissa's. I've thought about that might-have-been night so much that I know every moment of it: spinning her off her feet in a hug when she opened her door, *Congratulations! I knew you'd do it!*; the soft breathing curl of her in bed, her hair tickling my chin; lazy Saturday brunch in our favourite café, walk by the canal to see the swans, Melissa swinging our clasped hands. I miss it as ferociously as if it were something real and solid and irreplaceable that I somehow managed to mislay and could somehow, if only I knew the trick, salvage and keep safe.

'You didn't hang up.'

'Neither did you.'

'Night-night. Sleep tight.'

'Safe home. Night-night.' Kisses, more kisses.

Baggot Street was silent and near-deserted, long rows of massive Georgian houses, the fabulous wrought-iron whorls of old street-lamps. Smooth tickticktick of bicycle wheels coming up behind me and a tall guy in a trilby skimmed past, sitting very erect with his arms folded neatly across his chest. Two people kissing in a doorway, fall of smooth green hair, ruffle of lilac. I must have picked up Indian food somewhere although I can't imagine where, because the air around me was rich with coriander and fennel, making my mouth water. The street felt warm and strange and very wide, full of some odd coded enchantment. An old man in beard and flat cap doing a shuffling half-dance to himself, fingers spread, among the great trees in the centre divider. A girl across the street walking fast, black coat swirling around her ankles, head down over the phone that shone blue-white in her hand like a fairy-tale jewel. Delicate dusty fanlights, golden glow in a tiny high window. Dark water under the canal bridge, glitter and rush.

I must have made it home without incident – although how do I know, how do I know what was going on just beyond the corner of my eye, who might have been watching from the doorways, what might have detached itself from a shadow to pad soft-footed behind me? But at any rate I must have made it home without anything happening that set off warning bells. I must have eaten my Indian food

and maybe watched something on Netflix (although wouldn't I have been too drunk to bother following a plotline?), or maybe played some Xbox (although that seems unlikely; after the last few days I was sick to death of my Xbox). I must have forgotten to turn on the alarm – in spite of being on the ground floor, I only bothered with it about half the time; the kitchen window was a little loose and if the wind was in the wrong direction it rattled and set the alarm shrieking hysterically, and it wasn't like I lived in some crime-ridden urban jungle. And at some point I must have changed into my pyjamas and gone to bed, and fallen drunkenly and contentedly asleep.

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Something woke me. At first I wasn't sure what; I had a clear memory of a sound, a neat crack, but I couldn't tell whether it had been inside my dream (tall black guy with dreadlocks and a surfboard, laughing, refusing to tell me something I needed to know) or outside. The room was dark, only the faintest streetlamp glow outlining the curtains. I lay still, the last of the dream still cobwebbing my mind, and listened.

Nothing. And then: a drawer sliding open or closed, just on the other side of the wall, in my living room. A soft thud.

The first thing I thought was the guys, Dec sneaking in to mess with me as revenge for the hair-plug thing, one time in college Sean and I had woken him to our bare arses pressed up against his bedroom window, but Dec didn't have a key – my parents had a spare, maybe some surprise but surely they would have waited till morning – Melissa? couldn't wait to see me? but she hated being out alone at night – But some animal part of me knew; I had sat bolt upright, and all the time my heart was laying down a grim relentless beat.

A brief murmur from the living room. Pale swish of a torch-beam past the crack under the bedroom door.

On my bedside table was a candlestick that Melissa had brought over from the shop a few months back, a beautiful thing made to look like the black wrought-iron railings outside old Dublin homes: barley-sugar-twist stem and graceful fleur-de-lys swoops at the top, the centre prong sharpened to hold the candle (stub of melted wax, a night with wine in bed and Nina Simone). I don't remember getting up but I was

on my feet with both hands wrapped tight around the candlestick, testing the heft of it and feeling my way softly towards the bedroom door. I felt like an idiot, when obviously nothing bad was happening, I would terrify poor Melissa, Dec would never let me live this down—

The door to the living room was half open, a beam of light wavering through the darkness inside. I smashed the door back with the candlestick and slapped the light switch, and the room flared into brightness so that it was a blinking half-second before I could see.

My living room, espresso cup from that morning still on the coffee table, papers strewn on the floor beneath open drawers, and two men: both with tracksuit tops pulled up high over their mouths and baseball caps pulled down low over their eyes, both frozen in mid-motion to stare at me. One was turned towards my open patio door, hunched clumsily around my laptop; the other was stretching up behind my TV, reaching for the wall mount, his torch still poised in the other hand. They so clearly and utterly didn't belong there that they looked ludicrous, superimposed, a bad Photoshop job.

After the first stunned instant I yelled, 'Get out!' The outrage slammed through my whole body like rocket fuel, I'd never felt anything like it, the sheer nonchalant audacity of these scumbags coming into my home— *'Out! Get the fuck out! Out!'*

Then I realised they weren't running for the door and after that things get a bit confused, I don't know who moved first but all of a sudden the guy with the torch was halfway across the floor to me and I was launching myself at him. I think I got in a pretty good crack to his head with the candlestick, that at least, but our momentum threw us both off balance and we grappled at each other to stay standing. He stank, body odour and something strange and milky – I sometimes still catch a whiff of it in a shop and find myself gagging before I understand why. He was stronger than I had expected, wiry and twisting, he had me by the candlestick arm and I couldn't get another swing – I was jamming short furious punches into his stomach but I didn't have room to get any force behind them, we were pressed too close, stumbling. His thumb stabbed into my eye and I yelled and then something hit me in the jaw, blue-white light splintered everywhere and I was falling.

I landed on my back on the floor. My eyes and nose were



streaming, my mouth was filling with blood and I spat a mouthful, my tongue was on fire. Someone shouting, *stupid cunt you*— I was up on my elbows and pushing myself backwards away from them with my feet *think you're fucking great* and trying to pull myself up by the arm of the sofa and

Someone was kicking me in the stomach. *I'll fucking burst you*— I managed to roll away, retching in great raw heaves, but the kicks kept coming, into my side now, solid and systematic. There was no pain, not exactly, but there was something else, worse, a hideous jarring sense of wrongness. I couldn't breathe. I realised with a terrible detached clarity that I might die, that they needed to stop right now or it would be too late, but I couldn't find the breath to tell them this one unbearably important thing

I tried to scabble away, flat on my stomach, fingers clawing uselessly. A kick to my arse driving my face further into the carpet, and another and another. A man's laugh, high and amped up and triumphal.

From somewhere:

—*anyone else*—?

*Nah or they'd*

*Have a look.* —*girlfriend*—

The laugh again, that laugh, with a new avidity driving it. *Ah yeah man.*

I couldn't remember whether Melissa was there or not. On a fresh wave of terror I tried to push myself up off the ground but I couldn't, my arms were weak as ribbons, every breath was a thick ragged snuffle through blood and snot and carpet fibres. The kicking had stopped; the hugeness of the relief washed away the last of my strength.

Scraping sounds, grunts of effort. The candlestick, rolled away under an overturned chair. I couldn't even think about reaching for it but somehow it clicked a piece into place in my jumbled brain, *night-night sleep tight*, Melissa safe at her place, thank God— The light jabbing my eyeballs. Crash of tumbling objects, again, again. The green geometric pattern of my curtains, stretching upwards at an unfamiliar angle, fading and clearing and fading

*That's it*

—has any—  
—fuck it. Go  
Hang on is he?

A blur of dark moving closer. A sharp jab to my ribs and I balled up, coughing, pawing feebly against the next kick, but it didn't come. Instead a gloved hand came down into view and curled around the candlestick, and I had just time to wonder dizzily why they would want that before a vast soundless explosion blotted out the air and everything was gone, everything.

•

I don't know how long I was out. None of the next part holds together; all I have is isolated moments, framed like slides and with the same lucent, untethered quality, nothing in between them but blackness and the harsh click of one rotating away as the next drops into place.

Rough carpet against my face and pain everywhere; the pain was astounding, breathtaking, but that didn't seem particularly important or even particularly connected to me, what mattered the terrifying part was that I was blind, utterly, I couldn't

click

trying to push myself up from the floor but my arms were juddering like a seizure, went from under me and face-first onto the carpet

click

lunatic swipes and dabbles of red on white fabric, rich metallic reek of blood

click

on hands and knees, vomiting, warm liquid spilling onto my fingers

click

ragged blue chunks of china, scattered (in retrospect I figure these must have been the remnants of my espresso cup but at the time my mind wasn't working that way, nothing had any meaning or any essence, nothing was anything except there)

click

crawling through an endless field of debris that shifted and crackled, my knees slipping, the edges of my vision seething

click

the corridor, stretching away for miles, brown and beige and pulsing. A flick of movement far far away at the end, something white

holding myself up against the wall, staggering forwards jerkily as if all my joints had been unstrung. A terrible cawing noise coming from somewhere, rhythmic and impersonal; I tried desperately to speed up, to get away before it could attack, but I couldn't break out of nightmare slow-motion and it was still there, in my ears, at my back, all around me (and now of course I'm pretty sure it was my own breathing, but at the time etcetera etcetera)

click

brown wood, a door. Scrabbling at it, grate of my fingernails, a hoarse moaning that wouldn't form into words

click

a man's voice urgently demanding something, a woman's face skewed with horror, mouth wide, pink quilted dressing gown, and then one of my legs went liquid and the blindness came roaring back in and I disappeared.

## 2

After that came a long period – about forty-eight hours, as far as I can reconstruct events – where nothing made much sense. Obviously there are big dark patches where I was out cold, and I'm unpleasantly aware that I'm unlikely ever to know exactly what went on during those. I did ask my mother once, but she got a white, tight look around her mouth and said, 'I can't, Toby,' and that was the end of that.

Even when I started to wake up off and on, my memories are dislocated fragments arranged in no particular order. People barking at me, demanding things from me; sometimes I tried to do what they wanted – *squeeze my hand*, I remember, and *open your eyes* – to make them happy so they would leave me alone, but sometimes I just ignored them and eventually they went away again. My mother slumped in a plastic chair, silver-blond hair straggling loose and a green cardigan falling off one shoulder. She looked terrible and I wanted to put an arm around her and tell her that everything would be fine, she was getting wound up over nothing, all I had done was jump out of my grandparents' tree and break my ankle; I wanted to make her laugh till her slim rigid shoulders relaxed, but all I could manage was a clumsy grunting sound that sent her hurtling from the chair towards me, mouth stretched wide, *Toby oh sweetheart can you*— and then more darkness. My hand, with a chunky, shocking arrangement of needle and tube and bandage attached to the back of it, embedded deep in my flesh like some grotesque parasite. My father leaning against a wall, unshaven and baggy-eyed, blowing into a paper cup. There was an animal pacing silently back and forth in front of him, a long-muscled tan creature that looked like some kind of wild dog, maybe a jackal, but I couldn't focus on it properly enough to be sure; my dad didn't seem to have noticed it and it occurred to me that maybe I should warn him, but that would have

felt silly when quite possibly he had brought the animal himself, to cheer me up, which it wasn't really doing but maybe later it was going to curl up on the bed with me and that would do something about the pain— The pain was so huge and diffuse that it felt like an element intrinsic to the air, something to be taken for granted because it had always been there and would never go away. And yet it's not what I remember most vividly when I think of those first couple of days, not the pain; what I remember is the sensation that I was being methodically pulled apart into gobbets, body and mind, as easily as a wet tissue, and that there was nothing at all I could do to resist.

When the parts of me actually managed to reassemble themselves, tentatively and to whatever extent and in whatever form, it was night. I was flat on my back in an uncomfortable bed in an unfamiliar room, some part of which was partitioned off by a long pale curtain. I was much too hot. My lips were parched; my mouth felt like it was lined with dried clay. One of my hands was tethered to a tube that ran upwards into shadow. Window blinds ticked fitfully in a draught; a machine beeped faintly and regularly.

It occurred to me, gradually, that I must be in a hospital. This seemed like a good idea, given the kind of pain I was in. Just about everything hurt. The epicentre seemed to be a spot just behind my right temple; it felt full to bursting with a dark, hideous, liquid throbbing that made me too afraid to put up my hand and feel it.

The rush of sheer terror, once started, wouldn't stop. My heart was racing so frantically that I thought I might be having a heart attack; I was panting like a runner and every breath flared pain through my left side, which set the terror rising even more wildly. I knew there had to be a button somewhere nearby that I could press for a nurse, but I couldn't afford to do that: what if she gave me something that knocked me out, and I never managed to struggle back up again?

I lay very still for a long time, gripping fistfuls of bedsheet and fighting not to scream. Thin stripes of grey light slid between the slats of the window blinds. Somewhere beyond the curtain a woman was crying, quietly and terribly.

At the heart of the fear was the fact that I had no idea how I had

got there. I remembered something about Hogan's and Sean and Dec, walking home, phone kisses to Melissa or had that been another night? and then nothing. If someone had tried to kill me – and it certainly felt like they had, and had come pretty close to getting the job done – then what was to stop them coming after me in here, what was to stop them being behind the curtain right now? Sore, weak, shaking, staked down by tubes and God knew what else, I wasn't going to be much use against a merciless determined killer— The blinds clicked, and a spasm of fear nearly shot me out of the bed.

I don't know how long I lay there, trawling doggedly and desperately through the ragged shards of my mind. The woman in the other bed was still crying, which was at least slightly reassuring: as long as she kept going, I could be fairly sure there was no one creeping up on her side of the curtain. I was pretty close to tears myself by the time I finally managed to come up with one image: my living room, sudden blaze of light, two men frozen and staring at me.

Maybe this sounds strange, but it came as a huge relief. Burglars had beaten me up: it could happen to anyone, and now it was over and I was safe; they were hardly going to track me down in hospital to finish the job. All I had to do was lie there and get better.

Slowly my heart rate calmed. I think I even smiled, through it all, into the dark. That's how convinced I was, you see, how utterly and blessedly certain, that it was all over.

•

In the morning a doctor came to see me. I was awake, more or less – the noise level out in the corridor had been building for a while, brisk voices, footsteps, the sinister rumble of trolley wheels – but I could tell from the pale, head-cracking blast of light through the window that it was early. Behind the curtain someone was telling the woman in the other bed, with the cool, heavily emphasised firmness you would use on someone else's tantrumming toddler, 'You'll just have to accept that everything we've done has been within best-practice guidelines.'

I must have made some sound, because there was a rustle off to the side and a voice said gently, 'Toby.'

I flinched, sending pain crashing everywhere, but it was my father: leaning forwards in a chair, rumpled and red-eyed. ‘Toby, it’s me. How are you feeling?’

‘OK,’ I said blurrily. Actually I was feeling a lot less Zen than I had when I went to sleep. Everything hurt even worse, which wasn’t supposed to be happening; I was supposed to be getting better, and the possibility that things might not be that straightforward set the panic scritch-scratching at the edges of my mind again. I managed to get up the courage to touch two fingertips gingerly to the spot behind my right temple, but it seemed to be covered in a thick pad of gauze, which didn’t tell me anything useful, and the movement ratcheted up the pain another notch or two.

‘Do you want anything? A drink of water?’

What I wanted was something to put over my eyes. I was trying to pull together the focus to ask for it when one edge of the curtain twitched aside.

‘Good morning,’ said the doctor, putting his head through the gap. ‘How are you today?’

‘Oh,’ I said, struggling to sit up and wincing. ‘OK.’ My tongue was about twice its usual thickness, and sore on one side. I sounded like some bad actor playing handicapped.

‘Are you feeling well enough to talk?’

‘Yeah. Yes.’ I wasn’t, but I urgently needed to know what the fuck was going on.

‘Well, that’s a big step,’ the doctor said, closing the curtain behind him and nodding to my father. ‘Let me give you a hand there.’ He fiddled with something and the head of my bed lifted, with a displeased wheezing sound, so that I was half-sitting. ‘How’s that?’

The movement made my vision swoop and dip like I was on a fairground ride. ‘Good,’ I said. ‘Thanks.’

‘Good good.’ He was a young guy, only a few years older than me; tall, with a round, bland face and a receding hairline. ‘I’m Dr Coogan’ – or it may have been Cregan or Duggan or something totally unrelated, who knows. ‘Can you tell me your name?’

Just the fact that he was asking, like I might actually not know, was disturbing. It brought back a churning flash of chaos, loud

voice snapping in my ear, bright light swinging and bouncing, my whole body convulsing with dry retches— ‘Toby Hennessy.’

‘Mm-hm.’ He pulled over a chair and sat down. He was holding a sheaf of cryptic-looking paper that I assumed was my chart, whatever that meant. ‘Do you know what month it is?’

‘April.’

‘It is indeed. Do you know where you are?’

‘In a hospital.’

‘Right again.’ He made some kind of note on the chart. ‘How are you feeling?’

‘OK. Kind of sore.’

He glanced up at that. ‘Where’s the pain?’

‘My head. It’s pretty bad.’ This was an understatement – my head was pounding so hideously that it felt like my brain was actually rocking with the force of every heartbeat – but I didn’t want him to go off in search of painkillers and leave me without any explanations. ‘And my face. And my side. And’ – I couldn’t think of the doctor-appropriate term for ‘right above my arse’, I knew there was one but it wouldn’t come out – ‘here?’ The movement pulled an involuntary noise out of me.

The doctor nodded. He had small, clear, shallow eyes, like a toy’s. ‘Yes. Your tailbone is cracked, and so are four of your ribs. There’s nothing we can do to help with those, but they should all heal on their own with no lasting damage; nothing to worry about. And I can certainly get you something for the pain.’ He held out a finger. ‘Can you squeeze my finger?’

I did. His finger was long and a bit chubby and very dry, and there was something nasty about touching it that intimately.

‘Mm-hm. And with the other hand?’

I did it again with the other hand. I didn’t need medical training to tell the difference: my right hand felt the same as always; my left had a dreamlike cotton-wool quality that terrified me. My grip was soft as a child’s.

I glanced up at the doctor, but he gave no sign that he’d noticed anything. ‘Very good.’ He made another note. ‘May I?’

He was indicating the bedsheet. ‘Sure,’ I said, disorientated. I had



no idea what he wanted to do. My father was watching in silence, elbows on his knees, fingers steepled in front of his mouth.

The doctor flipped back the sheet, expertly, revealing my bare legs – I had a couple of ugly bruises – and the rucked-up skirt of the hospital gown, which was a greying white with a discreetly perky print of little blue diamonds. ‘Now,’ he said, placing the palm of his hand to the bottom of my foot. ‘Can you point your foot against my hand?’

Flex, extend, other foot, left weaker than the right again, although not as badly, surely the difference wasn’t as big— There was something horrifying about being exposed and handled so efficiently and impersonally. He was acting like my body was meat, not attached to a person at all. It took all my willpower not to jerk my foot away from his hand.

‘Good,’ he said. ‘Now I want you to lift your leg against the pressure of my hand. All right?’

He tweaked my gown straight and put a flat palm on my thigh. ‘Wait,’ I blurted out. ‘What’s wrong with me?’

I half-expected him to slap me down like he had the woman in the other bed, but she must have just been neurotic or a pain in the arse or something, because instead he took his hand off my leg and sat back in the chair. ‘You were attacked,’ he said gently. ‘Do you have any memory of it?’

‘Yes. Not all of, the whole thing, but— I mean, that’s not what I mean. Do I have a, a—’ I couldn’t come up with the word. ‘My head. Did they break it? Or what?’

‘You were hit in the head at least twice. Once probably with a fist, here’ – he pointed to the left side of his jaw – ‘and once with a heavy sharp object, here.’ That spot behind my right temple. I heard a tight breath from my father. ‘You had a concussion, but that seems to have resolved well. You also have a skull fracture, which caused an extradural haematoma – that’s a bleed between the skull and the outer covering of the brain, caused by a ruptured blood vessel. Don’t worry’ – I wasn’t really following a lot of this, but at that my eyes must have widened, because he raised one hand reassuringly – ‘we corrected that surgically, as soon as you came in. We drilled a small

hole in your skull and drained the blood, and that relieved the pressure on your brain. You were very lucky.'

Some vague part of me felt that this was a fairly outrageous thing to say to someone in my situation, but a bigger part seized on the comfort of it – lucky, yes, I was lucky, the guy was a doctor after all, he knew what he was talking about, I didn't want to be like the whiny woman in the other bed. 'I guess,' I said.

'You were indeed. You had what we call a lucid interval, after the attack. It's fairly common with this kind of injury. We're estimating that you were unconscious for an hour or more, due to the concussion, but then you came to and were able to call for help before you lost consciousness again?'

He blinked at me inquiringly. 'I guess,' I said again, after a confused moment. I couldn't remember calling anyone. I still couldn't remember much of anything, actually, just dark seething flashes that made me not want to look too closely.

'Very lucky,' the doctor repeated, leaning forwards to make sure I understood the seriousness of this. 'If you hadn't managed to get help, and the haematoma had been left untreated for another hour or so, it would almost certainly have been fatal.' And when I stared at him blankly, unable to do anything at all with that: 'You nearly died.'

'Oh,' I said, after a moment. 'I didn't realise.'

We looked at each other. It felt like he was waiting for something from me, but I had no idea what. The woman in the other bed was crying again.

'Now what?' I asked, managing to keep most of the fluttering panic out of my voice. 'I mean, my hand. My leg. Are they going to—? When are they going to—?'

'Too soon to know any of that,' the doctor said briskly. He wasn't looking at me any more, he was doing something with his notes, and that made the panic surge higher. 'The neurologist will be around to have a—'

'I just want a, a, a—' I couldn't come up with the word, and I was afraid this was where he would put on that toddler-quelling voice and tell me to stop asking questions and behave myself—

‘We understand you can’t give us any guarantees,’ my father said, quietly but firmly. ‘We’d just like a general idea of what to expect.’

After a moment the doctor nodded and folded his hands on top of the notes. ‘There’s often some damage after an injury like this,’ he said. ‘Yours seems to be relatively minor, although I can’t say anything definitive based on a bedside assessment. One common effect is seizures, so you’ll have to be watchful for those, but they usually peter out over time. We’ll be referring you to a physical therapist who can help with the left-side weakness, and there are occupational therapists available if you find yourself having trouble with concentration or memory.’ His tone was so matter-of-fact and reasonable that he actually had me nodding along, like all of this – *seizures, occupational therapist*, stuff straight out of some melodramatic medical show light-years away from my real life – was perfectly normal. Only some tiny peripheral part of me began to understand, with a sickening drop, that this was in fact my real life now. ‘You can expect most of the improvement to come over the next six months, but it can continue for up to two years. The neurologist will . . .’

He kept talking, but out of nowhere I was swamped by a tidal wave of exhaustion. His face doubled and blurred to nonsense; his voice receded into a faraway meaningless gabble. I wanted to tell him that I needed those painkillers now please, but summoning up the energy to talk seemed impossibly hard, too much for anyone to expect of anyone, and the pain went with me down into a thick treacherous sleep.

•

I was in the hospital for just under two weeks. It wasn’t that bad, all things considered. The evening of my chat with the doctor, they (apologetically, with some autopilot mumble about overcrowding) found me a single room, which was a relief: the neurotic woman in the other bed kept crying and it was starting to grate on me, drill its way into my dreams. The new room was bright and airy and quiet, and I gave myself a mental pat on the back for having good health insurance even though I hadn’t expected to need it for decades.

I did a lot of sleeping, and when I was awake there was usually someone with me. During the day it was mostly my mother, who had ditched work and thrown everything into the department's lap – she teaches eighteenth-century history at Trinity – as soon as she got the phone call. She brought me things: a fan because the room was mercilessly hot, endless bottles of water and juice and Lucozade because I needed to stay hydrated, art postcards and bunches of tulips, snacks I had liked as a kid (Monster Munch, cheesy popcorn that smelled violently of vomit), cards from my aunts and uncles, a baffling assortment of books, a pack of cards, a hipstery Lego-plated Rubik's Cube. I touched almost none of it and within a few days the room was getting a weird overgrown look, as if random stuff was popping up on every available surface through spontaneous generation and sooner or later the nurses would find me buried under a heap of cupcakes and an accordion.

I'd always got along well with my mother. She's smart and spiky and funny, with a keen sense of beauty and a lovely, expansive capacity for happiness, someone I would have liked even if we weren't related. Even when I was a mildly rebellious teenager, my fights (standard-issue stuff, why can't I stay out later and it's so unfair that you give me hassle about homework) had been with my father, almost never with her. Since I'd moved out of home I had rung her a couple of times a week, met her for lunch every month or two, out of genuine affection and enjoyment, not duty; I picked up odd little presents for her now and then, texted her funny things Richard said that I knew she would appreciate. Even the look of her warmed me, her long-legged unselfconscious stride with coat flapping, the wide fine arcs of her eyebrows quirking together and up and down in tandem with whatever story I was telling. So it came as a nasty surprise to both of us when her hospital visits drove me crazy.

For one thing she couldn't keep her hands off me: one of them was always stroking my hair or resting on my foot or finding my hand among the bedclothes, and even aside from the pain I was finding that I loathed being touched, so intensely that sometimes I couldn't stop myself from jerking away. And she kept wanting to

talk about that night – how was I feeling? (Fine.) Did I want to talk about it? (No.) Did I have any idea who the men had been, had they followed me home, maybe they'd spotted me in the pub and realised my coat was expensive and— At this stage I spent most of the time foggily but firmly convinced that the break-in had been Gouger and one of his Borstal buddies, getting revenge on me for having him booted out of the exhibition, but I was still much too confused about the whole thing to explain it to my mother even if I had wanted to. I retreated into grunts that got ruder and ruder until she backed off, but an hour later she would circle back to it, unable to help herself – Was I sleeping all right? Was I having nightmares? Did I remember much?

The real problem, I suppose, was that my mother was badly shaken up. She put a lot of willpower into covering it, but I knew the artificial, over-calm cheerfulness from childhood crises (*OK, sweetheart, let's get the blood cleaned off so we can see whether you need to go to Dr Mairéad for the blue glue! Maybe she'll have stickers again!*) and it set my teeth on edge. Occasionally the façade slipped and a terrible, raw horror showed through, and that sent me into paroxysms of sheer fury: obviously she had had a bad couple of days, but now I was out of danger and she had nothing to worry about, her hands were both working perfectly, her vision wasn't stuttering and doubling, nobody was giving her speeches about occupational therapy, what the hell was her problem?

All I wanted to do, almost the moment I saw her, was pick a fight. Whatever else the head injury had done, it didn't stop me doing that – on the contrary: most of the time I could just about form simple sentences, but going on the attack seemed to unleash a new and ugly fluency. All it took was one misstep from my mother, one phrase or look that flicked me on the raw – and even at gunpoint I couldn't have justified why certain things counted as missteps, but they did – and we were off.

'I brought you peaches. Will you have one now? I can wash them in the—'

'No. Thanks. I'm not hungry.'

'Well' – dialling up the cheery note, bending to rummage in the