

EMMA
DONOGHUE

Author of the International
Bestseller *ROOM*



STIR-FRY

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DONOGHUE**



STIR-FRY

 HarperCollins e-books

Dedication

This book is for Anne

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PICKING

“2♀ SEEK FLATMATE.” Two diamonds of masking tape held the card to the notice board. “OW! ROOM. Wow! NO BIGOTS.”

It was all in red ink except the Wow!, which must have been scrawled on by a passerby. A thumb had smudged the top of the 2, giving it the shape of a swan with its beak held up to the wind. Maria leaned against the wall, getting out of the way of a passing stream of hockey players, and rummaged for a biro.

She copied the ad onto the first page of her refill pad, which looked, she realised with a surge of irritation, as blank and virginal as the homework notebooks the nuns always sold on the first day back to school. She drew a jagged line below the number. Chances were the room would be filled by now since the card's top two corners were dog-eared. Still, it was worth a bash, better than anything else on offer. Maria wasn't sure how many more weeks she could stand with the aunt and her footstools. Her eyes slid down the notice board. It was leprous with peeling paper, scraps offering everything from “Grinds In Anglo-Saxon By A Fluent Speaker” to “heavyduty bikelock for sale.” All the propositions in the accommodation section sounded equally sinister. “V. low rent” had to mean squalor, and “informal atmos.” hinted at blue mould in the bread bin.

Returning her biro to her shirt pocket, Maria stood back against a pillar papered with flyers. She clasped her hands loosely over her refill pad, holding it against her belly. The corners of her mouth tilted up just a little, enough to give the impression that she was waiting for someone, she hoped, but not so much as to look inane. She hugged the refill pad tighter against her hips; it felt as comfortable as old armour. Her eyes stayed low, watching the crowd that had overflowed every bench and table in the Students' Union.

A knot of black-leather lads were kicking a coffee machine; she looked away at once, in case one of them might accost her with some witticism she would be unable to invent a retort for. Behind the layer of grit on the window, her eye caught a flat diamond of silver. The lake had looked so much bluer in the college prospectus. Her grip on the pad was too tight; she loosened her fingers and thought of being a pike. Steely and plump, nosing round the lake's cache of oilcans, black branches, the oiled and dropped sandal mouldering to green. A great patient fish, waiting for summer to dip the first unsuspecting toe within an inch of her bite. Maria swallowed a smile.

Bending her knees, she let herself down until she was sitting on the top step. Something tickled her on the side of the neck, and she jolted, but it was only a stray corner from one of the orange freshers' ball posters. She read the details over her shoulder, noting that *committee* was missing a few consonants. Then she told herself not to be so damn negative on the first day and turned her face forward again. In the far corner, under a brown-spattered mural of Mother Ireland, she spotted a slight acquaintance from home. His corduroy knees were drawn up to his chin, an Ecology Society pamphlet barricading his face. No, she would not go and say hello, she was not that desperate.

Trigonometry was a stuffy mousetrap on the fourth floor. She counted twenty-four heads and squeezed her leg an inch farther onto the back bench. The girl beside her seemed to be asleep, streaked hair hanging round her face like ivy; her padded hip was warm against Maria's. When the tutor asked

for their names, there was a sort of tremor along the bench, and the girl's head swung up.

Maria was reading the ad one more time; she could feel her mouth going limp with indecision. As the registration list was being passed around, she gave a tentative nudge to her neighbor and held up the refill pad at an angle. "Sorry, but would you have any idea what exactly the wee symbol stands for?"

Salmon-pink fingernails covered a small yawn. "Just means women," the girl murmured, "but they'd be fairly feminist, you know the sort."

Her glance was speculative, but Maria whispered "Many thanks" and bent her head. She was far from sure which sort she was meant to know the sort of. In the library at home she had found *The Female Eunuch*, a tattered copy with Nelly the Nutter's observations scrawled in the margins. She had richly enjoyed it—especially the bits Nelly had done zigzags on with her crayon—but could not imagine flatmates who'd go around quoting it all day. Still, Maria reminded herself as the tutorial dragged to a close, it was not familiarity she had come here for. If Dublin was going to feel so odd—so windy, littered with crisp packets, never quiet—then the odder the better, really.

It was five past twelve before she could slide round the cluster of elbows and out of the office. A knot of lecturers emerged from their tearoom behind her, their Anglophile accents filling the corridor. She hurried down the steps in search of a phone. Catching her reflection in a dusty staircase window, Maria paused to poke at the shoulder pads on her black jacket. Damn the things, they were meant to give an air of assurance, but they made her look humpbacked. She pushed back her fringe and gave her peaky chin an encouraging look.

"Yoohoo, Maria!"

She ignored that, because nobody knew her name.

The shriek went higher. She peered under the handrail to find the streaky blonde from the tutorial waving from a huddle of trench coats. To reach them she had to weave between an abstract bronze and the Archaeology Club's papier-mâché dolmen.

"It is Maria, isn't it?" The girl wore an enamel badge that read MATERIAL GIRL.

"Yeah, only it's a hard *i*," she explained.

The voice rolled past her. "Hard? Godawful. I'm dropping out of maths right away, life's too short. I heard the trig man read out your name, and I thought, well she looks like she knows what he's burbling on about, which is more than I do."

"I sort of like maths," Maria said reluctantly.

"Perv." Her eyes were straying to a mark on the thigh of her pale rose trousers; she picked at it with one nail. "Personally I'm switching to philosophy, they say it's a guaranteed honour." She glanced up. "Oh, I'm Yvonne, did I say? Sorry, I should have said."

Maria let her face lift in the first grin of the day. Not wanting it to last a second too long, she looked away and mentioned that she needed a pay phone.

"Over in the far corner, past the chaplaincy. Is it about that flat share?"

"Well, probably." Too defensive. "I haven't really made up my mind."

"Personally," Yvonne confided, "I wouldn't trust anything advertised in that hole of a Students' Union. A cousin of mine had a bad experience with a secondhand microwave oven."

Maria's mouth twisted. "What did it do to her, exactly?"

“I never got the full details,” Yvonne admitted. “Well, listen, if the Libbers don’t suit you, I have a ~~uncle who’s leasing terribly nice flats, apartments really, just outside Dublin—~~”

“Actually, I want something fairly low-budget,” Maria told her. “Got to make the money stretch.”

Yvonne nodded, her hoop earrings bobbing. “God, I know, don’t talk to me, where does it go? I’m already up to my eyes in debt to Mum for my ball gown. How are we going to make it to Christmas? Maria, tell me that?”

“Yeah.”

“Eh, hello, sorry, is that oh three six nine four two?”

“Far as I know.”

“Oh. Well, it’s just about your ad.”

“Me wha’?”

“Wasn’t it you?”

“Not that I know of.”

“Your ad. Your ad on the notice board in the Students’ Union.”

“I haven’t a notion what you’re talking about.”

“But, sorry, but I saw it there just this morning.”

“What did it say?”

“Well it starts ‘two’ and then a sort of symbol thing—”

“Hang on. Ruth? Ruth, turn off that bloody hair dryer. Listen, have you taken to advertising our services in the S.U.? What? No, I amn’t being thick. Oh, the flat, all right, well why didn’t you tell me? Yo, are you still there? Nobody tells me anything.”

“It’s just I was hoping, maybe I could come and have a look, if it’s not too inconvenient? Unless you have someone already?”

“For all I know she could have sublet the entire building to the Jehovah’s.”

“Maybe I should ring back later.”

“Ah, no, it’s grand. Why don’t you come over for eats?”

“Tonight?”

“Tomorrow we die.”

“You what?”

“Seize the day, for tomorrow we die. Sorry, just being pretentious. Make it eightish.”

“Are you sure? That’d be wonderful. Bye so.”

“Hang on, what’s your name? Just so we don’t invite some passing stranger in for dinner.”

“Sorry It’s Maria.”

“Well I’m Jael. By the way, was our address on the ad?”

“I don’t think so, no.”

“I suppose I’d better give it to you, then, unless you’d prefer to use your imagination?”

“Do I get the feeling you’re taking the piss out of me?”

“You bet your bottom I am. OK, seriously, folks, it’s sixty-nine Beldam Square, the top flat. Get the number seven bus from college, and ask the conductor to let you off after the Little Sisters of the Poor. Right?”

“I think so.”

“Be hungry.”

She loved the double-decker buses, every last lumbering dragon. One Christmas her Mam had brought the kids up to Dublin for a skite. Maria was only small, seven or so, but she dropped her mother’s hand halfway up the spiral steps of the bus and ran to the front seat. Sketching a giant wheel between her mittens, she steered round each corner, casting disdainful glances at cyclists who disappeared under the shadow of the bus as if the ground had gulped them down. As she revved up O’Connell Street the afternoon was darkening. When the bus stopped at Henry Street, she had to be prised away; she gave up her hand and followed her mother’s stubby heels into the crowd. Looking back over her shoulder, she saw the Christmas lights coming on all down the street, white bulbs filling each tree in turn and turning the sky navy blue. Maria tried asking her mother why the light made things darker, but by then they were on Moore Street, and her voice was lost in the yelps of *wrappinpaypa fifatwenty*.

This was not the same route but a much quieter journey, or perhaps a decade had dulled her perceptions. The bus chugged round Georgian squares, past the absentminded windows of office blocks. Gone half seven, and not a soul abroad; only the occasional newsagent spilled its light at the corner. Maria got off at the right stop but, dreading to be early, walked back to the last shop and loitered among the magazines for twenty minutes. The girl behind the counter had a hollow cough that kept doubling her over on her high stool. As the time ticked away Maria began to feel so uncomfortable that she finally bought *Her* magazine and a bag of crisps.

She was licking the salt off her fingers as she rounded the third corner of Beldam Square. Number 69 edged a narrow street; the digits were engraved on the fanlight. Maria knocked twice on the side door’s scuffed paintwork before discovering that it was on the latch. Inside, she fumbled for the switch; a light came on ten feet above her, round and pearly as the one in the dentist’s that she always focussed on during drilling. Halfway up the first flight of carpeted stairs, she remembered the gloss under her arm. She unrolled it and scanned the slippery cover. “Boss Giving You Grief?” That was fine, and not even the most fervid feminist could object to “Living with Breast Cancer.” She had had doubts about “Why Nice Men Aren’t Sexy,” and when her eye caught “Ten Weeks to Trim Those Bulges for Christmas!” she rolled up the magazine and left it at the base of the stairs. She could collect it on her way out. She might not even like them.

Between two steps Maria found herself in darkness. Damn light must be on a timer. At arm’s length she reached the bannister; it was a cool snake of wood drawing her hand upward. Not a whiff of lentils, she thought, as she was guided round a bend and up another flight of stairs. How many feminists does it take to screw in a light bulb? One to screw in the bulb, one to stir the lentil casserole and one to object to the use of the word *screw*. Her obnoxious little brother it was who’d told her that when she was complaining about something sexist on the telly one evening. She’d got him for it with a dishcloth later.

Grey light knifed the top steps. The clean, unvarnished door hung several inches open; Maria watched it shift a little in the draught. She buttoned up her jacket, then undid it again. The savor of garlic was tantalising. Her first tap made almost no sound; she summoned her nerve and thumped on

the wood.

“Hi, hang on, dinner’s burning,” came a yelp. A long pause. “I mean, you can come on in.”

Maria was standing in the shadowy hall, fingering half a peanut at the bottom of her jeans pocket when the woman elbowed through a bead curtain. Stuffing wisps of hair into her black cap, she smiled warm as toast. “I’m Ruth, the other one.” She brushed the beads out of the way and guided Maria in. Clearing a place on the tartan blanket that draped the sofa, she murmured, “Just hang on there while I have a serious conversation with the stir-fry. Oh, goddess, what a mess.”

Maria cleared her throat. “It’s not that bad,” she commented, fitting herself on the sofa between a dictionary and a small box of blackberries.

“See, I meant to come home early and tidy up so as I could play the suave hostess, but I was queueing for the library photocopier and my watch stopped, so anyway, I’m just in.” Ruth turned back to the wok and gave it a shake that made the hob clang. “And this cursed onion keeps sticking to my nonstick surface.”

Maria watched her swerve between the stove and the table, carrying wine glasses and earthenware plates. Ruth’s narrow face, framed in brief dark curls, swung round the kitchen. From the sink she pulled a heap of wet branches, stood them in an empty milk bottle, and placed it grandly in the center of the table. Maria’s eyes waited for a drip from the rusty tip of a leaf to fall onto the wood.

Ruth subsided onto the sofa. Her eyes rested on her oversized black watch, then lifted; they were wary and chocolate-brown. “Typical, I bust a gut getting everything ready for ten past, and my ladyship isn’t home yet.”

“I was meaning to ask, is it spelt with a Y?”

“Is what?”

“Her name. As in *Yale lock*.”

“No no, it’s a *J*. Jael from the Book of Judges. In the Bible, you know? Sorry, I shouldn’t assume. Anyway, this Jael killed an enemy general by hammering a tent peg into his brain, if I remember rightly.”

“Oh.” After a pause, Maria tried raising her voice again. “And she’s at college too?”

Ruth let her breath out in a yawn before answering. “In a long-term sense, yes, but right now she’s probably moseying round town buying purple socks and drinking cappuccinos.” She leaned back in the cushions and rolled her head from side to side.

“She does that often?”

“Every few weeks. Only sometimes shoelaces rather than socks. It’s her hormones, you know.”

They were beginning to giggle when the front door banged open and feet clumped down the passage.

Ruth’s narrow face opened. “Jaelo,” she sang. “Come here and entertain our guest.”

A pause, and then a pale, freckled face broke through the beads. She was very tall, with very ostentatious ruddy hair. An unsettling laugh as she tossed her plastic bags onto the sofa, just missing the blackberries. “Hello there, new person, I’d forgotten all about you. It’s Maria, right?”

“Yeah, but with a hard *i*—Mar-iy-a,” she explained. “But it doesn’t really matter, everyone tends to pronounce it wrong anyway.” God, how seventeen.

“Did you deliberately pick it to rhyme with *pariah*?” asked Jael, her chair scraping the bare board floor.

“Eh, no, actually.” Go on, don’t cop out. “What does it mean?”

Struggling with a bootlace, Jael paused, one foot in the air. “D’you know, I couldn’t tell you. Some sort of deviant. It’s one of those words you throw around all your life until someone asks you what means and you realise you’ve been talking through your rectum.”

Maria cleared her throat.

“Outcast,” murmured Ruth as she carried the wok to the table, her face averted from the steaming food. “Pariah is the lowest of the Indian castes.”

“And knowall is the second lowest.” Jael slid her hand into the crocodile oven glove and lunged at Ruth, who dipped out of the way.

The nearest seat was taken by a red-socked foot. “Sorry, Maria, my size tens need a throne of their own. Sit up there at the head of the table,” commanded Jael. “Only don’t lean back too far, or the chair might collapse.”

Maria slid onto the chair and accepted a smoking plateful. She tackled a mushroom.

“Don’t mind the woman,” said Ruth, unrolling her denim sleeves and passing the basket of garlic bread. “She broke it herself last summer; we had a few people in for dinner, and she got carried away in the middle of an impromptu guitar recital.”

“All my guitar recitals are impromptu,” said Jael in a depressed tone. She wrenched the corkscrew from the wine bottle gripped between her knees and bent toward Maria.

Automatically Maria covered the glass. “None for me, thanks.”

Jael trickled the wine through Maria’s fingers. Maria snatched her hand away. Red drips scattered on the table; one ran along a crack in the wood. “I said I—”

“I heard what you said.” The round-bellied glass was two thirds full. “But you can’t insult Ruth while cooking by drinking water, especially not plague-ridden Dublin tap water.”

Maria sucked her fingers dry one by one as the conversation slid away from her. The wine tasted as rich as the overpriced bottles her Da kept in the back of the shop for the occasional blow-ins from Dublin on their way to a holiday cottage. They often chose her town square to stop in, to stretch their legs and fill up the boot of the car with ginger cake and firelighters. How many years before she would become a foreigner like them? She reached for her glass and took a noiseless sip. Three years of the uni, that’s if she had the luck to pass everything first time. Then some kind of a job for which her statistics classes would in no way have qualified her. Or maybe she could cling on and do an M.A. in art history. Go on the dole and help kids paint murals on crumbling city walls. On what day in what month of this queue of years would she find that she had become a rootless stranger, a speck in the urban sprawl? The accent was wavering already; her “good night” to the bus driver this evening featured vowels she never knew she had.

There was something glinting on the window behind Ruth’s bobbing head; a hawk shape, a giant butterfly? Maria didn’t want to interrupt their argument, which seemed to be about the future (or lack of it) of the Irish language. She could look more closely at the window in daylight. If she was even here in daylight. If she didn’t catch the train home tonight and start sorting potatoes in the shop on Monday morning. At least in a small town people knew how to pronounce your name.

By the time Maria had forked down her cooling dinner, Jael was boasting of her twenty year experience of fine wine.

“They put it in your baby bottle?” suggested Maria.

She turned, big-eyed. “You mean you didn’t warn her?”

Ruth was staring at the fridge with an air of abstraction. “I knew I’d forget to add the bean sprouts. Sorry, warn what?”

“That we’re old fogeys. That dreaded breed who lurk under the euphemism of Mature Students.” Jael lifted a curl away to point out invisible crows’ feet round her eyes. “Your charming hostess is twenty-four, and I, loath though I am to admit it, am twenty-nine.”

“You’re not.” Maria’s eyes shifted from one to the other. She took another sip of wine. “Neither of you look it. I don’t mean you look young, exactly, but not nearly thirty.”

Jael cackled, balancing her last mushroom on a forkful of broccoli. “I retain my youthful appearance by sucking the blood of virginal freshers by night.”

“You look much more aged than me,” Ruth reflected. “Doesn’t she, Maria?”

“I’m not taking sides, I’m just a visitor.”

Ruth reached past Jael for the wine. “If her hair wasn’t red, the grey would be much more obvious. And you should see the cellulite on her hips.”

Jael made a face of outrage and flicked a pea at Ruth; Ruth retreated to the sink to fill the kettle.

“So what about you?” Jael asked.

Maria jumped; she had been engrossed in making a swirl of wine with her fork on the table. “What about me?”

“Oh, the usual things,” said Jael, tugging her frayed, multicolored jumper over her head and tossing it just short of the sofa. “Place of origin, college subjects, vital statistics, bad habits, thoughts on the meaning of life.”

Maria considered, the fork tasting metallic in her mouth. “I don’t like listing myself,” she said, smiling slightly to cushion the words.

Was that respect in Jael’s salty blue eyes, or amusement?

Maria edged her glazed mug over to be filled from the cafetière.

“But then,” Jael went on, “how are we meant to know whether you have all the necessary attributes of a good flatmate?”

“Guess.”

Her mother would slap her hand for being rude, but then, her mother was more than a hundred miles away. And they never had cream in coffee at home. She took the jug from the outstretched hand of Ruth, whose eyes rested on her. “Tell us this much—how did you come to answer our ad? I’d have thought you’d have friends from home coming up to college with you.”

“Oh, I have. Well, school friends, not real friends. They’re mostly doing commerce or agriculture. They’re nice, there’s nothing wrong with them,” she added uncomfortably. “It’s just that I’ve had enough of pretending to be equally nice.”

Ruth nodded. “I used to have some friends I could only describe as nice. Life is too short.”

“Besides,” Maria went on, taking a scalding mouthful of coffee, “I can just imagine what sharing a flat with school friends would be like. Borrowing stamps and comparing bra sizes, you know the way.”

Jael coughed so hard she had to put her cup down. “There was none of that in my day. Support girdles we wore, back then.”

“Oh and also,” said Maria, turning back to Ruth’s gaze, “why I noticed your ad was the bit about niggers and bigots.”

Hunched over her mug, Jael sniggered, for no reason that Maria could see.

“That was my idea,” Ruth murmured. “It simplifies things.”

“It was eye-catching,” Maria assured her.

Another snort.

Had she said something stupid? Was she showing her youth again? She leapt into speech. “I was once stuck in a Gaeltacht in Mayo learning to speak Irish for three entire weeks with a pair of bitchy women who supported apartheid. I don’t think I could stick a flat unless everyone in it was basically liberal.”

“We Dubliners are very liberal altogether, you’ll find,” Jael commented, shovelling the coarse curragh back from her forehead. “Life, liberty, and the pursuit of Guinness.”

“I’m the only Dub here,” commented Ruth.

“Ah, Kildare’s only a county away. Besides, I’ve been soaking up the metropolitan atmosphere for a fair while now; I’m as much a true Dub as a snobby Southsider like you anyway.” Jael ducked to avoid the tea towel. “Listen, why don’t we start showing this bogtrotter round our bijou residence?”

In the half-light of the corridor Maria glimpsed black-and-white posters of a cityscape. Something brushed her ear; she put up one hand and found an asparagus fern hanging overhead, its points sharp against her palm. They had no plants at home; her dad claimed they gave him hay fever.

“This room’s a bit bare, I’m afraid.” Ruth’s voice reverberated in a narrow doorway. As the light snapped on, Maria narrowed her eyes, taking in pale orange walls and flame-striped curtains. “If you really loathe the colour ... I mean, we keep meaning to get around to repainting it.”

“It’s distinctive,” said Maria warily.

“Ruthie babe,” came a bellow. “I’m off to the off-license. Don’t suppose you’d have a tenner on you?”

She was gone, fumbling in her jeans pocket. Maria’s palms bounced on the bed tentatively. The new brown chest of drawers looked antique; when she tugged at the top drawer, the wrought iron handle came off in her hand, so she stuck it back in hastily and sat on the edge of the bed.

Their voices trickled down the passage. It occurred to her to cover her ears, but that seemed juvenile. She concentrated on the old calendar hanging from a nail beside her. *Ireland’s Underwater Kingdom*, it read; the picture for October was a crab that seemed to be signalling frantically at her with a strip of seaweed.

“So she’s gone at last.” That was Jael, husky.

Maria held her breath.

“Really?”

“Her flight was at eleven this morning. Unless she missed it, which is unlikely.”

“Well.” Ruth again, distant. “Hope she finds a job all right. There’s not much for her in Dublin.”

Jael's voice lifted to a call as she clattered down the stairs. "See you later, ladies. Be good."

Cold air was coming off the bare window. Maria pulled the sleeves of her jumper down to cover her fingers and leaned on the sill. Her breath made a circle of glittering condensation; she touched her little finger to its chill, and made a small *m* in the center. When she heard steps in the passage, her hand poised to rub out the mark, but instead she reached for the curtains and drew them across. The room was safer now, but smaller. "Couldn't see anything but roofs," she told Ruth.

"Yes, but this room faces west; it's glorious in the late afternoons. Come and see the rest?"

It would be strange to live up so many steps, without a garden to wander into. The elegant and the shabby met in every corner of this flat. She craned her neck to examine the moulding around a bare light bulb.

"Georgian," Ruth explained. "Gorgeous fanlight over the front door, did you notice? Three floors of the building got converted into offices in the fifties, but the penthouse was too oddly shaped for anything but a flat. A bugger to heat in the winter, but I love these high ceilings. They elevate the mind, don't they?"

Maria nodded, rapt. The highest ceiling she had ever slept under, she remembered now, was in Uncle Malachy's smelly barn one night when she'd gotten locked out by mistake; she hadn't wanted to throw a stone and wake Mam, who was still weak after the operation. "So who's down below?"

"You're unlikely to meet them; they use the front staircase. There's a firm of chartered surveyors, an optician, and the Girl Guides HQ. In the basement there's what purports to be a baldness clinic, but we suspect it's a brothel for businessmen. Is there a brothel in your town, Maria?"

"I wouldn't know," she answered, after a puzzled moment. "I've lived there all my life, but I've no idea. There've been rumours about the flashy cars outside Mrs. Keogh's, but I'll bet that's because she's a redhead."

Ruth chuckled under her breath. "Must tell Jael about that."

The bathroom was lined with white tiles, clean but cracked in places. Opening the hot press, Ruth prodded a folded towel into line. When she turned, her face looked tired in the hard fluorescent light. "I'd better be honest with you, Maria, you might find it a bit isolated here."

"Isolated from what?"

A disconcerted pause. "Depends what you're looking for." Ruth bent to fish an empty shampoo bottle out of the bathtub. "I'm not wildly sociable, myself; I do things at college, debating and stuff, but when the day's over I like to curl up with tea and a book."

"Me too."

"Really?" Ruth's mouth softened. "You could get somewhere nearer the university with a younger crowd, for the same money. But on the other hand, this place can be a sort of home. On good days."

"It seems very nice," said Maria.

"Do you think so? It all depends on ... what do you do, Maria?"

"Maths and art."

Her hand flapped that away. "No, I mean what do you really like to do?"

She sat on the rim of the tub and let the question hang in the air. Her eyes paused on a ceramic mermaid, old toothbrushes poking up from her breasts.

“I know, isn’t it the pits?” said Ruth. “I’ve tried all sorts of arguments, but Jael is such a stubborn Scorpio. Apparently it’s got sentimental value because she got it from an old friend in Denmark. I think she keeps it to annoy me.”

Maria traced the yellow hair with one finger. “Why haven’t you accidentally knocked it off the windowsill?”

“Do you know, I’ve never thought of that.” Ruth’s expression was oddly respectful. “Not sure I could go through with it; what if it decapitated a passerby? Maybe if you came to live here, you could do the deed.”

Maria was reminded that she still had to prove herself. “About what you were asking—I can’t really say what I like to do.”

“Ah, forget it, you don’t like questions.”

“No, it’s not that.” Her fingers rested on the cold ceramic. “It’s just that I’ve never lived away before, so I don’t know what I’ll be like. At home I draw and watch wildlife documentaries and stuff, sit round nattering to Mam while she cooks, and keep my brothers away from breakable objects.”

“Every house needs someone like that.” Ruth’s smile vanished as she turned off the light. “And this is our room,” she said as she opened the door to a larger, darker bedroom, with a purplish hanging on the wall. “It’s north-facing, so we don’t sit around in it much.”

“But you don’t even have proper beds,” protested Maria. “Could you not ask the landlord—”

“We like the futon, really. It’s great for Jael’s bad back, and there’s plenty of space.”

“Just seems a bit unfair that whoever moves in gets a room of her own.”

“Ah, don’t worry about it,” said Ruth, bending to straighten a corner of the duvet. “We’re used to each other by now. I’ve trained Jael not to snore.”

Halfway through a tour of the cupboards, Maria’s eye was caught by a moth flapping against the ceiling; she looked up and noticed a skylight. “Can you get out onto the roof? The view over Dublin must be amazing.”

“To tell you the truth, I’ve never got around to it.”

“Suppose not,” said Maria, regretting her enthusiasm.

“But I must ask the landlord,” Ruth added as she pushed an obstinate door shut on a stack of blankets. “Though the mean bastard would probably put another fiver on the rent ‘for use of rooftop recreational space.’” Her fingers slid to the switch, and they were standing in darkness.

Maria stood still. Small ads, that was always how psycho killers lured victims to their flats.

“Look,” said Ruth.

“What?”

“Up. Have your eyes adjusted?” Directly below the skylight, Ruth’s finger was raised. “That must be the Seven Sisters.”

“I didn’t think Dublin had stars. I mean, with the smog and all.” She peered up, open-mouthed.

The front door lurched open.

“What are you two playing at in the dark?” Jael asked, as they came up the corridor to help her with her splitting bags. “Hey,” she went on, “some good fairy left me this month’s *Her* on the stairs, and it’s got twenty gorgeous pages of lingerie. I have my suspicions,” she went on, putting the tip of the

wine bottle to Ruth's temple.

"It's mine." Maria's cheeks were scorching. "I must have dropped it and not noticed."

"Ah, too bad."

"No, no, take it. I've read it already. On the bus," she insisted. "Speaking of which, I'd better be getting back before my Aunt Thelma rings the police."

They turned on the light in the stairwell for her as she said her goodbyes. They would ring. She would take care. As she reached the first landing, she heard one of them begin to hum, one of those slow fifties croonings you could never get out of your head.

Maria pretended not to see the youth in a bicycle helmet who was shifting round the phone box, rubbing his hands and peering at his watch in the streetlight.

"Yeah, they'll let me know by the end of the week. I hope so, Mam. I think being a nonsmoker was a plus.

"The rent's not too scarifying. If I got a job on top of my grant, it should be grand. Central heating and an open fire as well. I didn't check the fridge. Should I have? Ah, Mam, it's very civilised, not like a squalid bedsit at all. You can stop fretting. OK, I didn't mean fretting—being concerned.

"Yes, I'm eating very well, Thelma cooks everything in a cream sauce. Mam, she specifically asked me to call her that, it makes her feel younger. Yeah, she's still at the upholstery. All right. Night-night now. Ta for letting me ring reverse-charges. Say hi to Dad and the lads, will you? God bless."

She swung the glass door wide and darted out, with a quick "Sorry for keeping you." Halfway down the street, hands bunched in her duffel-coat pockets for warmth, she remembered her fountain pen sitting on the directory and loped back.

His helmet bent over the receiver, he was agitated in conversation. Maria knocked timidly on the glass and got a glare in return. "Sorry," she mouthed. "Pen." Her hand made a writing motion, then pointed at the ledge. Dark eyes stared through the glass. "Forget it," she mouthed, her hands flapping. She turned her hot face away and headed down the narrow street.

The door of the phone box crashed open. "What? What is it?"

"It doesn't matter," she called, her voice unsteady.

"Hey, come back here, I'm through with my call." He lowered his voice as she neared him. "I guess I was rude. I was in a hurry."

"It was just my fountain pen," Maria said, clearing her throat. "I think I left it on the shelf." She took it from his hand. Up close, he was skinny and no older than she was.

"I'm sorry I wouldn't open the door, but you know, you could have had a knife or something."

She stared.

"So you're not the most likely of muggers," he admitted, tugging off his helmet and running a bony hand through tufts of hair. "But in Brooklyn we take no chances."

"You're from New York, really?" Then she heard her own voice talking to a male stranger on an empty street. "Sorry to have bothered you. Good night." And she strode off, not giving him a chance to do more than nod.

Safe on the top deck of the meandering bus to Dun Laoghaire, she let her shoulders uncurl, shedding the weight of a long day. Twenty minutes of dreamtime now, as floodlit city corners flared into black.

suburban avenues. The knob-bled branches of overhanging horse chestnut trees cracked against the windows, on and off, pulling her back to consciousness. Glinting on the glass she could see the first spatter of rain.

Her aunt's house was the last in a cul-de-sac of opulent hedges. Maria let herself in noiselessly and was halfway up the stairs when she remembered the no-shoes rule. Damn it to hell, who ever heard of having a magnolia carpet? She was wrenching off her second sneaker when the kitchen door opened.

"Welcome back. You'll join me for cocoa?"

"Surely," said Maria, stuffing her sneakers into her coat pockets. She padded down the stairs and into the gleaming kitchen. "Could I have a glass of water as well?"

Gathering her beige satin dressing gown round her neck, Thelma smiled at the anxious tone. "I'm sure that could be arranged."

"Sorry to be in so late."

"Oh, I got accustomed to it with Alexandra. She was always staying out till five in the morning. University life brought out the vagabond in her."

"Where is it that she is now?" asked Maria politely, stifling a grimace as she sipped the urban water.

"Bucharest. At least that's where the last postcard was from. Live it up while you're young, or you'll regret it later, I always say."

She angled her glass, watching the water catch white ovals of light.

Thelma took a sip of cocoa without wetting her lips. "I've always said to her, 'Darling, make your own decisions and I will respect them.' Especially during her bad patch after her father passed away, I thought she needed to know that."

Maria nodded and reached for her cocoa. She was suddenly weary in every muscle.

"What about you, do you often clash with Caitríona? Battles over boys?"

Maria's lips tightened. "Mam and I get along fine, actually."

"You're not still calling her that, are you? Mam, it sounds so nineteen-forties." Thelma spooned up the last drip of cocoa.

"She prefers it."

"I see." A meditative pause. "Caitríona was never the radical of the family."

"How's the stool coming along?" asked Maria, on the verge of rudeness. She bent her face to catch the steam from the cocoa.

"Very nicely. French polishing's all done, and I start on the seat tomorrow. It's for my dentist's sitting room; he's taking it as payment for that broken crown on my molar." Thelma's face looked girlish with satisfaction. "Would you like to see it?"

The molar or the footstool? Maria wondered, and felt fatigue and repentance tugging her two ways. "In the morning, I'd love to."

"Good night so. There's a hot water bottle in your bed."

Maria watched the knot of limbs struggle toward the edge of the lake. All round her, students lay draped on the concrete steps, white-faced in the autumn sun. Only at the third scream from the girl

the hub of the group did people begin to look up. "Engineers are at it again," said a lazy voice just behind Maria. "I heard they're aiming to beat last year's total of ten girls in the pond by the end of Freshers' Week."

"At least it's sunny this year," commented another.

Maria could see the woman now; she bucked and shoved, making vain attempts with one free hand to keep her billowing peachy skirt between her knees while a dozen boys towed her, head first, down the steps. The odd giggle escaped from the watchers. With a shriek and a violent kick one leg leaped free, but the sandal dropped off, and four hands caught the ankle again. "Heave! Heave!" They swung her twice over the water, their chant drowning her out. And then the body dropped with a splash.

Almost at once a sleek black head emerged over the lip of concrete, dripping and laughing, calling for a helping hand. Maria gathered her belongings to go. At the top of the steps she turned, staring until one of the engineers retrieved the woman's sandal and another wrapped her in his laboratory coat.

Heading blindly up the peopled steps, Maria careered into a sharp shoulder.

"We must stop meeting like this."

For a long moment she couldn't place the face, then embarrassment flooded her as she recalled the New Yorker. "Sorry, hello. I'm sorry."

"And I'm Galway. Were you watching the ritual witch-dunking?" He jerked his eyes toward the lake.

"She's no witch, she's a bimbo," retorted Maria, more viciously than she meant.

One bushy eyebrow lifted. "Do you know her?"

"She was laughing, for god's sake. How could she let them toss her into all that oil and sludge, and then laugh?"

"Maybe she didn't have much of a choice. If she's going to be in their class for four years, she won't want a reputation for not being able to take a joke."

"Well, I think it's sick."

"Of course it's sick, I was taking that for granted." Galway readjusted the faded rucksack on his shoulders. "Adolescent macho thuggery. That's why I never joined a fraternity back home in my freshman year; I just couldn't see the thrill in walking backward along a roof ridge in my box shorts."

She eased into a smile as they began drifting toward the long grey buildings. "Do you want to, mean, I was just going for a cup of tea."

Fourth time tonight, thought Maria, gritting her teeth as she recognised the song. It drew squeals of enthusiasm, and another chain of dancers sewed its way into the crowd. She scanned the flushed faces of Nuala, her friend back in fourth year, would have reduced them to *sweaty proles*, or *the twit-terati*. It would be handy to despise these fellow freshers; then she could give up the bother of getting to know them and go back to Thelma's to read an early edition of the Sunday papers. But the fact was that half of these people seemed more intelligent than she was, and the other half were better-looking.

A painful prod between the shoulder blades; she turned and found Yvonne's pink nails. "Been queueing long? You could get me a vodka and Coke while you're there. Try the barman with the

earring, he's a sweetie."

Maria leaned against the wall. The condensation soaked through her thin sleeve, and she recoiled. "Having a good time?" she asked.

"Of course."

There was no answering that.

"Bet you're glad now that I made you come along."

They inserted themselves in a gap at the bar. Lager and stout mingled in tinted pools along the wood.

"Those harem pants are dead sexy on you," Yvonne said.

"They are not, they make me look bandy-legged." She caught Yvonne's eye. "Sorry, I mean, I'm grateful for the loan. I just hadn't realised they'd have so much gold braid on them; I feel like I've escaped from a circus."

"Mmm, that's why I never wore that outfit myself. But you've got the slimness to carry it off." Yvonne added hastily.

"You look rather luscious," Maria told her, stifling a yawn.

"Salmon has always done things for me," Yvonne agreed. "Nearly fell out of it when I was doing the lambada, though," she added; "that guy Pete's eyes were popping."

The barman noticed Maria's limp wave at last, and hurried them their drinks.

"So tell us, have you found a flat yet?"

"I've rung around a bit, and seen one total dive. I thought I'd have heard from that first place by the end of last week."

Yvonne's attention was wandering. She pointed discreetly, at hip level: "She's the one that got dumped in the lake, wasn't it gas? Looks a bit goosepimply still."

To avoid replying, Maria touched her lips to the creamy head of her half pint. "Anyway, if I don't get that flat, I'll try a few more on Monday."

"Do. So tell us," Yvonne said, turning her pale blue eyes, "you been asked up yet?"

Maria considered lying but hadn't the heart for it. "I jived to a fifties remix with a spotty theology student and got a violent stitch in the ribs."

"Bad luck."

"He was no loss; all he talked about was how many points he won in his matriculation."

Yvonne was smoothing out a crease in her skirt. "You have to start somewhere, Maria."

"Not with him, I don't."

She gave a theatrical sigh. "Your problem is, your standards are too high."

"That's what my mother says."

But Yvonne had drifted a few feet away in response to a wave from a boy in a wing collar.

Now that she came to think of it, Maria could only remember her mother telling her that once. She must have been about nine, that time she was allowed sit up late to watch the Eurovision Song Contest and had kept commenting how yucky the men were, with their big ears or furry chests. Mam remarked that Maria might end up an old maid, being too picky to be satisfied with any one man. Marriage was

about give and take and a fair bit of giving up too. It occurred to Maria to suggest polygamy, which she had read about in her history book's brief section on "Our Tribal Ancestors," but her mother was probably too Catholic to find that funny. As her dad took her up to bed he told her not to fret, she'd be the career woman of the family. She laughed and threw a rolled-up sock at him as he turned off the light.

In the dark, she parted the curtains and leaned her elbows on the chilly windowsill. Counting the lights of the small town nestling round her house, she realised that all the women she knew were wives and mothers. Except for the young ones heading for the uni, and that librarian with the hay fever, and a couple of teachers. And of course Nelly the Nutter, who sat on the steps of the town hall, scratching her ankles. That night Maria slid down and tucked the quilt over her head and could not sleep for worrying what she would turn out to be.

And how much farther had she gotten with that question in eight years, she asked herself wryly, as she picked her way through the bar to a spare chair by the window. The music had changed to a slow set, without her noticing; a cover version of a sixties lament inched the couples across the dance floor. Maria leaned back in the crooked plastic chair and turned her eyes to the window. She traced the last of lights around the campus buildings until the music and voices blurred into the background. She imagined herself up and away, gliding over the dark lake, gaining height as she zoomed toward the city. Black air between her legs, the office windows glinting as she skimmed by.

Yvonne dropped heavily into the next seat. Then she heaved up again, felt her buttock, and sniffed her finger. "Damn it to hell, I'm sitting in a puddle of cider."

Maria's hand patted the windowsill beside her, but Yvonne let herself down onto the floor and rested her sagging curls on her pink satin knees.

"Still having fun?"

"Yeah. It's just cramps." Yvonne's voice was rigid.

"Ah, you creature. Want an aspirin?"

"Better not, on top of three vodkas it'd probably make me pass out."

It occurred to Maria to reach down and stroke the bent head, but she thought better of it.

They sat wordlessly for two songs, then Yvonne asked, "So where's that skinny guy I spotted with you, all pally in the canteen queue?"

"Galway's not here, and he's not my type."

"Terribly weedy name, Gary."

Maria heaved her voice over the level of the music. "No, Galway, after the county. Yankee nostalgia."

"Even worse!"

"It's not his fault," argued Maria, putting her sore feet up on an ash-powdered bench. "Apparently his granny was postmistress in Oughterard until she emigrated in 1934; she bullied Galway into spending his junior year over here studying Anglo-Irish drama and discovering his roots."

"He might discover your roots while he's at it," replied Yvonne mechanically. "So why isn't he here tonight?"

"Apparently it's a puerile mating ritual. Besides, he can't afford it."

Yvonne stretched and pulled herself onto her high heels. "This one's Madonna. Let's get on down.

"I'm grand here."

Her eyes were hard. "I know it's not easy to make friends at a hundred decibels, but we've got to try."

"I do talk to people after classes."

Yvonne waited, hands supporting the small of her back. "You're only making it more difficult for yourself in the long run, Maria."

"Oh, all right, don't nag."

They squeezed into the crowd.

The little *m* was still there, a faint mark on the pane.

"I'll leave you to, well, whatever one leaves people in bedrooms to do!"

Maria turned from the window and grinned widely. "I'm ready for bed anyway. Hauling all my worldly goods up four flights of stairs has taken it out of me."

Ruth hovered at the door. "You're sure there's nothing you need, like a nailbrush or something?"

"There's nothing to brush," said Maria, holding out her trimmed nails for inspection. "I'll be grand, don't worry about me." She put the last of her neatly balled socks into the back of the drawer, rattled it shut, and bent to slide her suitcase under the bed. Straightening up, she found Ruth still there, her hand on the door handle, her face almost apprehensive.

"I'm really glad you wanted me, actually." Keep the tone casual; sit down on the brown candlewick bedspread. "I'd nearly given up expecting you to ring."

"I know, I'm sorry about that," said Ruth in a rush. "There were a few others interested, and we thought we should wait just to be on the safe side."

The safe side of what?

"Sweet dreams, Maria." Her light steps faded down the passage.

She could never sleep the first night in a strange place. The flat was warm, still smelling faintly of garlic. She stretched out on her creaky bed and tracked faces in the damp-marked ceiling. That one was definitely her father, with the big eyebrows and pointy chin. The brothers could be those two blobs in the corner, their features moving too fast to be distinguishable. And who was that with one wide eye and her hair blowing over her face?

Before she could scare herself, Maria turned her nose into the coverlet. There was nothing imaginary about its soft ridges. She ran her fingers over them, counting the rises and falls; she was a giantess, fondling a countryside of motorways.

It occurred to her that she had forgotten to brush her teeth. She yawned, fumbled for her toilet bag on the chest of drawers, and set out for the bathroom. Turning the wrong way down the pitch-black corridor, she felt her hand brush against the bead curtain; she was about to retreat when she heard low voices from the fireside. She jerked, but her feet refused to turn.

When she was about six, Maria had gone through an insecure phase. If she shut her eyes now, she could see her child self, rumped in brushed cotton pyjamas, creeping down to the living room door and pressing her ear against it as her parents swapped domestic trivia over supper. Just in case they would mention her, let fall some secret praise or sarcasm. They never did, and the child tiptoed cold

back to bed. Eventually she had broken herself of the eavesdropping habit. But on occasion, on nights like tonight, the old curiosity gripped her. Her feet were going numb as she stood in the corridor, her face almost touching the beads. Only half a minute, she promised herself.

Ruth's voice was the softer one. "Yes, but she's only seventeen."

Maria shut her eyes.

"Ageist," commented Jael with satisfaction. "She seems good crack; I'd rather her than the humorless social scientist anytime."

"It's not that. I think she'll be lovely to have around."

"Then what's your problem?"

"It's not my problem, it's ours." A hurt edge to the words. "Just, it occurred to me tonight when we were hauling her suitcases upstairs, she may not have copped on yet."

Maria strained to hear, her ear almost touching the beads.

After a pause, the lazy voice said, "Does it matter that much?"

"It does to me. I'm worried that the wording of the ad was too subtle."

Jael chuckled. "That's your idea of subtlety, pet?"

Then came a phrase too low for her to catch. The curtain was shifting slightly in the draught; would a crack of firelight slip between the beads and light her up? Her knees were locked.

Ruth again, straining. "All I mean is, we don't want another melodramatic exit, do we? I thought we agreed to be honest this time."

"There's honest and there's boringly obvious. I think you should give the girl a chance," Jael went on. Was her voice growing, moving toward the curtain?

Maria swerved away. Her feet carried her silently down the corridor and into her room. She pushed the door delicately shut before crawling under the quilt. Staring at the ceiling in confusion, she wondered what on earth she had not "copped on" about. All she could think of was a drug ring. She heaved herself over and immersed her face in the pillow.

MIXING

Regards to Dad and the lads. I'll be home for the weekend soon. All the best, Maria.

She licked the flap of the envelope, wincing slightly at the taste, and stuck it down. Pausing outside the other bedroom, her fingers played an arpeggio on the door. "Anyone want anything down the shops?" No answer. Odd, surely she'd have heard them going out. Walking down the corridor, she slapped at the fern's lowest tendril, and it bobbed in its hanging basket.

Dirty blue clouds were scudding over slate roofs. A good cold smell in the air and the whiff of turfsmoke as she turned the corner made her think of home. The dusk lasted much longer in the country; nothing to get in its way, she supposed. In Dublin there was only half an hour of grey, then the street lamps blinked on and all the shoppers hustled home in the dark.

The post office was in the back of a newsagent's on the bottom floor of a narrow townhouse; its fanlight seemed to have been shattered by a stone. After practising silently in the stamp queue, Maria managed to ask for "Three 30p's please" without spitting. She dawdled at the candy counter until the boy behind it began to whistle "Why Are We Waiting?" "One of those," she told him, with a minimal point of the finger.

She could tell he was not going to let her away with it. "Mum," he bawled, "how much's the Fizz Kolapops?"

Maria took it from his oversized fingers and slid out through the crowd. A year ago she would have claimed it was for her little sister. Real maturity would be hers, she decided as she tore the thin plastic with her teeth, when she found herself able to ask for Jelly Tots in a ringing voice.

It tasted as wild as she remembered. Ten years ago at least; Sister Miriam used to dole them out as prizes for good conduct. The breeze snatched the crinkly plastic from her fingers as she turned down the street. Getting nippy now. Maria unzipped her anorak and let the wind shake through her, flapping her long black skirt and tossing strands of pale hair in her face. At home the wind had always seemed horizontal, dulling her ears as she plodded the mile and a half home from school, looking out for a lift from the butcher's van. But here it gusted in spirals, exciting her skirts. If she had a big enough umbrella now, she could lift away from the earth like Mary Poppins, her neat feet spurning the chimneys.

As she turned onto Beldam Square, running her fingers along the scaly railings, someone came hurtling down the footpath. She stepped out of the way, then recognised the bounce of Jael's copper hair. Whipping the lollipop from her cheek, Maria dropped it into a clump of dandelions.

"Whoah," she called as the red face panted up to her. "What's the race?"

Jael grabbed her by the sleeve of her anorak and dragged her along. "Offy," she gasped, "near six." Her voice was harsh as a gull's.

Maria, tripping over her skirt, had no breath to answer. They made it to the door of the off-licence just as the manager was about to lock it, and though he seemed unconvinced by Jael's saga of an aunt who'd had a car crash, he did reopen the till to sell them a bottle of whisky.

They ambled back, swapping giggled details of Aunt Bridie and her late lamented Citroën Diana. Jael pulled up the collar of her battered leather jacket, wrenching loose hair out of the way. She looked

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