

First chapter of my second novel, *Service* (One, 2023)

I've never felt as alive as I did that summer. Alive, needed, run off my feet. Every evening we were queued out the door, we had bookings a year in advance. It was the kind of place people of a certain age called *hip*, while the rest of us rolled our eyes, discreetly, not wanting to jeopardize our tips.

Back then, when the country still thought it was rich, there was always some brash, impossible customer demanding a table from the hostess just as the dinner rush took hold. These arguments added to the atmosphere, the heat, the energy that ripped around the establishment and kept us going six out of seven nights a week.

The restaurant, let's call it T, was in a large, ivy-covered building two streets over from the Dáil. We served businessmen, politicians, lobbyists, the type of men who liked a side order of banter with their steak and old world red. We learnt quickly to talk nonsense about the property market and the boom, though we didn't really have a clue, we just knew that the wages were decent, the customers wore suits, and the tips were sometimes obscene.

We only employ college students.

Don't be brainless.

Don't be nosy.

Be tactful.

Be knowledgeable.

Your Châteauneuf from your Côtes du Rhône.

Your bouillon from your bouillabaisse.

Your? As if. We got the same pasta tray-bake and soggy salad every day before service. It was delicious—it was free.

I remember the heat of the kitchens, the huge flat pans with slabs of butter sizzling from midday, though I was fortunate to mostly work dinner, when the bigger tables came in. *You'll get cocktails and evenings for sure*, Flynn the bartender told me with a homicidal grin, then he muttered some quip that ended in *ass* to his sniggering colleague. That was the Ireland of the day, asses replacing bottoms, cocktails replacing pints, quick deals and easy money, opportunities that had taken decades—centuries—to filter down.

The kitchens were so hot that summer you could feel the burn on your blouse in the throughway, the small space off the main dining room that joined front of house with back. This was the nucleus of the restaurant, where we fired orders on computers, gossiped about customers and complained about the bar staff who'd let our drink orders back up while busy working their own tips. Double doors would

flap open to the kitchens as a runner passed through with four plates—the maximum number permitted—and the heat would come at us in short, magnificent bursts that were often accompanied by shouts from the chefs, which would remind us who was really in charge and send us running once more onto the floor. *Yes, sir, No, sir, may I tell you, sir.* It was like a show. It had the buzz of live performance.

The customers were a who's-who of boomtime Dublin, the men in suits and open-necked shirts, the women in stiff dresses and blow-dries. With our clipped ponytails and rubber-soled pumps, we could not compare. And yet, we did not go unnoticed.

Some of the restaurant staff were famous themselves. Everyone knew the manager Christopher, his high-boned London face, and the easy charm that was just the right side of fawning. *Christopher-call-me-Chris*, who was lovely to work for, clear and very funny, unless you were obviously hungover or in the habit of being late. Unless you offended a customer. It was the number one rule in the restaurant, in every good restaurant around the world: the customer is always right.

They came to T for the atmosphere, and for the cooking, certainly, though they never saw the reality behind the double doors, vaunted men in white with unnatural concentration, hot faces and drenched hairlines when they took off their caps at the end of the shift. The only women in the kitchen were the Polish dishwashers who doubled as baristas when the bar was mobbed and who refused to speak English to the waiters they disliked.

Most of the customers came for the head chef Daniel Costello, who was so good at cooking that he didn't need stars (though shortly after I left he got his first, which nearly killed me.) He had two sous chefs who hated each other but stuck it out to work with him, then the rest of the team—six or seven men, largely in their twenties—who each had their own station along the stainless steel counters that ran the length of the kitchen. They prepped and cooked, shouted and swore. They plated dainty meals in a matter of seconds. They listened to classic hits on the radio, or played loud music on the prehistoric stereo above the sinks. They drank vats of Coke from plastic cups with ice that melted in minutes. One of us waiters would do a refill round whenever we caught a lull. We looked after them and they looked after us. That was the theory. But really we stayed out of their way, and out of the kitchen unless we were buzzed. Theirs was a different world. You could smell it the moment you went back there, through the spices and sauces and the bins full of leftovers. Talent and testosterone. You hadn't a chance. You were a minnow in a pond—a help, a hindrance, a nothing.

The serving staff were at the end of the chain, attractive bartenders and waiters hired to make the customers feel good about themselves so they'd spend

more money. *Easy on the eye*. That was the phrase used by the owners, a consortium of rich men who treated the restaurant like a fancy canteen where they came and went as they pleased. *Easy on the eye*. It was literally part of the advertising policy. Everyone in the industry knew—you didn't apply unless you had a certain figure or face. They'd turned away a waitress in her thirties, one with years of Michelin experience. They told her she wouldn't be able to keep pace. Not in this restaurant, this so-hot-right-now restaurant.

So I suppose it is fair to say that when I went for the job, I had an idea that I was not uneasy on the eye. But it wasn't something I thought about all that much. And then after that summer, when I no longer worked there, which is to say when I was fired, I did not want to think about it at all.

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Even before I got the job, I knew that T would be a fun place to work. There were rumours about town. A generosity with shift drinks, a runner who doubled as a dealer, people having sex in the bathrooms, the odd private party with DJ such-and-such. We all thought it was exciting. For Ireland, we thought it was insane.

My interview took place in the middle of the restaurant, at Table Four as I would later learn, and lasted around ten minutes. While two middle-aged men scanned my CV and body—it was as blatant as those machines at the airport—I watched waitresses fold napkins at the bar. A stocky bartender was teasing a girl who looked younger than me, pretending to knock over her pile of cloth triangles with his tattooed arm. The messing broke off suddenly when Daniel Costello himself approached with a bowl of chips and some dip they all appeared to love. I found it hard not to follow his movements, that uncanniness of seeing a celebrity in real life. He was tall, almost hulkish, with formidable arms and unruly hair. The air in the room seemed thinner with him in it, the low roof gave a little bounce.

On the way back, he stopped at our table and I avoided his eyes, dark and roving, and not particularly interested in me. I stared at the immaculately white, double-breasted coat, the grandfather collar neat at his neck, which was tanned and thick. 'Ever more canaries,' he said to the owners. They laughed, then considered me in silence for a moment. I felt like I might melt. 'Take it easy on her,' Daniel said, walking away.

After a few cursory questions (Tipperary, twenty-one, business studies), one of the owners offered me the job on the spot and I said yes without asking about the pay, which caused the other one to laugh and hit the table with his hand and promise to teach me a thing or two about the real world.

I started the following Tuesday on a trail shift, shadowing a real waiter, helping with whatever small tasks they might entrust to a newbie. For five hours, I ran after Tracy, a slim, sharp-tongued redhead from Drogheda. I didn't leave her side all night. It was tricky work, trying to make a note of everything she did, without distracting her tables. From the beginning I loved it, the sense of belonging the uniform gave me, the snug blouse and tailored skirt, the neat black aprons we tied around our waists, buzzers clipped on the back.

I felt privileged to work in a place that was so obviously luxurious. People, I mean ordinary people, came to the restaurant once or twice a year for special occasions, whereas I was lucky enough to be there six nights a week. The place was so fancy it almost seemed holy. This was back when restaurants made an effort, when bare bulbs and exposed brickwork were only seen by the builders. Everything was plush and radiant. Stained-glass windows in the bathrooms, velvet-roped elitism for the upper floors. Customers were always commenting on the varnished floor in reception, the shine, the *remarkable* cherry wood. I learned to tell them it was antique, over a hundred years old, part of the original building, a former merchant bank, which meant that they were not just having dinner but dining out on history.

In the main room that stretched over two levels, ground and mezzanine, there was soft grey carpet, beautiful to look at and a nightmare for carrying cocktails. The walls were a lighter shade of grey and had original paintings by Irish artists I'd never heard of—Nano Reid, Robert Ballagh, a huge canvas of blocky autumnal colours by Sean Scully, which everyone said was a masterpiece. I knew nothing about art. Though I'd spent three years at college in Dublin, at heart I was still from Thurles, a midlands town whose only museum was a glorified tourist centre that told a fine story about the Famine. I used to eavesdrop on the customers' conversation. I liked to hear the different reactions from the rich business types who seemed to view art as a challenge. *We have a Scully in the veranda*, they might say. *I found a stunning Le Brocquy at auction*. You could always predict what people like that would order—some part of a cow and a bottle with Grand in the title. The kind of customer who cared about the origins of the produce, but didn't give a damn about the staff.

The walnut bar was another talking point, glasses and bottles backlit in cool pink, a vast tinted mirror that gave an illusory depth to the room. On the upper floors, there were smaller spaces, similar in style to the dining room, grey carpets, linen cloths, banquet seating for the tables near the wall. I loved the way the rooms changed as the restaurant filled, the afternoon slid into evening, the low hum of prep that would gradually give way until you were right in the centre of it—in the weeds, we called it—and the noise and rush was incredible.

Service!

Behind you!

Coming through!

Fire seven!

Clear two!

Turn ten!

Every day, in the break between lunch and dinner, we had a team meeting. Half four sharp, front and back of house, all the waitstaff standing to attention. Depending on Daniel's mood, it could be a wine-tasting, a specials run-through, a fierce interrogation about various items on the menu. Which of the starters contain nuts? How many oysters in the seafood platter? What's the difference between a langoustine and a prawn? Between *jus* and *velouté*? An artichoke and a chayote? Answer: a pass or a bollicking.

For the initial meetings as a lowly backwaiter I stayed under the radar, but by Saturday afternoon of my second week, I no longer felt secure. Lunch service had been chaotic. Tables were slow to finish, the ticket machine jammed, a bottle of Montepulciano smashed on the bar. Daniel ranted, looked everyone in the eye as he spoke, seeking out ignorance. The waiters aren't selling, he said. A T-bone. A fine cut. A treat. What was wrong with us? He glared our way and only Mel, the elegant head waitress, held his gaze with her clear, expressive eyes.

'It's too big,' she said, when he'd worn himself out.

Daniel turned to face her. He was in a polo shirt, muscular forearms crossed over each other. His fist clenched as Mel continued, the skin tightening at his bicep.

'No one wants a sixteen ounce steak,' she said. 'You'd be better off doing it for two.'

'Are you a chef now?' Daniel said. 'Will we put her in whites, Christopher?' And then to the gallery, his underlings who were huddled by the archway to the thoroughway, ready to run back to their prep, to the real business of the restaurant. 'She'd look good in white, wouldn't she, fellas?'

There was some mild hooting that died out quickly as Mel eyeballed them.

'Whatever, Daniel,' she said. 'It's up to you. But you're right—it's not selling. Not even to that table of bankers. They all went for the fillet.'

'Well,' Christopher said, 'we could slash the price.'

'No fucking way!' said Daniel. 'Are you mad? That cut. That beautiful piece.' His eyes flashed again. His *melty-brown eyes*, as Tracy had called them the previous night, four or five wines in. With another waitress, Eve, we'd gone drinking after the shift to some dive on Montague Lane that had a back-door policy for industry workers. I'd woken up dying right before work, hadn't even had time to shower.

Christopher raised his palms.

'Just sell, girls,' Daniel said, with mild asperity. 'Sell like your job depends on it.'

'How many left?' said Christopher.

'Eight. And they need to go tonight. OK?' Daniel tipped his head respectfully at Mel.

She nodded and we followed suit.

He turned to the chalkboard to go through the rest of the specials, was saying something about depth and sauce and milk-fed veal, when my legs started to shake. All I wanted was a seat, the comfort of the staff meal that followed team meetings—the creamy pasta sauce, the salt.

'You,' Daniel said. 'Sell me the veal.'

It took me more than a moment to realize that I was the unfortunate 'you'. I looked at the carpet, hoping he'd move on. I wasn't even a waitress yet. I couldn't sell to anyone.

'You!' His hands were waving in the air.

I felt a swell of vomit between my ribs.

'Veal,' I said uselessly.

'And?'

Everyone was watching. Christopher didn't seem remotely like he might save me. Tracy shrugged and examined her nails.

'The depth,' I said. 'In the sauce.'

'What in the fucking *fuck*?' Daniel exploded, a long line of expletives that were impressive in their own right, but not when they were firing like pellets towards your face.

'All right, Daniel, we get it. All right.' Mel moved in front of me.

Daniel stormed off to the kitchen, his crew trailing after him.

'Thanks,' I said to Mel. 'Thank you.'

She shook her head and pointed to the bathroom. 'Clean yourself up,' she said.

The beginning of my third novel, *Little Vanities* (One, May 2026)

On a cool April morning, thin fog lifted off the grand canal in Dublin to a fresh stain of blue pushing out across the sky. Still wet with dew, the yellowy bankside reeds held within them the movements of secret animals already at work. A lone swan glided eastwards, leaving in its wake a wide, triangular trail that disturbed the steady surface of the water, beneath which, barely a foot below, the canal bed was littered with bottles green and brown, broken and whole, glass and plastic, the unnatural, man-made artefacts from the long seasonless years of outdoor living in desperate times.

Dylan Turner strolled down the towpath to a nearby bench, took a seat on the damp wood to finish his coffee and wait for the off-licence to open. He had managed to walk all the way from his home in Terenure, just over half an hour, and was tiring. The bitter drink worked to revive him as pale sunlight wrinkled on and off in the shallow water. After a while he roused himself, made his way to the crossroads, then up South Circular Road. He felt full of the jaunting happiness of the night to come, the pleasure of having his two best friends over to the house for a game of cards.

In the offie he stocked up on Dutch Gold, a joke of sorts, but he knew they'd end up drinking it when everything else ran out. With effort he carried twelve cans to the counter, tried to engage the woman on the till, made some crack about how he couldn't believe they still manufactured the stuff, that he used to drink it in college—back in the noughties, like. She looked at him as if he was speaking in tongues, and perhaps he was, it felt that long since he'd been out in the world without assistance. He couldn't remember the rules of small talk, maybe it wasn't even called small talk unless you sort of knew the other person, which—he glanced at the woman again—he emphatically did not.

'Cash or card?' she said.

Dylan fumbled at the pocket of his tracksuit, straining to get the zip down his thigh. Eventually he produced a creased fifty and left it on the counter. She took the note reluctantly, smoothed it, gave him the change. Thanking her, he folded the twenty carefully in case she thought he was a rich douche with no regard for money. There had been a point in his life when he was undeniably wealthy, a magnificent moment, but he'd never felt comfortable flashing his cash, not like the Dublin lads who seemed born to sponsorship deals and luxury.

Something in the assistant's demeanour softened as she sat down on the stool, back to her magazine. Dylan put one four-pack in his rucksack and decided to carry

the remaining two pannier-style. He was balanced. He felt able, free. With a cheerful goodbye to the woman he turned to leave. The automatic glass doors parted with an energetic whoosh.

Halfway up Harold's Cross Road his arms began to tense, a prickly twitch in his biceps that went from tightness to cramp just as the narrow triangular park came into view. In the distance the Dublin Mountains tinged purple against the edge of morning sky, distant and forbidding, the gentle peak of Kippure listing south. He tried to think through the pain. The park was only across the way and if he could make it there he could take a break on one of the benches near the entrance. Even as he had the thought, his legs began to shake. He stopped at a low wall beside a barber's and put the cans down. The weight of the rucksack was still too much. On the ground before he knew it, plonked on his behind, which was cold now, and possibly wet, something creeping across his tracksuit.

A woman getting out of a white Beamer locked her car and went quickly up the street. By the gates to the park young lads with matching haircuts were smoking. If he called to them they might help him. They might not. His mind was busy with disappointment. All week he'd been doing his strength routine at home, feeling confident as the days passed and his body didn't give out, certain he would manage a round trip to the office. He thought forward to this evening, wondered if he'd be able for it. As the first drops of an imminently heavy rain landed in thick specks on his face, he slipped the rucksack off his shoulders then pushed himself up to sit on the wall.

Taking out his phone to call Rachel, he hesitated before pressing her name, as if the memory of last night's fight had ingrained itself in his fingertips. A fat splotch of water hit the screen, another landing on his head. After a few breaths he was able to quash the small bit of manhood that was still persistently alive within him, that clung on when so much else had been stripped away, and make the call.

His wife answered on the third ring. 'What's happened?'

'Nothing. Can you pick me up?' He told her where he was.

'Why didn't you go to the near one? Or why didn't you let—'

'Rachel,' he said. 'Please.'

A short while later she pulled up across the road in the Citroën, a boxy purple minivan she'd managed to talk him into back when she was pregnant, when he wanted to give her everything she asked for, and more. Now it seemed to represent all the things that had gone wrong in his life, that everywhere he looked there were people driving around in their delightfully dull vehicles, when he was saddled with—no, when he had chosen for himself—a car the colour of a television dinosaur.

An extra grand for the pleasure of it, he remembered the smirk on the salesguy's face.

Rachel put on the hazards, rolled down the window and waved. She went to get out, but he shook his head. He already had the rucksack on, picked up the remaining cans, walked easily to the car. That was the brutal thing about the state he was in, the way it constantly tricked him, undermining whatever reality he thought he was in, undermining the very idea of reality compared to the life he had before. He could see Rachel watching him. He shifted to one leg, moved a little slower for the final steps.

Leah was in the back, strapped into a booster. She palmed the rain-streaked window and shouted his name.

'Eggs!' she said, when he opened the door. 'I hate slimy eggs, Daddy.'

He got into the passenger seat and looked at his wife.

'Don't ask,' she said.

Turning to slot the rucksack behind the driver's seat, he balanced the remaining beer on his lap.

'Put on your belt,' Rachel said.

He sighed.

'What?'

'I'm not a child.' He snapped the cold metal into the socket.

Rachel kept her eyes on the road, her face didn't change, pale and expressionless, the perfect martyr. She would make a wonderful saint. He could see her in the shroud of the famous missionary nun, her blonde hair covered, her features rimmed in thin stripes of blue and white, the uneven patches of freckles—no, he stopped himself. He was doing it again. Letting all his rage at the great unfairness of his current situation leach into his marriage. Rachel had done nothing wrong. She had, in fact, dropped whatever she was doing to come to his aid. She'd become an expert in putting him first. As if reading his mind, she now said brightly and with conviction, 'Tonight will be fun. What time are Ben and Stevie due?'

'I told them seven.'

'It will be eight with Stevie. You know what she's like.'

Dylan didn't feel in the mood to comment on what Stevie might or might not be like, so he said nothing, just looked down at his ever-expanding middle. Who would have thought a few years could reverse decades of training? He found it hard to credit, though the proof was there for him to see any time he wanted, he couldn't get away from it, his body, in all its phenomenal failure. Closing his eyes, he tried to calm down. It could be worse. At least he could always say he'd played for Ireland—five caps, before it all fell apart with one horrendous wrong turn. He eventually got

back to provincial level but never fully regained his speed, his position lost to a younger, faster wing. In the years since, he'd had a solid if unspectacular career as a back for Leinster, part of the starting fifteen when the top dogs were gone, otherwise a reliable substitute whose name still held some promise or memory of glory.

Before the pandemic, Dylan had already been winding down, or more truthfully, management had indicated that he was, at the warhorse age of thirty-five, nearing his end. The pace of the young lads was the issue. He knew that, he understood. One of the hardest things to get his head around now was that he'd actually felt OK about retiring. Rachel and he had made plans. The European Cup was to be his last hurrah, followed by a family holiday in America, three weeks of relaxation and fun and travel that would ease the transition between life as a player and his plan to go into coaching. But that was back before The Bomb, as he liked to think of it, the definitive blast that ended his career, his ability to enjoy life, no, his ability to live. If athletes are said to die twice, Dylan was already on his third go. He was acutely aware of the passage of time, all the chronic, wasted minutes of his days.

His seat reverberated, sudden pain in his lower back.

'Leah!' he said, as she kicked again. 'Stop.'

'She's been trying to get your attention,' Rachel said.

'Sorry.'

'Are you hurt?'

'No,' he said, ignoring the darting sensation down his side. Real and certain the pain, yet the more he mentioned it the less she was inclined to believe him. He turned to face his daughter. 'What is it, baby?'

'Daddy!' she said. 'Eggs are yucky.'

'Really?'

'Yesh.'

'You sure?'

'Yucky.'

'All eggs?'

'All. Eggs.'

'No more Easter Eggs?'

This stymied her. She kicked the seat once more and burst into tears.

'Thanks,' said Rachel. 'Thanks a lot.'

They didn't talk again for the remainder of the journey home, just listened to the sharp little cries of their daughter, their only child, who was behaving, according to the woman at the crèche, exactly like an only child, by which she meant entitled, lonely and, at four years of age, already preoccupied with the greatest of all human quests, the hunt for more and better love.

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Emerging from the swimming pool in Trinity, Stevie felt refreshed, reborn, ready for the night ahead. She knew it would be a late one, they always were at Dylan's, some remnant of their college selves dormant within them, effortlessly summoned by a look, an old joke, a nostalgic anecdote or nudge, anything at all, really, which often left her thinking in the days that followed such occasions that too much of her adult life was spent yearning for the past.

She slipped on her faded turquoise flip-flops, wrung her swim hat over the pool drain. The past, *that* past, shouldn't be so easy to access. Thirty-eight now, she had lived almost as many years after college as she had before. Somehow this calculation made her want to get back into the water and do another set, but she knew she'd done enough, there was no point punishing her body for being the age it was, nothing a person could do about that.

Stevie was famously practical. Her older sister Laura was a writer who could do nothing except put words on a page, the younger one, Elise, a violinist currently busking her way across America with a blues singer she'd met in a bar, making Stevie, with her steady physio job and long-term relationship and small apartment in the docklands, the stable one of the family, a reputation she felt she'd never quite earned, rather had been branded with years earlier, possibly the moment Elise was born, when Stevie, through no fault of her own, became the sensible middle child who would one day know how to cook, clean, care for other people, care for herself. She did know how to do all those things, except maybe the last one, which seemed a bit lofty and abstract, like knowing how to pray or wish upon a star. Like knowing her heart's desires, which a doctor had recently said to her, as if the heart had feelings and was not just a vital organ that pumped blood around the body to keep a person alive.

Making her way down the deck to the sauna, she looked through the glass door and saw four or five muscular young men draped across the wooden benches. They had been swimming in rotation in the lane beside her and she'd already had enough of their overenthusiastic, endorphin-fuelled declarations on the benefits of morning sprints. Instead she tried the steam room, which was mercifully free, a cavernous space covered on all sides in characterless white tiles. Stevie lay on a bench, lifted her feet to the wall to stretch her calves, wondering how long she would get before the boys next door wanted to move from dry heat to wet. To call them boys wasn't quite accurate. They were college students and the pool belonged to them more than it did to her, an alumna so many years gone. The pool hadn't even existed when she was in college. They'd only had the sports hall, the

testosterone smack of the squash courts, gym mats that smelled of feet. Back then the place was always half empty. There were no philosophy majors on the rowing machines. No classics students doing spin. There were no high-ponytailed girls with full faces of make-up jogging on treadmills with study notes propped on a ledge, a sight Stevie had witnessed that morning as she warmed up before her swim. She'd wondered if she should go over as a physio and advise against it, but then she'd remembered what Ben had recently said to her, that it wasn't her job to look after everyone, sometimes people were more than capable of figuring things out for themselves. He had said that to her this week, or maybe the week before, it was hard to timestamp these things, the insults couched as compliments, the parts of her personality he'd loved initially, and still purported to love when pressed.

As her watch flashed on the hour she realised she'd been in the steam room for twenty minutes. Perhaps she was waiting for the group of students, the swim team or whoever they were, those irritatingly happy men-children who through some trick of the hot room, the relaxing hiss of the steam, were turning alarmingly into fantasy figures. Stevie laughed out loud, the tenseness in her groin dissipating, not able to be wished back, she knew from experience. There was always the purple bullet in her bedside cabinet at home. There was always Ben.

The door to the steam room opened. A pool attendant looked in, asked if it was hot enough. The reality of the man's face embarrassed her. She said the temperature was fine, she was just leaving. He held the door for her and she didn't look him in the eye as she mumbled a thank you, rushed off to the shower.

After breakfast in a busy bakery on Pearse Street, Stevie bought the paper and walked down the quays. Among the dazzling glass shapes of the grand offices, there were one or two derelict buildings—an old redbrick she was passing now, from which a sapling sprouted riverward out of the rotten wall. Most people wanted the buildings gone, but she found them cheering, the way they hung on in their old, flawed state amid all the transforming perfection. In the distance, beyond the white fin of the Beckett Bridge, the sky was turning dark, heavy, ready to drop into the oily waters of the Liffey. She hurried in the direction of the apartment, keen to get home now, even if she knew it wasn't safe to go back there, that the pills were exactly where she'd left them, in the zipped inside pocket of an old bag under a pile of other bags in the corner of a wardrobe, because of course they were, no one but Stevie knew they were there.

Soon her building came into view, a sturdy block of forty apartments whose windows didn't open beyond the regulatory few inches. On sunny days their bedroom was a greenhouse. Ben was always telling people they could live without heating year round, which wasn't true—the living room only got the sun for a brief

period in the morning—but she knew it made him feel better about the times he couldn't afford to contribute to the utility bills, that the impassioned environmental speeches he liked to give when drunk were largely borne of his economic circumstances and his perception of himself as a person who could withstand extreme hardship when it came to matters of survival. To be fair, it was an accurate perception. Stevie thought of the flat in Rathmines where Ben had lived for most of college. In first year he'd shared the place with a fellow drama student who slept sixteen hours a day because the heating only came on for an hour in the evenings. There was never any fresh milk. Never enough toilet paper or soap. They seemed to exist on nothing. Compared to the keen, orderly, health-conscious friends she had made through her physio course, it was exciting—even exotic. Canned meat, baked beans, an oven pizza at weekends. She'd call round after lectures and find them stoned on the faux leather sofas, watching the same old comedies and box sets whose overdue fines at the rental shop were so enormous as to make them obsolete. Ben used to call it studying, and who knows, maybe it was. All she could say for sure was that the place had been a haven for skivers until Dylan moved in at the start of second year and took charge.

Smiling at the memory, Stevie knew she'd have to snap out of the recollections before the evening. Rachel hated when the three of them started on the college stories, she didn't seem to get how much easier it was for people to talk about the good old days than the borderless blob of the present. Stevie pictured her prim smile, the deliberate jut of her dainty face, the way Dylan would choose to pick up on her signal or not, depending on his mood. She felt bad then, for the observation, or for Rachel herself, maybe. Rachel Turner was not an easy person to feel sorry for. A rigidity to her that Stevie found hard to negotiate, the stiffness of people meeting for the first time, which invariably resolves with time but in this instance remained. Every time she met Rachel it was like starting over. Her disposition didn't yield, at least not to Stevie. It yielded perfectly well to Dylan and Ben. At the thought of her perky blonde ponytail and amenable smile, the anecdotes that had a rehearsed quality designed to pander to men, Stevie felt the zippy aftereffects of the swim leave her. There was something draining about Rachel. The most rudimentary enquiries seemed like work.

Inside the apartment block Stevie checked the mailbox, hit the button for the lift, before deciding to take the stairs, four flights up, delaying the inevitable, the long hours of the day where she would be sharing the same space with those small yellow circles of serenity, consciously not thinking about them, which is to say, thinking about them all the time. It wasn't that she suffered from anxiety, the doctor said, rather she seemed to feel the world's problems a little more acutely than most.

This was anxiety-inducing, he decided, which was not the same as anxiety. All Stevie had to do was care less. She put her key in the door, thankful Ben had nothing on today. She needed his presence, his vitality. He might be stuck for the occasional heating bill, but he did not scrimp on life. His constant yearning to make something of himself filled up the dead moments of their days. Remarkable, his bottomless desire. The energy and glow. Coned spotlight through the mist of time.

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Ben had known for years that the odds were against him, his age ticking up like a speedometer pushing red, making him less suitable for even more roles than he'd been unsuitable for the previous year, even if he looked much the same, even if his agent assured him he was still *atypically attractive*, with the type of broad, senatorial face that commanded attention, that was able, on a good day, to project onto its sallow canvas a laborious range of convincing emotions desperate to be tested in the big leagues of the theatrical world.

So, he persisted. For nearly two decades he kept going. Countless auditions, understudy readings, stagehand work, minor roles in major productions, small snippets of almost greatness he had replayed in his head so many times they were close to losing their lustre. And they didn't do much to offset the rest of it, not really, the tedious extra gigs, near misses and final callbacks, advertisement parts which included a novice driver, angry milkman, new dad and a creepy sexual predator in a public service campaign about consent. Yes, in twenty years of *trying to be an actor*, which was what his friends and family called his profession, Ben Brosnahan had endured enough rejection to last a lifetime.

But things were about to change. Ben had been lying awake for hours, long before Stevie rose for her penitential exercise regime he had been wide-eyed, the news fizzing in his stomach, too unreal to share yet with the outside world. He wasn't sure he'd ever been to sleep, actually, the text coming through from his agent just as he was switching his phone to airplane mode last night, containing the four life-changing words he had waited an age to hear. *You got the part*. Caroline was pleased for him, he knew, by the uncharacteristic kiss after the message. She understood what it meant to him, how much he needed a win. Ben wanted big roles and stellar reviews. He wanted stardom. He wanted people on the street to lose control of their facial features when they saw him.

As he heard Stevie's key in the door he wondered how he should tell her. For years he'd fantasised about this moment, dreamt up every ludicrous scenario a man could think of, so that a plain delivery of the news seemed anticlimactic,

disappointing even, in a way that made him slow to tell her at all. Mostly he felt relieved he would be earning a decent wage for an extended period of time; he resolved to buy her something beautiful and frivolous.

‘Hiya,’ came from the living room.

‘In here,’ he said.

Through the thin walls he listened to her clatter around the kitchen, boil the kettle, take out the clothes horse to hang her togs. The entire apartment would be heavy with chlorine soon, medicinal cleanliness ripping through the air.

Stevie appeared in the doorway. ‘Still in bed?’

He patted the mattress and she smiled at him, cast her eyes over the laundry basket, before turning back to the kitchen. Hair in a dark top-knot. All go. She’d been like this for nearly a year now and he wondered if she was charging herself at night, if there might be a secret dock somewhere in the building she plugged into while he was sleeping. Because it wasn’t normal to have so much energy.

Ben stretched his feet over the end of the bed, which was just about able to contain him. Six-two, not a great height for a queen-size, but it was all the room could take. They were looking to move, had viewed this past year countless semi-detached houses in the wider Dublin region, to no avail. The asking prices were a farce, luring prospective buyers out to sea, suddenly plunging them deep and deeper. It was nonsense. Infuriating. A bore. Which didn’t really cover it at all, the fact that up to now he’d paid rent to Stevie, when he could, and it was ultimately her apartment that would have to be sold in order for them to afford a house and mortgage. Ben had virtually no savings. (One broker was incredulous, almost in awe, that a man could live thirty-nine years on the planet without saving a cent.) There was such shame in it that Ben preferred to pretend the whole thing was beneath him, the rat race, the ladder, the game so many of his friends were able to play. Dylan, for example, who owned a large redbrick in Terenure on a grand street of prestigious oaks. Dylan made the game look easy, he always had. Ben’s best friend had excelled at everything all his life. All their lives. Sports, obviously, but beyond that too, or perhaps because of it, girls, friends, money, any sniff of a competition and Dylan Turner nailed it. The age-old jealousy was still there, somewhere, if Ben sought it out. Having a best friend superior in every way meant a comparison so constant and instinctive it was barely even conscious.