

Fiction

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You applied for the festival's bursary, but didn't win. Your mum was disappointed for you – more disappointed than you were yourself – and she offered to pay, insisted on paying, and after a while it was easier to be grateful than to refuse.

She lives alone now, since you went to uni. Two days a week she volunteers at a charity shop, on Tuesday nights she does French classes, Thursdays Pilates. You don't know what she does at the weekend.

Your mum asks about the writer leading the workshop; if his work is good. You tell her it is. You don't tell her you sort of read it more wanting to than *actually* liking it? There is one good story in his first collection, the sort you can instantly tell is properly good, about a young boy abused by an elderly family member. But none of the rest of the stories – what is it, you think, and how, how does it work? – quite feel the same.

The workshop runs for the five days of the festival, from nine till midday, in a secondary school on the edge of the town. You're still not that long out of school yourself, but even the middle-aged women joke that it gives them the willies, walking the echoing corridors past the staffroom.

There are eight of you in the workshop, just over half its capacity: the five middle-aged women, two retired men, and you're by far the youngest. You go round one by one, introducing yourselves. Most of the others have done workshops before at other festivals: they set out what they hope to get from the week, and him. There are bursts of raucous laughter from the classroom next door where a younger writer, recently shortlisted for a clatter of major awards, is leading a sold-out course on the novel. You watch as your writer shuffles then drops his photocopies, runs a hand through hair which is thinning, clears his throat. He's older than his author picture in the brochure. When he looks up, you try to smile encouragingly.

When he asks questions, you make yourself answer them, though you've never been the sort to speak up in class. You volunteer to read aloud from the story he hands around. You even ask a question about his own work, to show that you've read it. He asked to read work from participants ahead of the workshop, and you agonised over what to send through: your best two stories, or were they too similar, and should you show range instead, or maybe the thing you'd most recently written, though it still seemed unfinished, in case he could help? The festival administrator said, Just send what you're happiest with, and so, in the end, you'd emailed her the two best. But he doesn't refer to it, gives no indication, in fact, that he's read any of your work. One of the retired men is writing his memoirs. The other a historical biography. Two of the women couldn't get onto the novel course, though it's novels they're working on, and the other three are in a book club together and decided to give writing a go. You don't think, from the exercises he sets that you read out in class, that any of them is particularly good, but then again, it's hard to tell; it all seems so artificial, and not what real writing – whatever that might be – is all about.

You text your mum daily updates with exclamation marks.

After the final session, you all go to the pub, and after a couple of rounds, he ends up sitting next to you. We haven't discussed your writing, he says. We should discuss your writing.

Ok, you say. Ok. You push your half-pint of lager-and-lime away, reach in your bag for your notebook.

He lays a hand on your bag.

Not here, he says. Somewhere more quiet. I've got a thing at five, but what about after that, say six-thirty, seven?

It's the closing night of the festival and there's a writer speaking who you don't want to miss. But you also don't want to pass up this chance.

Thank you, you say, that's so kind of you, thank you so much. Whenever suits best.

Great, he says, well why don't we make it dinner?

Oh, you say, ok, and he says, Great, again, and names the place.

Your mum has texted wanting to know how the last day's gone. You know you should call her, but you want to wait till you know what he thinks of your stories. You know too she'll ask about the others on the course, why they're not going for dinner. You wonder again if any of them heard him suggest it, and whether they minded.

Instead you text back it's been brilliant, exclamation marks, and promise to call her tomorrow, from the train station.

Back in the hotel you wash your face and re-straighten your hair, but you keep the same clothes on, so you don't look dressed-up, and you don't put on make-up, not even bronzer: you want to look serious, intellectual. Then you read and re-read the two stories you gave him, until it's time to go.

You're early and he's late. You sit there long enough that you start to wonder what you're doing. One of the retired men from your workshop walks past, holding hands with his wife, and they stop at the door and look at the menu and you wonder if they're going to come in, and what you'll say if they do, but after a while they walk on. You wonder if you were meant to go to the writer's panel discussion, and come here afterwards together, and if he'll be annoyed that you missed it? But then in he blusters, battered satchel, festival tote bag, books under his arm, so obviously unembarrassed that you relax a bit, too. The restaurant is modern, brightly-lit; there are people on their own as well as couples, one table of friends. It's seven o'clock: why wouldn't you have dinner? It's just a normal, practical thing to do. The writer talks about his panel, about the audience member who wouldn't stop talking, the moderator who got the title of his second book wrong. You smile, nod. He seems to have forgotten he's not talking to another writer, a real writer. Here you are, talking writing with a writer at a festival, over

dinner, no big deal. This is it, you think, what it's like, this thing you've wanted so very long, this world behind the curtain.

When the waitress comes you order risotto, in part because it's the cheapest thing on the menu, but also because you have a thing about eating in front of people, men, you don't know; going back to teenage years spent with braces, the horror of food caught in them. Risotto you can eat in tiny bites, and you don't even have to chew it. He orders the steak, *medium rare, of course*, and asks you if he should go for chunky chips or fries.

Go for chunky chips, the waitress says, the chunky chips here are out of this world, and once she's said that, of course you have to say, Chunky chips.

When he says, What are we drinking, you gesture at your tap-water: just this is fine. But he insists on a glass of wine, then, Feck it, let's get a bottle, shall we? Oh, you say, but the *shall we* doesn't seem to be a question. He orders a bottle of white wine and you do the calculations in your head. There's no way you can afford this, what with him ordering the steak, too. Just risotto and tap-water and a euro for the tip, you could have managed. If you had half a glass of wine and just paid for that, say adding five euro, instead of paying for half of the twenty-five-euro bottle? But he's already filled your glass right up and is raising his, Your good health, sláinte, and you find yourself taking a gulp. Slow down. You can put it on your mum's credit card, which you still have for emergencies, and when she asks you can say there was a problem with yours, or something, you'll think of something.

You try to focus on the conversation. You're aware you haven't contributed much: this can't be fun for him, forced to do all the talking. You try to think of interesting questions to ask or witty things to say but your mind is a blank. You don't know if you're allowed to ask what he's working on now. You think of your mum that time, going to see a prize-winning author in town. Your mum had loved her book, had bought a copy for you, and several friends. When the Q&A began, your mum asked the author if she'd consider a sequel. From her velvet chair on the stage, the author heaved an exaggerated sigh and rolled her eyes. If I had a dollar, she said, for every time I was asked that, I wouldn't need to be here, any other questions?

The food comes, and he hasn't yet mentioned your stories. He will, you tell yourself, he will.

You eat your risotto, and when he insists that you try his, you don't say you're vegetarian, but just take a polite single chip and try to ignore the sauce.

The wine goes down much faster than it should. He orders a glass of red, as well. His cheeks are pink.

You finish your risotto and lay your cutlery neatly down. Any moment now, you think.

He pushes his plate aside.

I'm away to the jacks, he says.

While he's gone, the waitress comes to clear the plates. Are yez finished?

That was lovely, thanks, you say as she lifts yours.

Did yez like the chunky chips, she says. She lowers her voice conspiratorially: They fry them three times, that's the secret. Then she goes on: Will your Da be wanting a doggy-bag, she says, for the remains of his steak. Oh, you fumble, feeling your cheeks get hot, I don't think so, thank you anyway.

What's that? he says then, coming back to the table, zipping his flies.

Oh, nothing, you say quickly, she just said would you be wanting a doggy-bag.

And what did you say? he says, looking amused.

I said, you say, still flustered, I didn't know.

Sure why would I be wanting a doggy-bag?

Maybe you have a dog, you say, stupidly, and he puts his elbow dramatically on the table and leans his head on his fist and says, *Oh really?* Do I *look* like the sort of person has a dog?

I don't know, you say, and he says, Tell me this, so if I'd a dog, what sort of dog would it be?

And all you can think is St Bernard, the flecks of spittle on fleshy pink lips, now suddenly so close, but of course you can't say that, and so you just haver, say nothing, smile, smile, smile, and he puts a paw over yours, the black hairs on the backs of his white fingers, and he says, Now you'd be a whippet, wouldn't you, or what do you call them ones with all the hair, a saluki, that's it, that's what you'd be. All jumpy and nervy and skittish. Relax, just relax!

And the horror of it all somehow galvanises you and manage to blurt out: My stories. Can we talk about my stories?

Your stories? he says, as if you've said something funny. Then he sits back, freeing your hand from his. Ok. Fair enough. Your stories. Well, he says. What do you think about your stories?

Me? you say. I don't know what I think. I mean I wondered what you think.

Well do you think they're any good?

I don't know, you say. Well no, not really. I mean I know they're only drafts, but – I'm just not sure what to do with them next, or –

Or what?

Or if they might be good enough to, I don't know, to send somewhere. Or something.

Look, he says. I'll be honest with you. Your stories are. What would the word be. Your stories are *facile*. They're just too facile. There's nothing there – is there?

I – don't know, you say.

Well then, there you go, he says. If you *knew*, you'd know.

Ok, you say.

For the first time all meal, there is a silence. It is horrible. You can feel him watching you, watching as you try not to cry, watching as you try and fail not to cry.

When the waitress comes back with the dessert menu she looks at you, looks from you to him.

Just the bill, he says.

He lets you split it, seems happy to, in fact. You are shaking now, and can't seem to stop the tears from spilling endlessly down your face. Your mum has paid for this, you keep on thinking. You feel so stupid, so wretchedly stupid. Oh come on now, he finally says. You wouldn't want me to tell you like it isn't, would you? Don't take it so personally.

When you finally get out of the restaurant, he suggests a drink back at the hotel bar. You manage to say no: you couldn't bear for anyone, anyone else to see you like this, but he says he's walking back that way anyway, so what else can you do? You walk back together.

The hotel's lobby is full of people, writers, workshop attendees, festival organisers, all streaming out of the closing-night session and into the bar. No-one sees you, or everyone does, you can't tell.

Look, you're taking this too personally, he says again, and he offers to see you to your room.

Please, you say, meaning *no, please no, please no*, and you manage to turn and make it to the stairs and he doesn't, he doesn't follow.

In your washbag you have a little blister-strip of Valium, the generic sort, brought back by your flatmate's boyfriend from his trip to India. The dosage depends on whether or not you're used to it: you're not. Would two tablets be enough, you think?

Enough for what?

Enough to just fall asleep, enough never have to deal with any of this again, this suffocating *shame*.

Don't be such a fucking idiot.

What, after all, has happened? Nothing. You try to imagine telling it as a story – writing it. You went for dinner with someone who didn't think your writing was much good.

And, what?

He momentarily touched your *hand*?

Nothing. Nothing has happened.

You can hear the revelry downstairs. It's only, you think, just beginning. The nights here are legendary: the bar stays open until the last people have gone, which is sometimes when the first are coming down for breakfast. The writer will be there, the people from the workshop, the other writers, the other people from the other workshops. All of the organisers, the audience members, the volunteers. You could call your mum but of course you can't call your mum. Breathe, you think, just breathe. The air in your room smells stale, though there are signs everywhere saying *No Smoking!* It's in the fabric of the curtains, you think, and the carpet and the polyester quilt and the matching pelmet around the bed, and *pelmet*, what a ridiculous word. You open the window the two inches that it opens and the cool green air rushes in. If your laptop wasn't so expensive you'd hurl it out of the window and into the river somewhere below. No you wouldn't, of course you wouldn't. Somewhere below, on the river-path, people are laughing.

Did I tell you this story is true?

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