

It is one of the secrets in that change of mental poise which has been fitly named conversion, that to many among us neither heaven nor earth has any revelation till some personality touches theirs with a peculiar influence, subduing them into receptiveness.

George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*

He opens the door. Before he lets her in he looks over her shoulder, to make sure that no one has seen her arrive.

Without turning around, Marianne walks out the door, lets it slam behind her. She's in the hallway now with the cloakroom and can't remember whether the exit is right or left. She's shaking all over her body. The cloakroom attendant asks if she's alright. Marianne doesn't know anymore how drunk she is. She walks a few steps towards a door on the left and then puts her back against the wall and starts sliding down towards a seated position on the floor. Her breast is aching where that man grabbed it. He wasn't joking, he wanted to hurt her. She's on the floor now hugging her knees against her chest.

Up the hall the door comes open again and Karen comes out, with Eric and Rachel and Connell following. They see Marianne on the floor and Karen runs over to her while the other three stay standing where they are, not knowing what to do maybe, or not wanting to do anything. Karen hunches down in front of Marianne and touches her hand. Marianne's eyes are sore and she doesn't know where to look.

Are you alright? Karen says.

I'm fine, says Marianne. I'm sorry. I think I just had too much to drink.

Leave her, says Rachel.

Here, look, it was just a bit of fun, says Eric. Pat's actually a sound enough guy if you get to know him.

I think it was funny, says Rachel.

At this Karen snaps around and looks at them. Why are you even out here if you think it was so funny? she says. Why don't you go and pal around with your best friend Pat? If you think it's so funny to molest young girls?

How is Marianne *young*? says Eric.

We were all laughing at the time, says Rachel.

That's not true, says Connell.

Everyone looks around at him then. Marianne looks at him. Their eyes meet.

Are you okay, are you? he says.

Oh, do you want to kiss her better? says Rachel.

His face is flushed now, and he touches a hand to his brow. Everyone is still watching him. The wall feels cold against Marianne's back.

Rachel, he says, would you ever fuck off?

In April, Connell told her he was taking Rachel Moran to the Debs. Marianne was sitting on the side of his bed at the time, acting very cold and humorous, which made him awkward. He told her it wasn't 'romantic', and that he and Rachel were just friends.

You mean like we're just friends, said Marianne.

Well, no, he said. Different.

But are you sleeping with her?

No. When would I even have time?

Do you want to? said Marianne.

I'm not hugely gone on the idea. I don't feel like I'm that insatiable really, I do already have you.

Marianne stared down at her fingernails.

That was a joke, Connell said.

I don't get what the joke part was.

I know you're pissed off with me.

I don't really care, she said. I just think if you want to sleep with her you should tell me.

Yeah, and I will tell you, if I ever want to do that. You're saying that's what the issue is, but I honestly don't think that's what it is.

Marianne snapped: What is it, then? He just stared at her. She went back to looking at her fingernails, flushed. He didn't say anything. Eventually she laughed, because she wasn't totally without spirit, and it obviously was kind of funny, just how savagely he had humiliated her, and his inability to apologise or even admit he had done it. She went home then and straight to bed, where she slept for thirteen hours without waking.

The next morning she quit school. It wasn't possible to go back, however she looked at it. No one else would invite her to the Debs, that was clear. She had organised the fundraisers, she had booked the venue, but she wouldn't be able to attend the event. Everyone would know that, and some of them would be glad, and even the most sympathetic ones could only feel a terrible second-hand embarrassment. Instead she stayed home in her room all day with the curtains closed, studying and sleeping at strange hours. Her mother was furious. Doors were slammed. On two separate occasions Marianne's dinner was scraped into the bin. Still, she was an adult woman, and no one could make her dress up in a uniform anymore

funny and coy because she wants to show him that she's not bitter. He could say: I'm really sorry for what I did to you, Marianne. He always thought, if he did see her again, that's what he would say. Somehow she doesn't seem to admit that possibility, or maybe he's being cowardly, or both.

I don't know, he says. Good question, I don't know.

Oh no, says Marianne. I'm much too self-conscious. I'd die.

Peggy says: Really? She says this in a pleasant, interested tone of voice, like she's just as happy discussing Marianne's self-consciousness as she would be engaging in group sex. Connell tries not to display any outward relief.

I have all kinds of hang-ups, says Marianne. Very neurotic.

Peggy compliments Marianne's appearance in a routine, effeminate way and asks what her hang-ups are about.

Marianne pinches her lower lip and then says: Well, I don't feel lovable. I think I have an unlovable sort of ... I have a coldness about me, I'm difficult to like. She gestures one of her long, thin hands in the air, like she's only approximating what she means rather than really nailing it.

I don't believe that, says Peggy. Is she cold with you?

Connell coughs and says: No.

She and Marianne continue talking and he rolls the folded label between his fingers, feeling anxious.

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Marianne went home for a couple of days this week, and when she came back to Dublin last night she seemed quiet. They watched *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* together in her apartment. At the end Marianne cried, but she turned her face away so it looked like she wasn't crying. This unsettled Connell. The film had a pretty sad ending but he didn't really see what there was to cry about. Are you okay? he said. She nodded, with her face turned, so he could see a white tendon in her neck pressing outwards.

Hey, he said. Is something upsetting you?

She shook her head but didn't turn around. He went to make her a cup of tea and by the time he brought it to her she had stopped crying. He touched her hair and she smiled, weakly. The character in the film had become pregnant unexpectedly, and Connell was trying to remember when Marianne had last had her period. The longer he thought about it, the longer ago it seemed to have been. Eventually, in a panic, he said: Hey, you're not pregnant or anything, are you? Marianne laughed. That settled his nerves.

No, she said. I got my period this morning.

Okay. Well, that's good.

What would you do if I was?

Six Weeks Later

(SEPTEMBER 2012)

He's late to meet her. The bus was caught in traffic because of some rally in town and now he's eight minutes late and he doesn't know where the cafe is. He has never met Marianne 'for coffee' before. The weather is too warm today, a scratchy and unseasonal heat. He finds the cafe on Capel Street and walks past the cashier towards the door at the back, checking his phone. It's nine minutes past three. Outside the back door Marianne is sitting in the smoking garden drinking her coffee already. No one else is out there, the place is quiet. She doesn't get up when she sees him.

Sorry I'm late, he says. There was some protest on so the bus was delayed.

He sits down opposite her. He hasn't ordered anything yet.

Don't worry about it, she says. What was the protest? It wasn't abortion or anything, was it?

He feels ashamed now that he didn't notice. No, I don't think so, he says. The household tax or something.

Well, best of luck to them. May the revolution be swift and brutal.

He hasn't seen her in person since July, when she came home for her father's Mass. Her lips look pale now and slightly chapped, and she has dark circles under her eyes. Although he takes pleasure in seeing her look good, he feels a special sympathy with her when she looks ill or her skin is bad, like when someone who's usually very good at sports has a poor game. It makes her seem nicer somehow. She's wearing a very elegant black blouse, her wrists look slender and white, and her hair is twisted back loosely at her neck.

Yeah, he says. I would have a bit more energy for protesting if it was more on the brutal side, to be honest.

You want to get beaten up by the Gardaí.

There are worse things than getting beaten up.

Marianne is taking a sip of coffee when he says this, and she seems to pause for a moment with the cup at her lips. He can't tell how he identifies this pause as distinct from the natural motion of her drinking, but he sees it. Then she replaces the cup on the saucer.

in one hand and turns to face them. She explains what's happened, and they all express sympathy for Connell. He still comes to her parties occasionally, just for a quick drink before heading on somewhere else. He told Marianne in September what had happened with Paula Neary, and it made Marianne feel unearthly, possessed of a violence she had never known before. I know I'm being dramatic, Connell said. It's not like she did anything that bad. But I feel fucked up about it. Marianne heard herself in a voice like hard ice saying: I would like to slit her throat. Connell looked up and laughed, just from shock. Jesus, Marianne, he said. But he was laughing. I would, she insisted. He shook his head. You have to tone down these violent impulses, he said. You can't be going around slashing people's throats, they'll put you in prison. Marianne let him laugh it off, but quietly she said: If she ever lays a hand on you again I will do it, I don't care.

She has only spare change in her purse, but in a drawer in her bedside cabinet she has three hundred euro in cash. She goes in there now, without switching the light on, and she can hear the voices of her friends murmur through the wall. The cash is there, six fifties. She takes three and folds them into her purse quietly. Then she sits on the side of the bed, not wanting to go back out right away.

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Things at home were tense over Christmas. Alan gets anxious and highly strung whenever they have guests in the house. One night, after their aunt and uncle left, Alan followed Marianne down to the kitchen, where she had taken their empty cups of tea.

State of you, he said. Bragging about your exam results.

Marianne turned on the hot tap and measured the temperature with her fingers. Alan stood inside the doorway, arms folded.

I didn't bring it up, she said. They did.

If that's all you have to brag about in your life I feel sorry for you, said Alan.

The water from the tap got warmer and Marianne put the plug in the sink and squeezed a little dish soap onto a sponge.

Are you listening to me? said Alan.

Yes, you feel sorry for me, I'm listening.

You're fucking pathetic, so you are.

Message received, she said.

his life, and her instinct to survey his thoughts whenever she feels conflicted about anything. He expressed himself more in terms of identification, his sense of rooting for her and suffering with her when she suffers, his ability to perceive and sympathise with her motivations. Marianne thought this had something to do with gender roles. I think I just like you a lot as a person, he replied defensively. That's actually very sweet, she wrote back.

Jamie comes down the steps behind them now and they all turn around to greet him. Connell makes a half-nodding gesture, just barely inclining his chin upwards. Jamie gives him a mocking smile and says: You're looking rough, mate. Jamie has been a continual object of loathing and derision for Connell since he became Marianne's boyfriend. For several months after he first saw them together Connell had compulsive fantasies about kicking Jamie in the head until his skull was the texture of wet newspaper. Once, after speaking to Jamie briefly at a party, Connell left the building and punched a brick wall so hard his hand started bleeding. Jamie is somehow both boring and hostile at the same time, always yawning and rolling his eyes when other people are speaking. And yet he is the most effortlessly confident person Connell has ever met. Nothing fazes him. He doesn't seem capable of internal conflict. Connell can imagine him choking Marianne with his bare hands and feeling completely relaxed about it, which according to her he in fact does.

Marianne puts on a pot of coffee while Peggy cuts bread into slices and arranges olives and Parma ham onto plates. Elaine is telling them about Niall's antics and Marianne is laughing in a generous way, not because the stories are so funny but to make Elaine feel welcome. Peggy passes plates around the table and Marianne touches Connell's shoulder and hands him a cup of coffee. Because of the white dress and because of the small white china cup, he wants to say: You look like an angel. It's not even something Helen would mind him saying, but he can't talk like that in front of people anyway, saying whimsical affectionate things. He drinks the coffee, he eats some bread. The coffee is very hot and bitter and the bread is soft and fresh. He starts to feel tired.

After lunch he goes upstairs to shower. There are four bedrooms, so he has one to himself, with a huge sash window over the garden. After his shower he dresses in the only presentable clothes he has left: a plain white T-shirt and the blue jeans he has had since he was in school. His hair is wet. He feels clearheaded, an effect of the coffee, and the high water pressure in the shower, and the cool cotton on his skin. He hangs the damp towel over his shoulders and opens the window. Cherries hang on the dark-green trees

Five Months Later

(DECEMBER 2013)

In the lobby of the Languages and Literature building she sits down to check her email. She doesn't remove her overcoat because she'll be getting up in a minute. Beside her on the desk is her breakfast, which she just purchased from the supermarket across the street: one black coffee with brown sugar, one lemon pastry roll. She eats this exact breakfast regularly. Lately she has started to eat it slowly, in lavish sugary mouthfuls that congeal around her teeth. The more slowly she eats, and the more consideration she gives to the composition of her food, the less hungry she feels. She won't eat again until eight or nine in the evening.

She has two new emails, one from Connell and one from Joanna. She dabs her mouse back and forth between them, and then selects Joanna's.

no real news from here, as usual. I've recently taken to staying home at night and watching my way through a nine part documentary series about the american civil war. I have a lot of new information about various civil war generals to share with you next time we're on Skype. how are you? how is Lukas? did he take those photos yet or is that today? and the big question ... can I see them when they're done?? or is that prurient. I await your word. xx

Marianne lifts the lemon pastry, takes a large, slow bite, and lets it dissolve in layers on her tongue. She chews, swallows, then lifts the coffee cup. One mouthful of coffee. She replaces the cup and opens Connell's message.

I don't know what you mean by your last sentence there exactly. Do you mean just because we're far away from each other or because we've actually changed as people? I do feel like a pretty different person now than I was then but maybe I don't seem that different, I don't know. By the way I looked your friend Lukas up on Facebook, he's what you would call 'Scandinavian looking'. Sadly Sweden did not qualify for the World Cup this time so if you end up with a Swedish boyfriend I'll have to think of another way to bond with him. Not that I'm saying this guy Lukas is going to be your boyfriend or would want to talk to me about football if he was, although it's something I am putting out as a possibility. I know you like the tall handsome guys as you say, so why not Lukas, who looks

Right. Would it?

She shuffles the sheets of paper. He can see on the first sheet where his pen made the small tear.

This is what we call the Beck Depression Inventory, she says. I'm sure you've figured out how it works, we just assign a score from zero to three for each item. Now, someone like me might score between, say, zero and five on a test like this, and someone who's going through a mild depressive episode could expect to see a score of maybe fifteen or sixteen.

Okay, he says. Right.

And what we're seeing here is a score of forty-three.

Yeah. Okay.

So that would put us in the territory of a very serious depression, she says. Do you think that matches up with your experience?

He rubs at his eye again. Quietly he manages to say: Yeah.

I'm seeing that you're feeling very negatively towards yourself, you're having some suicidal thoughts, things like that. So those are things we'd have to take very seriously.

Right.

At this point she starts talking about treatment options. She says she's going to recommend that he should see a GP in college to talk about the option of medication. You understand I'm not in a position to make any prescriptions here, she says. He nods, restless now. Yeah, I know that, he says. He keeps rubbing at his eyes, they're itchy. She offers him a glass of water but he declines. She starts to ask questions about his family, about his mother and where she lives and whether he has brothers and sisters.

Any girlfriend or boyfriend on the scene at the moment? Yvonne says.

No, says Connell. No one like that.

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Helen came back to Carricklea with him for the funeral. The morning of the ceremony they dressed in his room together in silence, with the noise of Lorraine's hairdryer humming through the wall. Connell was wearing the only suit he owned, which he had bought for a cousin's communion when he was sixteen. The jacket was tight around his shoulders, he could feel it when he lifted his arms. The sensation that he looked bad preoccupied him. Helen was sitting at the mirror putting on her make-up, and Connell stood behind her to knot his tie. She reached up to touch his face. You look

and without touching the dial or raising his voice to be heard over the sound of the radio Connell said: You know I love you. He didn't say anything else. She said she loved him too and he nodded and continued driving as if nothing at all had happened, which in a way it hadn't.

Marianne's brother works for the county council now. He comes home in the evening and prowls around the house looking for her. From her room she can tell it's him because he always wears his shoes inside. He knocks on her door if he can't find her in the living room or the kitchen. I just want to talk to you, he says. Why are you acting like you're scared of me? Can we talk for a second? She has to come to the door then, and he wants to go over some argument they had the night before, and she says she's tired and wants to get some sleep, but he won't leave until she says she's sorry for the previous argument, so she says she's sorry, and he says: You think I'm such a horrible person. She wonders if that's true. I try to be nice to you, he says, but you always throw it back at me. She doesn't think that's true, but she knows he probably thinks it is. It's nothing worse than this mostly, it's just this all the time, nothing but this, and long empty weekdays wiping down surfaces and wringing damp sponges into the sink.

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Connell comes back upstairs now and tosses her an ice lolly wrapped in shiny plastic. She catches it in her hands and lifts it straight to her cheek, where the cold radiates outwards sweetly. He sits back against the headboard, starts unwrapping his own.

Do you ever see Peggy in Dublin? she says. Or any of those people.

He pauses, his fingers crackle on the plastic wrap. No, he says. I thought you had a falling-out with them, didn't you?

But I'm just asking if you ever hear from them.

No. I wouldn't have much to say to them if I did.

She pulls open the plastic packaging and removes the lolly from inside, orange with vanilla cream. On her tongue, tiny flakes of clear unflavoured ice.

I did hear Jamie wasn't happy, Connell adds.

I believe he was saying some pretty unpleasant things about me.

Yeah. Well, I wasn't talking to him myself, obviously. But I got the impression he was saying some stuff, yeah.

Marianne lifts her eyebrows, as if amused. When she'd first heard the rumours that were circulating about her, she hadn't found it funny at all.

Goodnight, then.

She closes the door behind her. He listens to her footsteps up the stairs. After a few minutes have passed he gets up, empties the dregs of his beer down the sink and puts the can quietly in the recycling bin.

On the table his phone starts ringing. It's set to vibrate so it starts shimmying around the surface of the table, catching the light. He goes to get it before it falls over the edge, and he sees it's Marianne calling. He pauses. He looks at the screen. Finally he slides the answer button.

Hey, he says.

He can hear her breath hard on the other end of the line. He asks if she's okay.

I'm really sorry about this, she says. I feel like an idiot.

Her voice in the phone sounds clouded, like she has a bad cold, or something in her mouth. Connell swallows and walks over to the kitchen window.

About earlier? he says. I've been thinking about it as well.

No, it's not that. It's really stupid. I just tripped or something and I have a small injury. I'm sorry to bother you about it. It's nothing. I just don't know what to do.

He puts his hand on the sink.

Where are you? he says.

I'm at home. It's not serious, it just hurts, that's all. I don't really know why I'm calling. I'm sorry.

Can I come get you?

She pauses. In a muffled voice she replies: Yes, please.

I'm on my way, he says. I'm getting in the car right now, okay?

Sandwiching the phone between his ear and shoulder, he fishes his left shoe out from under the table and pulls it on.

This is really nice of you, says Marianne in his ear.

I'll see you in a few minutes. I'm leaving right now. Alright? See you soon.

Outside he gets in the car and starts the engine. The radio comes on and he snaps it off with a flat hand. His breath isn't right. After only one drink he feels out of it, not alert enough, or too alert, twitchy. The car is too silent

By the Same Author
CONVERSATIONS WITH FRIENDS