THE FALLING IN Love MONTAGE

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For Steph,
Never gonna dance again.

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I don't believe in love at first sight or soul mates or any of that guff you see in the movies. You know, where you meet someone in an impossibly coincidental way and you lock eyes and true, everlasting love ensues. I've read a bunch of think pieces about how the romantic comedy is making a comeback, but I think it's just a nineties hangover trying to crawl its way back into relevance. Like plastic chokers, glittery eyeshadow, and TV reboots.

I do believe in wanting to get the shift. You know, maul, snog, lob the gob, feek, meet, wear . . . or as the French say, kiss. That doesn't get its due as the beautiful phenomenon it is.

Wanting to shift the life out of someone was about as much as I could hope for if I went to the post-exam party, but it wasn't enough to get me out of my fluffy socks and sweatpants. I was exhausted. I'd spent two gruelling weeks sitting in a hall with no air-conditioning and the mandatory exam period heat wave making me so sweaty my thighs squelched every time I stood up. True to form, however, Dad found a way to make putting on clothes and running away to a party an appealing prospect.

"Saoirse," his voice rang out.

That's Seer-sha, by the way. I know Saoirse Ronan's been on an international tour of duty telling everyone it's Sur-sha and God knows she's a national treasure but it's Seer-sha. It's really messing things up for all of the other Seer-shas in the country. I don't know why the poor girl won't pronounce her own name the way I want.

I could hear the excitement in Dad's voice, but I needed another minute. My brain was so numb it wasn't sending any signals to the rest of my body. Everything I'd been storing in my head until a few hours ago was gone. This could be how it started. Or maybe this happened to everyone. What was the Franco-Prussian War about? Did I care any more? Could I remember how to spell Württemberg? Unlikely.

"Saoirse, come on," Dad called again, the foot-stomping tone evident.

I pasted a smile on my face and reminded myself that he was trying to be thoughtful for a change. I'd seen him put a bottle of champagne in the fridge when he got home from work a couple of hours ago.

In October, assuming I got the bundle of As I needed, I'd be moving across the sea to go to Oxford. Mum had studied there too. Dad was obsessed. He told everyone he met. Some people feigned interest; others, like the postman, stopped ringing our doorbell. Thanks to Dad, whenever we got a package we always had to go down to the depot.

I think he thought it would be something nice for Mum

and me to have in common, but good exam results were not the thing I was concerned about sharing with her.

When I applied, Hannah and I had broken up very recently, so putting the Irish Sea between us seemed like a good idea at the time. Fast forward to June, and the increasingly real prospect of leaving Mum behind was giving me second thoughts. Actually, I was having second thoughts about the whole university malarkey altogether. But I couldn't tell Dad that. He'd flip his lid.

"We don't have champagne flutes," he said when I walked into the kitchen. He frowned at the mugs on the mug tree.

"The banana one or the stripy one?"

Our kitchen was bright and cosy with a wonky spice rack on the wall and clutter on every surface, cookbooks with the pages stuck together with sauce, and crooked wooden cabinets that Granddad built because when we moved in here, we didn't have money for things like redoing the kitchen. Dad was no cook, though, so these days the spices were clumping together and there was dust collecting on the recipe books.

"The stripy one," I said.

"Right." He beamed and ran one hand through his hair, wavy and still black even though he was nearly forty-five. In the exact moment of noticing it, I realised he must dye it. "So, history today, wasn't it? Was it what you hoped for? Bernadette Devlin and Bismarck?"

"Yeah, I really don't want to dissect it. I'm fried."

"All right, all right. Let's toast instead. We have a lot to celebrate."

I squeezed the cork out of the bottle with a satisfying *pop!*

I had a lot to celebrate, technically. The last year of school had been hell topped off with the Leaving Cert, but it was over now and I would never have to go back there again. Dad, on the other hand, would not have realised my exams were over if the schedule hadn't been posted to the fridge for the last nine months. Ironically he was always the one with the scatty memory.

"Your exams are over," he announced, holding his mug aloft, "and you're going to Oxford—"

"We don't know that," I said quickly, my stomach churning.

"I'm certain of it. You'll have the time of your life." He hesitated then, and I could tell he was ramping up to something else. Suddenly, I knew what it was and my stomach did a giddy flip.

I'd been begging him to let Mum come home for months. He always had a million reasons why it didn't make sense, but for a second my heart expanded to allow hope in. It wouldn't be perfect, I knew that, but it would be better than now. I could see her all day. Not just a visit for an hour or two, which is not the same as living with someone. I could defer Oxford and make up for the time

we'd lost this year. Then I'd be ready to go and everyone would be happy.

"I have some exciting news. I know it's going to come as a shock. I wanted to tell you before but it's been so complicated and you've been so angry with me."

His words were not making sense. I mean yes, I'd been angry. Although I thought I'd hidden it remarkably well, seeing as I hadn't snuck into his room at night and set it on fire.

"I hope you'll be happy for me." The glass in his hand and his voice wavered.

Nothing good starts with *I hope you'll be happy for me*. The phrase is loaded with the unsaid ending *because you won't be happy for yourself*.

"Saoirse, honey, I asked Beth to marry me."

I dropped my mug on the table, champagne splashing out the top and forming a puddle. He set his down and held his hands up in surrender.

"Look, I know you haven't really got to know her yet, but you haven't given her a chance."

My mouth opened as though I was trying to respond, but my brain did not have the capacity to produce language. I closed my mouth and did the only mature thing possible. I ran upstairs to my room.

The small space between the door and the window wasn't long enough for pacing up and down to be satisfying but I did my best; smoke was practically coming out of my

nose. I wondered if he'd follow me. When I started to feel dizzy, I stopped pacing and paused to see if I could hear his footsteps in the hall. After a few moments, I heard the TV coming to life, the sounds of a sportsketball game making their way through the ceiling.

How could he do this to me? To Mum? I conjured up everything I knew about Beth. She and my dad were having an affair. She worked at an advertising company. She was always trying to talk to me, and I had to come up with ever more creative ways to avoid these "friendly" chats. I hated Dad for being so weak, for betraying Mum like that, for hopping into bed with the first replacement he could find, like you could just swap one woman out for another if she didn't suit you any more. And the way he expected me to accept it was mind-blowing. But I never in all this time thought it was serious. I would have worried if she'd started coming around for dinner or worse, she'd been staying here overnight, but they always went out. When he didn't come home, I tried not to think about why and concentrated on being grateful for the peace and quiet.

On the edge of my bed, my finger hovered over Hannah's name in my contact list. I was so tempted to press call. Even after eight months, after everything that happened, I really wanted to talk to her. I wanted to call and let myself sink into her voice, the words soothing me no matter what absurdly well-reasoned, totally emotionless thing she actually said. But I was longing for something that didn't exist any

more. That was the thing about breaking up. You think you're over it and then something happens and you feel the loss all over again. I put the phone down. There wasn't anyone else to tell.

Don't go feeling all sorry for me or anything, though. I hate that. It's the worst part of everyone knowing you have no friends. I really don't mind being alone, it's the pity I can't bear.

Once, about six weeks after the breakupocalypse, I was alone in our form classroom, eating a sandwich, when my ex-best friend, Izzy, walked into the room.

Now sandwiches are literally the stuff of life. You can't beat food stuck between bread by a thick layer of butter. But there is nothing that looks more forlorn and pathetic than sitting alone, eating a sandwich. It happens in films all the time. Whenever they want to show how sad and lonely a character is, they have them eat a sandwich at their desk or eat a sandwich on a park bench or eat a sandwich in front of the TV.

So there I am with my sad sandwich in one hand, listening to a podcast about grisly murders, minding my own damn business and graffitiing male genitals into the desk with a compass in my other hand. I find that teachers assume it is boys who graffiti such things onto desks. If you are a girl inclined to deface school property, may I suggest the classic penis and balls, as you will avoid suspicion due to stereotyping.

Izzy was swinging a locker key around her finger and humming show tunes loud enough to penetrate the description of dismemberment playing through my headphones. I used to love her penchant for bursting into song, but when you fall out with someone, you can grow to hate the same things you once loved. I didn't look at her but I could tell the moment when she noticed I was there. The air became thick, and I knew she wasn't sure whether to avoid me or not. We'd had this huge fight over Hannah, and I hadn't spoken to her in two weeks.

I pretended not to notice her even though I was counting the awkward, clunking seconds piling up. While her back was turned, I peeked. She was staring into her locker. Her shoulders sagged. I knew then that she was going to try to have a heart-to-heart with me. My options were to hastily try to wrap up my sandwich and get out of there or sit through the awkward attempt to reconnect. There was a small possibility that she'd start telling me off, but it was remote. Izzy was a gentle sort, not prone to confrontation. I was the *cross me once, cold shoulder forever* type.

I'm a real catch, did I mention that?

Izzy pulled a chair around and sat opposite me. I removed my earbuds and sighed pointedly.

"Yes?" I said, as if she were a teacher bothering me about missing homework, not one of my oldest friends.

"Saoirse, let's not do this. We're friends." Her face was open, vulnerable. She really wanted me to drop the defences

and tell her how I felt. I admit I thought about it. Cutting someone out takes a lot of energy. The last couple of weeks had been the loneliest I'd ever had. Everyone I could talk to was gone, not just at school but at home too. Trying to manage my feelings by myself after years of always having Hannah or Izzy to talk to felt like I was trying to shepherd a clutter of feral cats into a pen. But I couldn't trust Izzy any more. It was just me and my cats and I would have to learn to be OK with that.

"We *were* friends, Izzy."

"So what, now we have to be enemies because we disagreed on one thing?" She put her hand over mine. "Nothing has changed between you and me."

I moved my hand away and crossed my arms.

"We're not enemies, Izzy," I said lightly, like it didn't bother me enough to get annoyed. "We're not anything. You kept something really important from me."

"It wasn't my place to tell you," she said. For the four hundredth time. I knew she really believed it too, but it was less than meaningless.

"I'm not mad," I lied. "I don't care any more."

You can't go around letting people know they hurt your feelings. It gives them too much power.

"So, what, you're going to spend the rest of the year alone? Sitting in an empty classroom playing on your phone?"

There it was. The pity.

I shrugged my best IDGAF shrug and put my earbuds

back in my ears even though she didn't seem to be finished talking. Her forehead creased and her bottom lip quivered. The kind of face a child might make if you chopped the head off their favourite toy.

I pressed the back button until I got to the place in the podcast where I'd stopped paying attention. Izzy waited a second. Keep fighting or give up? It was written all over her face. I pictured her finally getting annoyed with me and telling me to grow up, telling me that friendships don't end just like that.

But she didn't. Because they do.

I got annoyed with Izzy all over again just thinking about it. When Hannah and I broke up, I lost Izzy too, and it was all her fault. But in the intervening months I'd learned a neat trick for managing all those pesky feelings. I pretended it never happened and focused on something else.

Even if I didn't have any close friends left, it didn't mean I was a complete hermit who had to stay locked up in her room like an outcast. I scrolled through the messages on my phone and found the details of the after-party I hadn't planned on going to. The combination of cheap vodka shots and girls feeling post-exam relief who may or may not want to experiment was now my best option for avoiding staring at my bedroom wall all night, avoiding awkwardness with Dad, and avoiding being stuck in an endless loop of my own thoughts.

Since my breakup with Hannah, I've had a rule, you see. I point-blank refuse to get into a relationship. An important addendum to this rule, a part B if you will, is that I don't kiss lesbians or bi girls. I'm not saying they'd all fall in love with me or they're all looking for a relationship, but it puts the possibility out there. If I cross that line, I'm asking for trouble. But I have a perfectly good thing going. Every girl in my school who wants to see what it's like to kiss a girl knows (1) I'm super gay and (2) I won't try to date them afterwards. We kiss, we part ways, no one gets hurt. Win-win.

Hannah – when we were friends and before we were more than friends – used to complain about girls like that, the ones who wanted to use me to see what it was like, and to be honest there was a time when I would have agreed with her. Like when I was fourteen and Gracie Belle Corban said she only did it because she wanted to be able to tell Oliver Quinn that she'd kissed a girl. I cried to Hannah for a week about that. But now, well, I have different priorities. As long as we both get what we want, no strings, just good old-fashioned girl-on-girl kissing, then what's the problem? I still draw the line at girls who want to do it to make their boyfriends horny. But a girl who wants to satisfy her curiosity? I am all over that. Literally.

I snorted when I finally found the message. Of course, it was good old Oliver Quinn's party. It was always his party. He had an enormous house and the only reason he didn't

go to some fancy private school is because there wasn't one anywhere near us. So if I ended up puking in his mother's rosebushes that wouldn't be so terrible. Not that I'm still bitter or anything.

The group text said to come any time after ten, which meant I'd be weirdly early, but if I didn't leave now there was a possibility that Dad would intercept me and force me to have a deep and meaningful about his new fiancée.

Just kidding.

We would avoid the topic until we both grew so resentful that we'd shout terrible things at each other across the living room.

That sweet father-daughter moment could wait. I pried my bedroom door open as quietly as possible and peered downstairs. The light from the living room flickered against the back wall of the hall. Open plan was a real bitch sometimes. The window it was then. I changed into something more suitable and laced my feet into black military boots. I felt kind of badass as I climbed out the window.

Dad would realise later of course and send me an annoyed text. He hated me sneaking out. As he figured it, he never actually stopped me from going anywhere, so the least I could do was tell him where I was going to be. But why confront today what you can argue about over breakfast tomorrow?