

“The Afterlife”

I

They do not know what will happen after Friday. They are not even sure whether to speak about it or not. For now, they'll lie together in ignorance, legs interlocked and let each breath lead into the next. They keep their arms apart. He puts his right hand flat on the bedside table and runs it from one corner to the other until his fingers skim the cigarette packet.

'You want one?' he asks.

She pulls the duvet up to her neck and unknots her legs from his.

'No.'

'Suit yourself.'

He takes a cigarette from the box along with a lighter and scrapes his thumb against the spark wheel. The flame singes loose tobacco strings before it rips into the rolling paper. She watches him take long, drawn-out puffs. They slowly dry the sweat droplets from his cheeks.

'Actually, I'll have the arse of that.'

'Knew it.'

The cigarette slips from his fingers into hers and she inspects the stub for saliva before resting it on her bottom lip.

'That was a good fuck.'

'Was to be fair.'

They've been having sex for three months. They promised to stop after submitting their group project in March, but it's the last week of final exams, and their relationship is now a self-coined 'friends with all the benefits situation'.

'Do you and Lorcan have your stuff packed and ready?' she asks, dropping the cigarette butt into a half-full pint glass on the floor.

'Ah, bits and pieces. Sure it's only Tuesday.'

A momentary silence ensues while the acrid smell of burnt tobacco perfumes the bedroom walls. They each stare at the ceiling and wait for the other to speak, to ask the questions they'd prefer to leave unanswered.

'You been riding anyone lately?'

'Not really, one fella over in Knocknacarra a few weeks ago, that's all.'

He sucks his lips into one another as if his mouth cannot form a sentence without first conserving the bitter taste of the tobacco.

'Was he any use?'

'I thought we don't ask each other those sorts of questions Mikey,' she protests. 'But no, he wasn't.'

Mikey nods. He sinks his shoulders into the pillow and huffs a laugh.

‘What about you? Who’ve you been riding?’

Mikey twists his neck but keeps his eyes forward. His peripheral vision catches her pupils dilating.

‘Brought one girl home last week, that’s it.’

She sighs and slides her right hand between her temple and the pillowcase as if she’s a child being told a scary bedtime story.

‘Do you know how you like. . .’

She winces but recomposes herself by the time their eyes meet.

‘Sleep with other girls in your bed?’

‘Yeah?’

‘Do you change the sheets for when I come over?’

‘I thought we don’t ask each other those sorts of questions Ailish.’

‘Touché . . . Prick.’

They both laugh peculiarly. Then again, everything about their relationship is peculiar, from openly discussing their sex lives to the words they use with each other, carefully constructing each sentence to diminish the possibility of one upsetting the other. The irony? Words are intangible. They cannot stop Mikey or Ailish from sleeping with other people.

‘In post-COVID times, casual relationships are more common than ever. Even the term ‘sneaky link’ arose from everyone fucking somebody late at night during the lockdowns,’ Ailish once told Mikey after their Modern Irish Lit tutorial. Mikey then questioned her on if it was also ‘common to go on walks along the Salthill promenade with somebody you don’t fuck until after 10:00 pm?’ Ailish admitted she wasn’t so sure about that as she watched the waves of the Atlantic Ocean crash against the pebble-dashed beach.

‘What time is it there?’ Mikey asks.

‘Quarter past eleven.’

‘Shit.’

‘What?’

‘I was meant to read some more of Bowen for Friday’s exam.’

Mikey and Ailish are each on target for a 1:1. In February, their lecturer shared Ailish’s essay on ‘sexual identity in 21st-century Irish fiction’ with all their classmates. It impressed Mikey to the point that he found her email from the attendance sheet and congratulated her. He still denies having any ulterior motive.

‘You’ve already read three of her novels? A fourth and she’d give you shares in Bowens’ Court if this was a hundred years ago.’

‘Wouldn’t mind some with this housing crisis.’

Mikey swings his legs out from under the duvet onto the cold wooden floor and covers his penis with his hands.

‘Don’t be looking.’

‘Oh, for god’s sake,’ Ailish says, rolling her eyes. ‘I see you naked more than I see you dressed at this point.’

‘Yeah, but I’m not hard.’

‘Are you serious?’

Mikey doesn’t answer.

‘Right. Fine. I’ll cover my head with a pillow.’

‘No peeking now.’

Mikey picks his worn briefs up from a corner of the room and slides them up his legs.

‘You can open them.’

‘I don’t know why you’re being so insecure. You have a big dick.’

Despite not being exclusive, Ailish always reminds Mikey of his worth. She doesn’t want his insecurities to fester.

‘Thanks.’

Ailish watches Mikey dress himself. He is milk bottle white with a skinny muscular frame, wide back, long legs, and a short torso.

‘Do you maybe want to talk about the afterlife tomorrow?’ Mikey asks.

The ‘afterlife’ is a private joke between them about the ambiguity surrounding their ‘relationship’. On Saturday morning, Mikey will move back home to Castlepollard in Westmeath. His lease expired yesterday, Monday, May 1, but his landlord agreed to extend it until Saturday so he and his flatmate, Lorcan, can finish their final exams.

‘What’s there to talk about? We aren’t a couple or anything. We knew what we were getting ourselves into.’

‘Correct answer. Anyways, I better hit the road.’

‘Text me when you’re home.’

‘Yeah, I will.’

Forty-five minutes later, Ailish’s phone vibrates.

‘Just home now.’

P.S.: changed the bedsheets there.’

She doesn't reply, turns onto her side, and falls asleep.

II

It's noon the following day and Mikey is seated at the kitchen table. The dishwasher hums and clicks from the utility room. Streaks of oil from the morning's fry-up scale the wall behind the stovetop. Smells of burnt meat and ground cannabis fuse together and soak into dirty crockery submerged in filthy kitchen sink water. Mikey flicks through his copybook to notes on Beckett's *Six Residua* when he hears the front door open.

'Well.'

'Well.'

Lorcan shadowboxes the air and raises his arms above his head in a V-shape.

'How did it go?' Mikey asks.

Lorcan takes two slices of bread from a sliced pan and prods each of them with his thumb. He places the bread into the toaster and pushes down the lever.

'Yeah, it went well thanks. Just happy it's all over to be honest.'

'Lucky you.'

Lorcan folds his arms and leans against the counter.

'Sorry. Just stressed.'

Their gaze shifts to Mikey's flashcards. They're stacked together on top of a crumb-filled dinner plate along with an empty blister pack.

'Yeah man, I can see that.'

'I'll be grand lad. Have you packed your stuff?'

'Yeah most of it. Have you?'

'Ah yeah mostly done now.'

Lorcan clicks a button on the toaster and inspects his bread to see if it's reached his preferred shade. He tuts, and once again, pushes the lever.

'You seeing Ailish today?' he asks.

'No.'

Lorcan regularly questions Mikey about his and Ailish's relationship. He's baffled by its 'openness' and regularly utters platitudes to reaffirm his bafflement. 'You're a better man than me' and 'that'd kill me, her shagging other lads like' are two of his favourites.

'Oh? Why not?'

'I don't know, we're busy with this exam Friday.'

Lorcan smiles wryly.

'Don't dare say it.'

'Alright, alright.'

Mikey drops his eyes back down onto his copybook and waits for the next intrusive question. He knows Lorcan is only looking out for him. They've been friends since orientation week of first year.

'Have you thought about asking her to do long-distance?'

Mikey raises his eyebrows. He views long-distance as an achievement for exclusive partners, not two people on casual terms. Still, he enjoys the thought of visiting Ailish on the weekends once he moves home. It soothes him.

'No? We aren't exclusive; why would we do long distance? Sure her parents her apartment she's in and she's doing her M.A. in Publishing in September. It'll just fizzle out I reckon.'

'Don't be stupid.'

'What do you mean?'

'You can't just let it fizzle out. You spend most of your time with her and never shut up about her.'

'No, I don't.'

'Yes, you do.'

'Your toast is done.'

'I like it burnt.'

The two hold their stare until Lorcan's bread pops from the toaster. Its shade is similar to a rubber-worn car tyre.

'Look, just think about it alright? She's a good-looking girl and you know . . .' Lorcan grimaces. 'She seems to make you happy man.'

Mikey doesn't reply. His smile elicits his thanks. He picks up his mobile from the table as Lorcan walks past him with his plate of toast.

'You not going to butter them?'

'Out of date.'

'Nice.'

Lorcan bites down on the toast and shuts the kitchen door after him. Mikey turns his head to make sure he's gone and writes Ailish a text message:

'Want to run over some last few exam things together tomorrow afternoon?'

Fifteen minutes later, Ailish replies: *'Sounds good.'* Mikey puts his phone screen-side down on the table and begins studying again.

III

They've been in the library for three hours. Unlike last week, the crowd is sparse as most students have already finished their exams. Ailish whispers her thoughts to Mikey on his practice essay entitled, "The Portrayal of Love in Celtic Tiger Literature".

'It's great, but I think you really need to emphasise the author's use of monetary language in relation to the characters' relationship.'

'What do you mean?'

Ailish lightly taps her pen off her left palm and puffs her cheeks.

'Well, I mean from her description of them only being able to ride in cheap hotels to the elaborate gifts they buy each other, it's all so. . . so transactional.'

Mikey nods in agreement. He likes that word. *Transactional*.

'People must have had pretty shitty values during the boom.'

'Nothing's changed. They blamed money; we blame social media.'

Mikey and Ailish smirk at one another, not because it's funny but true. They've previously discussed this topic over some beers, how social media has turned modern dating into some sort of game where labels are viewed as a commitment to old-fashioned expectations and when you accept a label, you automatically lose. Funnily, they tried to label their own relationship then and couldn't.

'Do you want to grab a coffee?' Mikey whispers.

'Yeah, okay.'

They purchase two cappuccinos from the Students' Union Shop in the library's basement and leave through an emergency exit door. The May sunshine creeps through the clouds as they walk and, when hidden, makes them shiver until it reappears. Mikey spots a free picnic table. They sit beside one another to gaze out at the River Corrib and enjoy the quietude.

'Will you miss Galway?' Ailish asks.

Mikey grips his hand tight around the coffee cup and takes his first mouthful.

'Yeah, I will. Once I get some money together, I'll move from home again.'

She turns to stare at him, but his eyes are still focused on an anonymous part of the river.

'You know I'll miss you Mikey, don't you?'

'Yeah, I know.'

Ailish snuffles. She lifts her bag onto her knees and rummages through it.

'Do you want a cigarette?'

'What are they?'

She raises her hand from her bag victoriously.

‘Marlboro touch, your favourite.’

‘Go on then.’

Mikey takes a cigarette from Ailish and holds it between his lips. On their first-ever date, he brought her to some ill-lit bar off Shop Street. Mikey never remembers the name of the bar. Ailish always does. He’s fascinated by her memory and is smitten whenever she recalls specific details about him or their relationship.

‘I know you didn’t ask me here just to revise, Ailish mumbles, lighting her cigarette before passing the lighter to Mikey.

‘I’m sorry for shooting you down about the afterlife the other night but it’s just, I don’t. . .’

His eyes follow her movements. She looks vulnerable. Her hands are stuffed deep in each tracksuit pocket and her chin is tucked into the collar of her puffer jacket.

‘Want to admit it’s going to hurt?’ he says.

‘Yeah.’

Mikey sighs and flicks excess ash from his cigarette onto the grass. A black crow lands beside the ash and inspects it. It flaps its wings and departs once realising the ash cannot be eaten nor pecked.

‘Well, I was thinking and . . . it doesn’t have to hurt.’

Ailish takes one last drag from her cigarette before crushing it into the picnic table.

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean, would you like to do long distance? Exclusively.’

Ailish tilts her head and tries to reply, but instead, swallows her breath.

‘I know it’s a big ask, but I’m not really that far away from Galway, and your master’s is only one year, and who knows, it might work.’

Mikey turns to Ailish and stares at the side of her face. Her jaw is clenched.

‘It won’t Mikey.’

‘What?’

‘It won’t work. I’m not ready for that type of commitment. We’re too young.’

‘We’re twenty-two Ailish not fifteen.’

Ailish shakes her head furiously.

‘I think for now we’re better off just being friends.’

‘Friends who what? Who go on dates and fuck four times a week? Because I don’t do that with any of my other friends. Do you?’

She wipes her eyes with her hands, and he meets them for the first time since they've sat down. Tearful gunmetal blue.

'Sorry. I didn't mean to be so blunt.'

'It's okay.'

The sky's colour is changed. A teal blue covered by brumous clouds descending down past the river. It dissolves into amber notes of the evening twilight as darkness awaits in the distance. At the picnic table, their bodies remain motionless.

'I just think that for me . . . it's not a good idea for us to be friends.'

'So what, we cut all contact?'

'I think for now, it's best.'

'Will you miss me too?'

Mikey lets out a half-suppressed laugh and they sit in silence. She doesn't know if she's made the right decision nor does he. They're young. There's time.

IV

They're in the backseat of a taxi stopped at the traffic lights off Quay Street. Trickle of raindrops fall from the midnight sky and splat against the windscreen before the driver washes them away with his wipers. Lorcan squeezes two fingers into his jacket pocket and pinches them between his wallet.

'So, that's it then? Youse are finished?' Lorcan asks while brandishing a twenty euro note folded in half.

'Aye' Mikey replies.

They've been drinking all day. Mikey finished his exam at 1:00 pm and walked from the campus to Eyre Square where Lorcan had a pint of lager waiting for him. 'Here's to joining the big bad world,' was his congratulatory remark.

'Sure look, chances are slim you'll see her with the crowds that are out and then, after tonight, *you won't see her at all.*'

'Suppose.'

The driver forces his wheels onto a kerb supported by double yellow lines and extends his hand back onto his wrist to collect the fare. 'Keep the change' Lorcan says.

They slam the rear car doors and walk to the entrance of a pub surrounded by students. The bouncer assesses their attire and facial expressions before tilting his head backwards to signal their admittance.

Inside, asynchronous roars to Eliza Rose's *Baddest of Them All* bellow out from the dancefloor. Mikey follows Lorcan through the crowds, shapelessly bending his body as if he is boneless and invisible to the people he taps on the shoulder to sidle past.

'Pints or spirits?' Lorcan shouts into Mikey's right ear.

'Vodka. I'll vomit if I have another pint.'

They reach the bar and Lorcan flails his hand. A barperson waves back sardonically. 'Some prick isn't he?' Lorcan complains but Mikey doesn't hear him. He leans an elbow on the countertop and squeezes his eyes shut until they force themselves back open.

'Are you alright? Here, I only got one mixer. Cheaper.'

'Yeah. . . Thanks.'

'I'm going to leave this coat in the cloakroom; wait here.'

'Grand.'

Mikey watches Lorcan barge through the crowd until he's undetectable. He sips his drink, but his jaw is too relaxed, and he spills the liquor onto his white polo shirt. He rubs his palm against the stain but pauses when he sees someone's shoes on the ground in front of him.

‘Hel-lo stranger’ Ailish shouts.

She puts her hand on his chest and smiles at him. Her eyes are glassed and she cannot hold his stare.

‘Hey. . . how-r-ye’

He attempts to remove her hand from his chest, but she tightens her grip on the fabric. The more he tries, the more she laughs.

‘Do you. . . not wanna. . . talk to me or sumtin?’

‘Why wouldn’t I be ehm. . . speakin’ . . . to ya?’

Ailish digs her hands through his shirt, bundles the fabric together in her palm and pulls his ear to her mouth.

‘Goooooooood boy,’ she whispers and releases her grip.

Mikey attempts a reply but instead covers his mouth and retches.

‘Ya look really, real-ly hot,’ Ailish adds.

‘I think I’m. . . I’m gonna head t’the smoking area.’

‘Why won’t you just be my fucking friend?’

It’s the first sentence she’s pronounced perfectly. Her arms fold into one another and she sways from right to left as if she’s a puppet being controlled by an inexperienced ventriloquist. His forehead is sweating. He wipes his palm against it before placing it in between the curves of her back to edge around her but she mimics his movements.

‘Ailish, please. . . hic. . . move.’

‘No, Answer me.’

‘Ailish, please.’

‘You’ Ailish screams and points her finger at Mikey. ‘You hate me for it don’t you? For not wanting a relationship.’

She pushes her palms into his stomach and a chunk of vomit falls from his mouth onto the floor.

‘You and your “afterlife” she screams, making bunny ears with two fingers on each hand. You’re fucking pathetic.’

He manages to slip underneath her left arm while it’s in the air and disappears into the crowd. Vomit bounces between his mouth and palm causing the repugnant odour of sour acid to travel up into his nostrils. He locates the bathroom. It’s in the far-left corner and underneath the stairs. He feels lumps from his chip shop dinner ferment in his hand as he staggers towards the door. Inside, men jeer as Mikey heaves into a toilet bowl with the cubicle door ajar.

Pathetic. Hate. Friend. The words wrap around his head, layer after layer until another dry heave temporarily erases them from his mind. He wants to apologise to Ailish. 'I don't hate you; I don't hate you' he mumbles with his eyes closed while his back rests against the cubicle's urine-splashed side panel.

'Come with me son.'

A burly security guard stands at the cubicle, door hunched over. He lifts Mikey to his feet and clutches his forearms. They leave the bathroom, and the security guard bends Mikey's elbows behind his back. As they approach the exit, Mikey sees Lorcan and Ailish standing at the bar. His hands are on her hips. She whispers into his ear while he pulls her closer to him and kisses her neck. Mikey doesn't scream or resist. The security guard shoves him out through the exit door and into the middle of the street and roars: 'Go home.'

A group of intoxicated Law students assert Mikey's rights to the security guards, but he's already stumbled down the footpath towards Wolfe Tone Bridge. He takes his phone from his pocket. Out of battery. Wheels from vehicles melt away into the asphalt road as Mikey crosses the bridge and wobbles along Claddagh Quay to the sound of the estuary's roar. He stands in the darkness at the edge of Nimmo's pier and watches the city lights pulsate. The words wrap around his head again. *Her words.*

V

Ailish turns left into the estate and searches for the most congested street. She doesn't know the house number. Ahead of her at the T-Junction, cars align on the footpath as people walk with their heads bowed. A man in a Hi-Vis beckons her forward. She drops into second gear and crawls towards him until he gestures her to halt.

'Here for the wake?'

'Yes.'

'Space down the end there between two jeeps. The house is the last one on the right, in the corner there.'

'Thank you.'

She rolls up her window and drives her shaking left foot against the clutch. It took rescue squads over one week to recover the body. Ailish thought she was just being rightfully ignored until receiving a 'death notice email' from the university. The sobbing began after reading the email a third time.

She checks her complexion in the rearview mirror before opening her door and stepping onto the footpath. Sympathisers behind her whisper the possible reasons for the death as she reaches the front door. Inside, the house is tall and narrow. Framed photographs of Mikey are spread across the walls, all equal lengths apart. A grey-haired man in a black suit and tie smelling of whiskey stands at the kitchen door with his hand outstretched.

'You must be Mikey's dad, I'm sorry for your loss,' Ailish says, shaking his hand.

'You're very welcome to this part of the country.'

His smile looks painted onto his face.

'Thank you.'

'Would you like a cup of tea or anything darling?'

'No, no. I'm honestly fine.'

'No problem, He's in there to the right.'

Mikey's father points to a poorly lit room left of the kitchen overcrowded with wooden chairs and mourners eating triangular-cut sandwiches. Ailish turns and slowly walks through the door. It's a closed coffin. She lays her hand at the bottom and runs it to the top where a steel cross plated with gold sits atop the rim. A queue forms and forces her into the opposite corner of the room. She takes a tissue from the end table beside her and wipes it against her nose. She studies the faces in the room and only recognises one person.

Lorcan stands at the base of the coffin with his hands clasped. Ailish hasn't seen him since the night after final exams. She hardly remembers anything besides her fight with Mikey

and pushing Lorcan away, telling him to stop when he had his hands on her hips and started kissing her neck. He wouldn't have stopped only for a barperson threatened to call security. She bows her head and waits for him to pass but he stops in front of her.

‘Ailish?’

Ailish stands upright and retracts her shoulders.

‘Hi Lorcan.’

He offers himself for a hug. She hesitates for a second before reluctantly wrapping her arms around him.

‘It’s terrible, isn’t it?’ he mumbles.

His eyes are puffy and his face is swollen.

‘Yeah, I can’t believe it.’

They each drop their hands into their pockets and wait for the other to speak.

‘I ended up pulling the night of it. Sure, I didn’t think anything of not going home to check on him.’

Ailish furrows her eyebrows. She knows she cannot shame him, not here.

‘Oh Lorcan pet, Thanks so much for coming.’

A small, frail woman around five feet cusps her hands around Lorcan’s right wrist.

‘No problem Mrs Riordan. I’m sorry for your loss. I’m broken-hearted myself. I can only imagine how you feel.’

The woman’s eyes widen. They’re the same colour as Mikey’s. Chuck Hazel.

‘And whose this?’ Mikey’s mother says, holding her arms out.

‘Ailish, I’m a friend of Mikey’s from college. I’m so sorry for your loss.’

Ailish clings to her. She squeezes what may be her last-ever connection to Mikey again.

‘Thanks pet. Did you two come together or?’

Ailish and Lorcan stare at one another.

‘I mean, are you two an item?’

‘No, no. Just friends,’ Lorcan titters.

Ailish stares at Mikey’s coffin until she feels his mother’s gaze fixate on her. She looks into the woman’s eyes and her lips take a moment to part.

‘Yeah, just friends.’