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PART ONE

1

Didn't seem fair on the young lad. That suit at the funeral. With the braces on his teeth, the supreme discomfort of the adolescent. On such occasions, one could almost come to regret one's own social brilliance. Gives him the excuse, or gives him in any case someone at whom to look pleadingly between the mandatory handshakes. God love him. Nearly twenty-three now: Ivan the terrible. Difficult actually to believe the suit on him. Picked it up perhaps in some little damp-smelling second-hand shop for the local hospice, paid in cash, rode it home on his bicycle crumpled in a reusable plastic bag. Yes, that in fact would make sense of it, would bring into alignment the suit in its resplendent ugliness and the personality of the younger brother, ten years younger. Not without style in his own way. Certain kind of panache in his absolute disregard for the material world. Brains and beauty, an aunt said once. About them both. Or was it Ivan brains and Peter beauty. Thanks, I think. He crosses Watling Street now towards the apartment that is not an apartment, the house that is not a house, eleven or is it twelve days since the funeral, back in town. Back at work, such as it is. Or back anyway to Naomi's place. And what will she be wearing when she answers the door. Slides his phone from his pocket into the palm of his hand as he reaches the front step, cool tactility of the screen as it lights under his fingers,

typing. Outside. Evenings drawing in now and she's back at her lectures, presumably. No reply but she sees the message, and then the predictable sequence, the so familiar and by now indirectly arousing sequence of sounds as behind the front door she comes up the old basement staircase and into the hall. Classical conditioning: how did it take so long to figure that out? Common sense. Not that. Everyday experience. The relationship of memory and feeling. The opening door.

Hello, Peter, she says.

A cropped cashmere tank top, thin gold necklace. And black sweatpants fitted slim at the ankle. Not elasticated, she hates that. Bare feet.

May I come in? he asks.

Down the staircase and into her room without seeing any of the others. Fairy lights glowing dim pinpricks against the wall. Takes his shoes off, leaves them by the door. Laptop lying splayed open on the unmade mattress. Fragrance of perfume, sweat and cannabis. In whose blent air all our compulsions meet. Curtains hanging closed, as always.

Where have you been? she asks.

Ah. I'm afraid something came up.

She's looking at him, and then not looking, with a scoff. Off on a late summer holiday, were you? she asks.

Naomi, sweetheart, he says in a friendly voice. My dad died.

Stunned, she turns to look, saying: Your— Then she falls silent. Jesus, she adds. Oh my God, fuck. Peter, I'm so sorry.

Do you mind if I sit down?

They sit on the mattress together.

Christ, she says. Then: Are you okay?

Yeah, I think so.

She's looking down at the soles of her feet, crossed on the

mattress. Blackened with the dirt that never seems dirty exactly. You want to talk about it? she asks.

Not really.

How's your brother doing?

Ivan, he says. Do you know he's about your age?

Yeah, you told me. You said you wanted to introduce us. Is he okay?

With love, irresistibly, Peter smiles, and to avoid the spectacle of smiling with irresistible love at Naomi herself, he smiles instead, as if humorously, at the inside of his own extended wrist. Oh, he's doing— I actually have no idea how he's doing. What did I tell you about him before?

I don't know, you said he was 'a curio' or something.

Yeah, he's a complete oddball. Really not your type. I think he's kind of autistic, although I guess you can't say that now.

You can, if he actually is.

Well, not clinically or whatever. But he's a chess genius, so. Peter lies back on the bed now, looking up at the ceiling. You don't mind, do you? he adds. I have to head on somewhere else in a bit.

From outside his line of sight, Naomi's mouth answers: That's cool. A pause. He toys with the inseam of her sweat-pants. She lies down beside him, warm, her breath warm, the scent of coffee, and something else. Her breasts warm under the little cashmere top. Which he bought for her, or the same one in another colour. 'Paris grey'. Letting him touch with his fingertips her damp underarm. Chalky scent of deodorant only masking the lower savoury smell of perspiration. Hardly ever shaves anywhere except her legs, below the knee. He told her once that back in his day, the girls in college used to get bikini waxes. That made her laugh. She asked if he was trying to make her

feel bad or what. Not at all, he said. Just an interesting development in the sexual culture. She's always laughing. Those Celtic Tiger years must have been wild. Anyway, you like it. And it's true, he does. Something sensual in her carelessness. Cold feet. Soles always black from walking around this kip half-dressed, smoking a joint, talking on speakerphone. She murmurs softly now: I'm so sorry. His fingers under the cashmere. Eyes closing. Everything very languid and dreamy like this. Her skin unseen beneath his hands with that soft downy quality almost velvet. He asks what she got up to while he was away. No answer. His eyes open again and find hers.

Listen, she says. I feel stupid telling you this. But some stuff came up a few weeks ago. Like for college, I had to buy some books. So I needed money. It's not a big deal.

Slowly he nods his head. Ah, he says. Okay. I could have helped you out, if I'd known.

Yeah, she says. Well, you weren't really replying to my texts. Screws her mouth up into a pained smile. Sorry, she adds. I didn't know about your dad, obviously.

Don't worry, he says. I didn't know you needed money. Obviously.

They look at one another a moment longer, embarrassed, irritable, guilty. Then she turns onto her back. It's cool, she says. I didn't even have to do anything, the pictures were from ages ago. Feeling his body tired and heavy he closes his eyes. One of these guys who comments on all her posts, probably. The emoji of the monkey covering its eyes. Or some sad married man with a credit card his wife doesn't know about.

That's fucked up about your dad, she says. When was the funeral?

Last week. Two weeks ago.

Did your friends all go?

He pauses. Not all, he says. After another pause: Sylvia. And a few others.

I guess you didn't want me to be there.

He turns to look at her face in profile. Full lips parted, sweep of freckles on her cheekbone. Silver stud glinting in her ear. The image of youth and beauty. He wonders also how much the guy paid. No, he says. I guess not.

Without looking at him she grins. What did you think I was going to do? she says. Try to seduce the priest or something? I have been to funerals, you know.

I just thought people would probably ask me who you were, he says. And what was I going to say, we're friends?

Why not?

I don't think anyone would believe me.

Thanks a lot, she says. I don't look classy enough to be friends with you?

You don't look old enough.

Tongue between her lips now, grinning. You're sick in the head, you know, she says.

I know, but so are you.

She stretches her arms thoughtfully, and then settles the back of her head down on her hands. Do you have a girlfriend or something? she asks.

He says nothing for a moment. Since in any case she doesn't seem to care, and why should she. Thinks of saying: I did, once. And now might be the time to tell her about that, mightn't it. About the funeral, and afterwards. Not that anything happened. Just the feeling, memory of a feeling, which was nothing in reality. In the car found himself mumbling stupidly: Don't leave me alone with Ivan, will you. That was why she

stayed. Only reason. Up in the old childhood bedroom, throbbing against her like a teenager. Too dark blessedly to look her in the eyes. She slept beside him, that was all. Nothing to tell. In the morning she was up before he was. Downstairs in the kitchen with Ivan, speaking in soft tones; he heard them from the landing. What did they have to say to each other? Nice little outpost for the knight on d5, was it? She probably would too. Humour him. Forget about it.

If I did, he says, why would I be hanging around with you?

Turning her body to face him, she touches with a fingertip the thin gold chain at her neck. Because you're sick in the head, remember? she says.

He remembers, yes, and remembering touches his hand to her small face, his palm resting on her jaw. Is she laughing at him also. Yes, of course, but is it only that. At her birthday party in the summer when he brought champagne and she drank from the bottle with her painted lips. In the kitchen her friend Janine said you know I think she likes you Peter. Different from the others, he knows. Something of the challenge he liked when he met her. At the bar in her tiny silver dress, hair down nearly to her waist, stud in her nose glinting red under the lamps. Her friends showed him the website, pretending to ask if it was legal. Fuck off, she said. Don't tell him about that. Flashing him a glance then: animal intelligence. Just between the two of them, he knew. Different from the others. Men who send her deranged threats of sexual violence on the internet, stupid whore, I'll kill you, I will slit your throat. Thumbing through the inbox she laughs. The absolute cringe, imagine. Beneath her to be frightened. If it happened she would die laughing, he believes. Stupid not to reply to her texts. Some of them very nice too. His fault. He wonders how badly she needs the money, and then he feels—

what? Ashamed, or whatever. As usual. She lies face down with her head in her arms. Familiar choreography, rehearsed together and with others, both. What lips my lips have. There is no one else, he could say. Someone, but not. I'm sorry. I love you. Her. Both. Don't worry. Don't say it. Christ no. Christ commands us universally to love one another.

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Nine already by the time he leaves. Four minutes past. Also a little high because they smoked together afterwards. Types into the white box: Running about 20mins late, sorry. Cool darkness gathers around the lighted screen. Trees waving silent branches overhead, tram running past with faces in the windows. Locks the phone and pockets. James's Street at night. Has to walk quickly to try and make up the time now. But it is a pleasure, isn't it, on a crisp September night in Dublin to walk with long free strides along a quiet street. In the prime of his life. Incumbent on him now to enjoy such fleeting pleasures. Next minute might die. Happens every day to someone. And the man was no age, as everyone kept saying, sixty-five, that was all. Peter halfway there himself now, thirty-two and six months. Already middle-aged by that calculation. Frightening how quickly it all falls away. No, he'll say, my father's no longer with us, I'm afraid. People will be sorry, naturally, but not shocked. Different for Ivan. Almost like an orphan in his case, for all the good their mother has done him. Why they ever had children in the first place God knows. At the funeral, she muttered to Peter: The cut of him. And although Ivan did actually look absurd, and although Peter himself had only seconds before been thinking about how absurd Ivan looked, he replied: Well, his appearance may not have been foremost on his mind

this week. Christine glancing back at him. Her tasteful skirt suit, navy merino. Nothing wrong with your turnout, she said. Always like that with her. He avoided her eye, watching Ivan loitering miserably alone at the table of sandwiches. Yes, he answered. Thanks. Past the old bank now towards Thomas Street and Sylvia's reply vibrates in his pocket, against his hip. Used to have a different ringtone for her messages, didn't he. In the old days. Dublin in the rare, etc. Can't remember now how it sounded. What make or model the phone was, how it weighed in his hand. Obsolete now presumably, no longer in production. Just to hear that sound once again, he thinks. To feel that his life has been preserved somewhere and not forgotten, gathered around him, packed protectively around him still. Early-morning bus journeys to the intervarsities. Prepping for the final in a back corridor while the audience waited in their seats. The record-breakers. Despised, they both were, of course. In love with one another and themselves. On the lock screen now: No problem. Have you eaten? Sensible woman. Wearing good sturdy shoes no doubt and the warm tweed coat. No. Looking out for him, that's all. Twenty minutes late and she wants to know if he's had his dinner. Twenty-five minutes. And she is, to say the least, not stupid. He thinks sometimes the nature and extent of her suffering has lifted her free from the petty frustrations of mere inconvenience. Half an hour late, so what. When you're in and out of hospital every other week with a needle in your arm, doesn't matter much, probably. Overhearing the doctors talking about you behind the curtain. Patient female thirty-two years old. History of chronic refractory pain following traumatic injury. Road traffic accident. No, no kids, lives alone. And few could know. For himself he would rather die than go on like that. No fuss, just get it over with.

She must know that other people think so. Knows even he does, maybe. But then they say one adjusts. The old life of pleasure gone and never returning; accept, or else delude yourself, all the same in the end. The will to live so much stronger than anyone imagines. Like a kind of death, what happened. A kind of death you survive out of politeness, respect for others, out of selfless love. Christ also survived his own death. And was dignified and exalted.

Past the art college now, students milling around in denim jackets, plastic boots, torn stockings. Formless teenage faces floating pale under the streetlight. At the outer door of life. He knows they're watching. Brains and beauty. Amused as he passes. One head turning to follow. Well, good for her, you only live once. He could be halfway through his days already. Allows himself to glance back with a smile. Not even pretty, but why not, and she smiles also, crookedly. Half an hour late at least. Naomi would be beside herself. God, men are disgusting. She only looked about sixteen. Oh, and it's illegal to smile now? At children. Actually he does smile at children. Also elderly people. Likes to convey to the world at large a genial disposition. Even smiles at other men sometimes. Differently. No you don't. He does if there's a reason. Mishears them speaking, or walks in front of them by accident, that kind of thing. Smiles, yes. At his rivals and enemies. You hate men more than I do, says Naomi. Obviously true, since she goes to bed with them of her own free will. Peter only goes to bed with people he likes. Most women ultimately very likeable individuals. Men, as everyone knows, disgusting. Not all: not his father, not like that. And Ivan? Different. Used to think he was one of these sexless beings you read about. Sort of amoeba blob floating in a jar. Then Peter brought a certain girlfriend