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Joseph O'Connor



things i know

helena close

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PAPER LANTERNS

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THINGS I KNOW

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Do mo chara, Rena,
le grá agus buíochas

May

1

'Take the devil out,' says Cian, pushing his big bacon-and-cabbage head right in my face. 'Fuck sake, Saoirse, just give it one good slug – what's wrong with you?'

He grabs the wine bottle from me, some cheap shit from Megan's mother's endless stash, and glugs it back, like water.

'Devil gone,' he says, laughing and scratching his crotch.

Megan and Kate giggle in unison, like they rehearsed it earlier. Dylan and Finn keep talking, their voices low and urgent. Dylan has an arm around Finn, like he's trying to convince him of something. The Clancy twins have finished a full slab of cans between them and are beating the shit out of each other near the waterfall. Cian hands the bottle to Megan and picks up my guitar. My fucking beautiful guitar that I should never have brought. He perches his arse on a flat rock and strums the chords of 'Outnumbered'. His voice is whiney and Americanised, West Clare accent well hidden, and if Dermot Kennedy could hear this version, he'd never sleep again.

It's one week before the stupid Leaving Cert, our last hurrah for the next few weeks, and everything's wrong. Broken. I want to blame them, but it's me. I know that now and I understand why Megan's cold with me. Finn's her twin. There are lots of twins in West Clare and I'd love to know why.

'Saoirse, you're weird as fuck tonight,' Cian says, giving up on the singing and reverting to his real talents, drinking and being a dick. 'Weirder than usual, like.'

He laughs, looking around for joke validation. He gets none. 'Why didn't your pal come, the mad wan from Limerick? She's a great laugh, her. Thought she was all on for a party?'

He scratches his arse this time – just for a change. I shrug and take a can from the pile on the grass near me. To have something to hold. To play with. I watch Finn and Dylan and am relieved when I see them laughing. At least *they* won't end up beating the crap out of each other too. Then Finn goes all Heathcliff, big moody head on him. He even has the dark curls and he fixes me with his eyes, spearing me, X-raying me. Dylan's all golden lad beside him, shimmery shine off him, even from here. The moon has risen over the rapids and the sun's setting over the forest, and that's one thing I love about the west coast – the way moon and sun drag out the day. There's this space between, a no-time space that I'd like to live in, and I really want Finn to stop staring at me. I pop the can and the cheap beer is warm and smells of vomit. Cian has taken to flicking bottle caps at Megan and Kate. Some fucking party.

Why didn't Jade come, after I begged her to? I pleaded with her, told her how awkward it would be with Finn, how Megan was being weird with me, how I just needed her to come here to this god-forsaken hole for one last time before I could escape back to Limerick and college. Bitch. She probably met someone, and when Jade has a new interest it's like her brain is a wiped hard drive. I miss her. She was great when we moved here first, two years ago, and I didn't know anyone and I was sad and Mam was gone and ... and not much has changed. Mam is still dead, Dad's still living a borrowed life, and maybe so am I. This one doesn't fit. It's tight and loose at the same time and I can't pull it off no matter what I do. Fuck. Cian is right. I'm weird and it's funny that he's the one that picks up on it. Big Clare head on him, no brain, itchy balls, and he can smell an imposter from three fields away.

'Play a few tunes, Saoirse,' he says now, like he knows I'm thinking about him. Megan laughs and turns her back to us. I've seen a lot of Megan's back recently, at school, in town, at the beach. Her back has become more familiar than her face. Cian finishes the wine in one slug and throws the bottle against the rocks under the waterfall. The crash of glass sends crows and conversations skittering.

'What's wrong with ye at all? We're supposed to be partying, like – I'd more fun at my grandmother's funeral. I'm getting locked, so fuck ye,' Cian says, and he unscrews a naggin. He downs it without flinching – only possible when you've an iron stomach and no brain. He grabs my guitar and starts to play, beating the strings into tuneless submission,

and a black knob of anger rises in my chest, squeezing air from my lungs. I could feel it when he smashed the bottle, the tiny hello of it in the pit of my stomach, and if I open my mouth now it'll come out like a fist and hammer the fuck out of him.

It's Finn who cops it. Feels it. And he's over and talking to Cian and taking the guitar away from him and my eyes are blurry with tears and rage and something else. Loneliness. Weirdness. I don't know what to call it.

'He's out of it,' Finn says, crouching in front of me. 'Are you OK?'

Cian has the guitar again and Finn tries to grab it from him, but Cian's enjoying this new sport. I get up, but my legs are shaking and I know that the black fist in my chest is bursting to get out.

Cian holds the guitar up in the air. 'Go on, Finn, jump for it, hahaha, watch Finn, lads, wimp is all he is,' he says. He falls backwards, the guitar slipping out of his hands and thumping down towards the river. One of the Clancy twins grabs it before it hits the water. Megan's recording the pantomime for TikTok or Insta because if it's not on her feed then it didn't happen.

'Come on, we'll go into town and get something to eat,' says Dylan, as he grabs my guitar and slips it into its soft case. Finn stacks all the cans and bottles into a neat pile and I can see his eyes searching for the nearest bin. I like that about him.

'We can head out to the beach after the grub – and fuck it, some of us need soakage,' says Dylan. 'You're coming

to the beach, aren't you, Saoirse? There's a gang out there already – Iron Blake, Lanky, they've a fire going and all.'

'I don't know,' I say. 'I've work in the morning,'

'I forgot,' says Dylan. 'The new job. Come for a while anyway. Jaysus, we need a decent singer or we'll have Cian howling for the night.'

The last thing I feel like doing is singing. For them.

We're walking the brow of the hill beyond the roaring waterfall and the sky blackens. Starlings swoop in a moving murmuration over and back across the pink and navy sky. I'm laughing and pointing but only Finn looks up too. I never saw a murmuration until I moved here and I think now that this is TikTok-worthy, Insta-perfect, and the others don't even notice. They call starlings *shitlings*. The birds weave intricate paths and I'm shivering and scared and happy all at once.

We walk into town in a long straggle, Dylan and I leading the way, Cian walking in the middle of the road, forcing motorists to swerve and honk at him. He loves that and gives them the finger and shouts long, loud strings of swears after them. He's very articulate when it comes to swearing. This town, Cloughmore, has a whole lexicon of swears that I had to master. If you don't swear, you're weird. I think that's why they all love Jade. She'd come on visits and teach them new swear words and a lot more besides.

We turn down Main Street and head towards Manny's. The street's deserted, although I can hear the sound of a squeeze box coming from one of the pubs and the loud buzz of alcohol-infused chat.

'What are you getting, Saoirse? Let me guess – the veggie option,' says Dylan, leaning in to me as we go in the door. I laugh. The veggie option in Manny's is a garlic chip.

'The usual, love?' Manny asks. Manny was the first person I spoke to when I moved here. It was September, the beginning of fifth year. I had no friends. Manny filled the gap with chips and smiles.

'Extra garlic sauce,' I say and root in my bag for coins. 'How are things?'

'Good, Saoirse. What will you have, young man?'

'Same as her,' says Dylan. 'I can't eat meat in front of her. She guilts me out.'

'She's bad for business, and now she's crossed over to the other side – that fancy place over the road – the competition,' says Manny. He laughs and turns back to his bubbling chip pans.

Cian and the others crowd into the tiny space and it's like they use up all the air and the black fist in my chest squeezes my lungs. *Not here, please not here, in front of them.* I push my way out, past Cian with his sweaty breath and Megan and her sickening perfume and the clingy smell of chips. I crouch down by the window and suck in cold air and try to steady my breathing. I want to go home, but I know staying is the right thing to do. Staying will make the broken seem fixed.

The street is night-quiet, except for the chatter from Manny's and the whish of faraway traffic. Dylan comes out and moves my guitar to sit beside me. He doesn't say anything, doesn't need to pack the silence or look at his

phone or flick bottle caps or make jokes. The streetlight throws yellowed, dirty colour on his face but he's still golden. Maybe it's the blond hair and I want to ask him if he bleaches it or highlights it and sure his mother is a hairdresser, the only one in town bar Hair Today and they only do blue rinses and bobs. How do I even know these things? Am I all small-town now too, and fuck it, I can't wait to get out of here.

I see movement at the top of the road and small-town me scans the street. I see a shape, just standing there, and I think it's Finn and I think he's watching us, eyes fixed on mine. I'm about to wave but he disappears around the corner, back towards Lord's Cove, like a shadowy ghost lad. Maybe I imagined him and he's inside getting chips and the double burger he loves, the meatier the better. It wouldn't be the first time I imagined things, people, conversations that never happened.

I stand up, legs cramping and look through the steamed-up window. Megan and Kate are Insta-ing or TikTokking or Snapchatting and Cian's shovelling chips into his mouth. The Clancy twins are leaning against the far wall, chatting like normal people. No sign of Finn. I search the street again but it's deserted. I'm about to ask Dylan if he saw Finn, when the others arrive.

'Here,' says Cian, throwing a parcel of food at Dylan. Cian leans against the window, pawing through a box of chicken, fingers shiny with grease. Dylan unwraps our chips and the waft of garlic makes my stomach growl. Megan and Kate are in a whisper-coven by the doorway. I miss Jade.

The air is full of munching sounds, mostly Cian sucking and gnawing at a drumstick like some neanderthal who hasn't seen food in a year. I eat a few chips but the smell of meat sickens me, makes me dizzy and mad. I'm close to punching Cian, just a quick hard fist right between his eyes, because he is everything that's broken, him with his greasy sucking lips and big brazen dumb head and thick accent and homophobic, racist, tiny brain.

'Where's Finn?' he says now, chicken flesh flying out of his mouth.

'Dunno,' says Dylan. 'He was here a while ago. Hey, Meg, where's Finn?'

'No idea,' she says without turning around. 'Probably headed to the beach.'

'Did he say anything to you, Saoirse?'

Cian's eyes narrow as he looks at me. I'm fixated on the bits of meat stuck between his teeth. I shake my head.

'Weird he said nothing. Just fucked off, like,' he says.

He's still looking at me. Bastard.

'I'm going home,' I say and bin my half-eaten chips. I pick up my guitar case and head up the street.

'Wait up,' says Dylan. 'Come to the beach for a few cans.'

'You're some *craic*, Saoirse,' says Cian, but he and the others follow us.

'He's a gowl,' says Dylan. 'He just can't help himself.'

'Stop stealing my words.'

'You own the word "gowl", do you?' Dylan says, laughing.

'Yep. My claim to fame. I brought the word to Cloughmore.'

'Weird night, isn't it, Saoirse? I don't know if we're at the end of something, or at the beginning.'

I know exactly what Dylan means. It's the in-between space, the liminal place where I've been skulking for the last two years.

'I have a question,' I say. I can hear the others screeching and laughing, and when I turn I see them behind us, poking at something in a doorway.

'Ask me anything,' says Dylan.

'Highlights. You get your mother to do highlights for you, don't you?'

He cracks up, spitting chips he's laughing so much. There's a low moaning sound and we turn back towards the lads. Cian's pulling down his fly and aiming at a humped pile in the doorway. My black fist punches up my mouth and comes out in a roar as I realise what he's doing. He's pissing on Timber Hanley, the local town drunk. The fucking bastard is pissing on a passed-out man on the ground. I launch myself at Cian, big, hulky Cian, and he bats me off like a fly. I can't hear the others, their voices are jumbled together, but I can see the flash of Megan's phone or maybe it's Kate's, and hot steam rises from poor Timber on his makeshift doorway bed and I throw myself on Cian's back this time, clinging hard and the piss is a huge arc falling on Timber's face and hair and clothes. I can't get a proper hold of Cian and he's belly-laughing at my attempts and then his ear is there, right by my mouth, soft and hurtable, and I bite down, hard as I can. It feels good. I bite for the guitar, the dumb head on him, the itchy balls and arse, but most of all I bite for Timber.

Dylan has me in an armlock and Cian's roaring, clutching his ear and screaming at me, spit flying out of his mouth, and I want to tell him that his pants are down around his ankles and we can all see his little dangly penis and his spotty boxers. Dylan's saying something but it sounds far away and under water. Cian's wiping his ear and his hand's covered in something shiny and black. He's staring at it, pants still down, the absolute gowl. I feel sated, tired, spent. I push Dylan's arms away and kneel beside Timber, who's oblivious still. The smell of strong piss wafts around me. I take off my hoodie and wipe his face with it. I stand up and see the Clancy twins holding my guitar case and I don't know how they got it or why they seem to have the job of rescuing it all night. They step back from me as I grab it from them, and I walk away as Dylan debates following me or seeing what the damage is to Cian's stupid ear. I manage to elbow Megan in the back as I pass her, stupid bitch, and head towards home, but it's a run, not a walk, and the guitar slaps off my back as I turn down towards our house. My phone beeps. A message from Jade.

> Where are u?
> At beach with Nicky and the others.
> Beers cooling. Hurry tf up.

Who the fuck is Nicky? I stare at the screen as a symphony of notifications pops up. I click on one. There it is. A TikTok of me screaming and biting Cian's ear. Snapchat too. And Insta stories. The Cloughmore Vampire. The notifications

keep pinging and my eyes sting and of course there's no context, no arc of piss on Timber Hanley's face. I throw the phone hard at the low stone wall in front of our cottage. It shatters and spills its insides on the road. My breathing is raggy and I pick up the mangled phone and allow myself to cry.