



DEV HENDRICK was lying in the dark on the sofa, laptop propped on his belly, asleep or almost asleep, earbuds bleeding white noise into his ears when his phone buzzed three times on the coffee table and stopped.

He felt the vibrations more than he heard them. He sat up, snapped shut his laptop and put it on the coffee table. The white noise in his earbuds died. He reached for his phone and knew the number before he even checked the screen. Three buzzes meant: *we are here*. He pulled the buds from his ears, cocked his head to listen into the empty night and then he heard it, the familiar noise of the car crawling up the drive, the low burr of the engine, the bubble-wrap crackle of wheels turning slow on gravel.

There was a near-empty bottle of Corona on the table. He drank off the dregs. The Corona was flat and citrus-sour, a wilted wedge of lime curled like a drowned bug in the bottom of the bottle.

The dog, Georgie, snoozing away on the battered red wingback chair, stirred and came awake with a startled yelp.

‘Shush now,’ Dev said.

Georgie was a tiny, highly strung dog with a candyfloss coat covering a ribcage as fragilely fine-boned as a chicken’s. He had demonic yellow teeth, a wizened, rat-like face and a moist, bloodshot, perpetually beseeching stare that half the time made Dev want to punt the thing over the garden wall. Not that Georgie ventured outdoors much any more; ageing, ill-tempered and increasingly unintrepid, the dog preferred the cosily cluttered terrain of the sitting room, where he spent his days mooching from cushioned niche to niche and staring at the TV like an old woman.

Georgie yelped again.

‘Stop now, will you?’ Dev said, raising his voice enough to draw a chastened gurgle from Georgie.

Dev and Georgie had never much got on, but ever since the mother died and the dog had come to the realisation that Dev was now the sole source of sustenance and what would thereafter pass for companionship available in the house, Georgie had developed, if not an affection, at least a grudging receptivity to Dev’s commands, so long as those commands were delivered with sufficient emphasis and contempt. Georgie respected only emphasis and contempt, at least from Dev.

Dev slipped on his Crocs and lumbered into the hallway. An icy diagonal of light had pierced the front door’s glass panel, illuminating the hall’s green-and-gold wallpaper and the musty foliage of the mother’s old overcoats piled up on the coat rack.

Dev drew back the latch and opened the door. The

sensor light had come on, flooding the drive with brightness. Rain flurried like sparks in the light. Drops touched Dev's face and stuck. The car's engine cut off and the headlights went dark. Dev watched his cousin Gabe Ferdia step out of the driver door and a moment later Gabe's younger brother Sketch stepped out of the back and helped, or rather dragged, a third person out onto the drive. The third person was a kid, a pale-faced young fella.

'Some night for it,' Gabe declared.

'Are you fucking kidding me?' Dev said.

'I'm afraid not,' Gabe said, squinting beleagueredly against the flurrying rain and smiling slyly out of his long, thin face. 'You going to let us in or what?'

The three stood there in the rain, waiting on Dev.

'Come in,' Dev said.

Sketch shoved the kid in the back to get him moving. He was wearing only one sneaker and carrying the second in his hand, obliging him to hop a little on his socked foot across the drive's stony gravel. When the kid was close enough, Dev could see that his face was marked, a dark nick, too fresh to have scabbed, lining the rim of one eye. The boy gazed expressionlessly up at the house, then Dev.

'Nah,' he said.

'Yeah,' Gabe said.

'No fucking way,' the kid said.

He stood in place until Sketch shoved him again. The kid stumbled in over the threshold. Sketch and Gabe came in after him. Dev latched the door as the brothers marched the kid down the hall.

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When Dev joined them in the kitchen they had put the kid in a chair by the table. The runner was up on the table, next to the butter dish. Sketch was standing behind the kid with his hands on his shoulders. Gabe had removed and was holding up his jacket, a black bomber with the legend TEQUILA PATROL embossed in gold lettering on the back. With a practised flourish he snapped the jacket, once, in the air, sending the loosest droplets of rain flying from the fabric, then draped it neatly across a chair back. He popped the fridge and began fishing out bottles of Corona, placing four of them in a row on the counter.

The kid looked fifteen, sixteen. His face was pale, blue-tinged as raw milk in a bucket. He was clean-shaven and if it wasn't for the missing runner and the nasty notch over the corner of his eye, he would have looked like any young fella you'd see shaping around the town on a Friday night, punctiliously spruced for the disco; short black hair brushed emphatically forward, and so sodden with rain and product it gleamed like melted tar, the top button of his baby-blue shirt closed clerically at the throat, dark jeans and the scouring bang of aftershave crawling off him like a fog.

'Your foot must be wringing,' Dev said.

'What?' the kid said.

'I said your foot must be wringing.'

The kid looked at his foot. He looked at Dev.

'Such a size of a cunt,' he said.

A hot current ran through Dev. He heard the Ferdias chuckle.

'Dev's a godly sized unit all right,' Gabe said as he

worked the tops off the Coronas. The depressurising hiss and pop of each bottle cap – pop, pop, pop, pop – overlapped with the tinny clinking of the caps as they bounced on the counter and two rolled off the counter's edge and clinked a second time on the floor.

'The *lambs* on him,' Sketch said, 'like excavator buckets.'

Dev looked down at his dangling hands. It was true. They were massive, as was Dev. When he was on his own, which he mostly was now, he forgot about his size. When other people appeared, they were quick to remind him. A lad who grew beyond a certain limit, beyond certain proportions: people just never got used to it.

'You know this fella?' Gabe asked the kid.

The kid shrugged.

'Never seen him about in Ballina?'

'I'd nearly recall a cunt that huge if I had. Is he seven foot tall?'

'Oh, he's not far off it,' Gabe said, 'but Dev is deceptive. Big as he is, he leaves an awful dainty mark on the world. You'd barely know he was there half the time.'

The kid looked at Dev and seemed to be weighing in his mind the possible veracity of Gabe's remark.

'I want my phone,' he said.

'Never mind about your phone, kid,' Gabe said.

'Here, you, big man,' the kid said to Dev, 'have you the lend of a phone?'

'Phone's out of the equation,' Sketch said, jabbing the kid on the shoulder.

'Dev, let me introduce you to Doll English,' Gabe said. 'Doll, this is Dev.'

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‘I shouldn’t be here,’ Doll said.

‘That’s not a problem,’ Gabe said patiently. ‘Dev doesn’t mind, do you, Dev?’

Dev shook his head.

‘We were thinking you might crash here tonight,’ Gabe continued.

‘No fucking way,’ the kid said.

‘A bit of manners, now,’ Gabe said and looked at Dev. ‘That’d be all right, wouldn’t it?’

‘If you’re vouching for him,’ Dev said.

‘One hundred per cent we’re vouching for him,’ Gabe said. He grabbed a Corona from the counter. ‘You can have this,’ he said, extending the bottle to the kid, ‘*if* you’re going to sit here and drink it and be civil.’

‘Dev here knows Cillian,’ Sketch said. ‘Everyone here knows your brother.’

Mention of his brother seemed to placate the kid. He accepted the bottle. Gabe passed a bottle to Sketch, offered the remaining one to Dev.

‘I’m OK,’ Dev said.

‘Go on,’ Gabe said, pressing the bottle into Dev’s hand.

Gabe took a drink. Doll English took a drink. Sketch took a drink.

Dev took a drink, worked the sizzle of bubbles around his mouth and swallowed.

Sketch Ferdia was twenty-five or so, a couple of years older than Dev. He was a handsome unit with the slick, thirty-euro hairdo of a Premier League footballer and the curated muscle of a gym freak, his big tattooed arms so

lavishly lettered and illustrated they looked like the pages of a medieval manuscript. He had a conceited right-angled jaw, moody blue eyes and a propensity for clouting shams in the head the second he decided it was warranted.

Gabe, by contrast, was skin and bone. He was touching forty but looked ten years older again, with a face on him like a vandalised church, long and angular and pitted, eyes glinting deep in their sockets like smashed-out windows. His was the face of a man who had come through some terrible and consuming privation, and Gabe had, sort of. For the best part of a decade he had shot heroin, with the needle and the strap and the whole shebang, a dedicated feat to pull off this far out in the sticks, because heroin was not an available or popular drug in the West. Dev did not touch anything stronger than beer but he knew that the pharmaceutical tastes of the average Mayoite tended away from those substances that encouraged narcosis, introversion and melancholy – traits the natives already possessed in massive hereditary infusions – in favour of uppers; addys and coke and speed; drugs designed to rev your pulse and blast you *out* of your head.

Gabe had been an exception in this regard. He did finally quit the heroin a couple of years back, but only after he managed to overdose at three separate house parties in the span of a single summer, each time winding up in Castlebar emergency. On two of those occasions, he claimed his heart had stopped altogether – he had been clinically dead – and had to be jolted back to life with those electric paddles to the chest you see in the movies. And though he had since reacquainted himself with certain habits Gabe took a



drink, took a smoke, and would take a hit of a joint if a joint was going – he still considered himself clean because he was off the heroin, and if that distinction was sufficient to meet the man's definition of clean, well, fair enough so, was Dev's opinion.

'Dev here's a Muredach's boy, too,' Sketch said.

Muredach's was the boys' secondary school in Ballina town. Cillian English and Sketch had been a couple of years ahead of Dev. Sketch had never said two words to Dev back then, was nowhere to be seen when things had begun to go bad for him.

'Cillian was a hellion but he had a brain in his head,' Sketch said. 'Honours classes until he was expelled, fair play to him. I'd say you were as bad as me, Dev. Pass everything.'

Dev bristled at Sketch's remark but said nothing. Everyone's assumption was that Dev was thick, for three reasons. One, because he was big, and people thought if you were big, you must be some kind of oaf. Two, because he tended not to say much, and people thought that if you didn't say much you mustn't have much to say. And three, because, yes, Dev had been in all pass classes and had not even finished school, but none of that had anything to do with how smart he was.

Dev was watching the kid. Doll's face wasn't giving much away, his expression stony and remote, staring impassively at the bottle of Corona he was holding between his legs. He cleared his throat.

'Whatever's between you boys and Cillian has nothing

to do with me,' he said in a low voice, not looking up as he said it.

Dev heard a pattering in the hall and Georgie came racing around the corner and into the kitchen. The little dog stopped dead in his tracks, sized up the three new presences in the house and commenced barking, in apoplectic recognition, at Gabe's shins.

'Hello yourself, you bollocks,' Gabe chided.

'Settle down now, Georgie,' Dev said.

Georgie ceased barking and looked around again, nose in the air. After another moment's deliberation the dog approached Doll's foot, sniffed and began zestfully licking at the toe of his wet sock.

Doll sat up in his seat. Slowly, as if the action had nothing to do with him, he lifted his foot and for a second Dev thought he might do something awful, like stomp straight down on Georgie, but he only began to nudge, gently and insistently, at the dog's flank with his toe. And Georgie, instead of taking fright or protesting, rolled over onto his back, exposing the pale pink flesh of his underbelly, the livid seam and knotted grey stub where his poor old ball-bag used to be. Doll settled the sole of his foot on Georgie's belly and began briskly rocking him back and forth, coaxing a bout of hoarse, satiated panting from the little beast.

'That dog likes you,' Gabe said to Doll. 'And that dog don't like nobody.'

'That dog don't like me,' Dev said.

'Just let me call the mother,' Doll said. 'She'll be worrying.'

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‘It’s two in the morning, buck,’ Sketch said, ‘your mother’s sound asleep in her *leaba*.’

‘She’s not a good sleeper. The head does be at her.’

‘All the more reason not to bother her at this hour,’ Sketch said.

Doll stooped forward in his chair to get a better look at Georgie.

‘What breed of dog is this?’

‘It’s the mother’s dog,’ Dev said.

‘The mother,’ Doll said. He showed Georgie his palms, and Georgie, to Dev’s astonishment, jumped up and scrambled into the kid’s lap, the way Dev had only ever seen him do with the mother. ‘I’ll ask her so.’

‘You can’t do that.’

‘Cos she’s dead,’ Doll said.

Dev felt his face flush.

Doll began brushing flat the soft quivering triangles of Georgie’s ears. Georgie tried to lick the kid’s face. With each curling dart of the dog’s tongue Doll jinked his chin fractionally out of reach. ‘Serious? You don’t know what kind of dog this is?’

Dev said nothing.

‘This fella would be some mix of Pom and Jack Russell, I’d say. I’d an aunt had one almost like it. They’ve delicate enough constitutions for all the noise out of them. They do get tricky lungs when they’re older.’

Doll gripped Georgie by his scrawny forelegs and lifted him into the air with the dextrous matter-of-factness of a veterinarian. He pressed his ear to the dog’s elongated belly.

‘Hear that?’ he said. ‘What age is he?’

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‘Will you put my dog down?’ Dev said.

‘You said he was your mother’s dog.’

‘He’s my dog, now. Put him down.’

Doll guided Georgie back into his lap and released him. Georgie slithered down the kid’s knees, retreated beneath an empty chair and from there fixed Doll English with a long, consequential look.

‘Animals like me,’ Doll said.

‘How’s Cillian’s hand?’ Gabe said.

Doll did not look at Gabe but his eyes narrowed as he continued to watch Georgie. He scratched the side of his jaw.

‘His hand’s fine,’ he said.

‘He tell you how he got that broke hand?’

‘Said he fell.’

‘Fell,’ Sketch said and grinned.

‘That wasn’t a pleasant episode,’ Gabe said. ‘But here, did you ever meet Mulrooney?’

‘I don’t know,’ Doll said.

‘You don’t know?’

‘No,’ Doll said, ‘never met a Mulrooney.’

‘Because that’s who Cillian’s on the hook to.’

‘Who Cillian’s on the hook to is none of my business.’

‘It is, though,’ Gabe said. He took a Ziploc bag from his pocket and tossed it on the table. The Ziploc was bulging with knotty green clumps of weed. ‘I’d say you were a popular man at that party.’

‘That’s nothing,’ Doll shrugged. ‘That’s just bits and pieces for me and my mates.’

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‘Cillian sort you with that?’

‘Cillian doesn’t sort me with much these days.’

‘No, not so much these days, I’d say,’ Gabe said. ‘I’m asking do you know Mulrooney because that’s who Cillian used to work for. We still do.’

‘He never told you how it went south between him and Mulrooney?’ Sketch said.

Doll shrugged again.

‘I’m afraid your brother fucked up there well and good,’ Gabe said.

Dev knew the man the Ferdias worked for, because he worked for him too; what Dev did was sit on drugs for Mulrooney. For almost a year now Gabe and Sketch had been showing up – sometimes every few weeks, sometimes not for months – with a bootful of stuff packed away into sports bags. Dev stowed each delivery somewhere dark and dry and forgot all about it until the Ferdias returned. He had several good storage places; a couple of derelict cattle sheds in the fields down the back lane, or just here in the house if the sit was quick. He was a good sitter because he lived in the middle of nowhere, he never left the house and he lived alone, apart from Georgie. The only people he even saw regularly any more were Gabe and Sketch.

‘You hungry?’ Gabe said to Doll.

‘What?’

‘We’ll be putting you down for the night shortly. You want some grub first?’

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