

EVANESCENCE

By Peter Stones

I

Crouching down, he flings his gear bag onto his back and glances up at the slip-flap display screen. ‘Fuck sake’, he mutters to himself, realising that a stale over-priced croissant and a measly-sized latte has left him with four minutes to reach platform seven. For a Saturday morning, the station is crowded, congested even. He begins to quicken his pace. However, a tawdry suit and the lackadaisical movements of morning travellers are enough to hinder his efforts. He checks his watch. 7:13 am. The station conductor’s whistle lightly pinches his eardrums. Choosing his steps carefully, he relies only upon a broad set of shoulders and insincere apologies as a form of navigation to the first carriage headed for Edinburgh. With sweat claspings the cheap fabric to his skin and the conductor’s whistle now cutting the air with the pitch of a wailing air raid siren, he wryly smiles. His fresh face taking the brunt of the crisp September air.

Sitting up in her seat to avoid an appearance of idleness, she scrolls through her iPod. *The Hottest Singles of 2010*. ‘God, how is such tripe making it into the charts’, she thinks. Finally deciding on *Animal* by ‘Neon Trees’, she runs the wired earphones through her knitted Bardot and down into the side pocket of her jeans. Her outside seat prepaid for by the university. It saves other passengers from the troublesome task of taking the inside seat until the train is almost full. Like every Saturday morning, she studies her fellow passengers. Catching a glimpse of the engineer that sat beside her last weekend, she realises that his wife and kids now accompany him. ‘If only you could hear the intent he had in that voice darling’, she chuckles to herself. Laying eyes on the business student suffering from fuckboyism, she vaguely hears the last of the bags hurled onto the racks. The train lets out its roar. Another week in Dunbar completed.

Eminem. ‘No’. P!NK, ‘No’. Nicky Minaj. ‘Dear lord what...’

‘I only asked if you mind if I sit on the inside seat there.’

She pulls her right earphone out—her eyeline meeting only his belt buckle.

‘Oh Jesus, sorry. I was choosing a song. No bother.’

She lifts her feet onto the seat and clutches her knees into her chin. He wears the same aftershave as her father. *Million*. He sits down to breathe. Finally. Intrigued, she puts her earphone back in and gives fleeting glimpses towards his face. His jaw. Shaven and defined. His eyes. Violet. His hair. Jet black and undercut. His nose. Bent. His lips. Throbbing.

‘Does she speak?’ he utters.

‘Does he mind?’ she snaps back.

‘Not now that she’s being rude.’

She smirks at this comment. Not that it amuses her, but because it’s true.

‘You’re a fan of reverse psychology then?’

‘See that boy over there? A few weeks ago on the train, he wondered if I had ever thought about taking it off two lads at once’ she says in an aggressive tone.

He swallows his breath.

‘And if you say have you, I swear to God. So, excuse the coldness please,’ she adds, fortifying her aggressive tone.

He cannot help the peculiar impulse to laugh at this comment. She raises her eyes to him. Chuck Hazel.

‘Sorry. I guess there’s just something about young men and public transport that heightens their randiness. Prick.’

Now gesturing a smile, she turns her head to him. Her hair swinging behind her ear before covering it abruptly. Its tawny glow from the reflection of the sunrise coming through the window. Lord Farquaad is his first instinct.

‘What were you doing before you got here and nearly squashed my face with your bum.’

‘You were the one sitting forward.’

‘Well, I was trying to tuck in my laces.’

He hmms. She raises her eyebrows in retaliation. Lifting her right leg, she tucks her ankle into the makeshift crevice of her travel pillow. His shirt. Too loose and the top button undone. It reveals the first piece of hidden skin to her.

‘Bit dressy aren’t ya?’

‘In this old thing? It’s a rental. I had a christening yesterday. The little cousins thought it would be hilarious to bathe my spare clothes.’

‘Ah right.’ She starts laughing at his misfortune. Subduing her laugh into a giggle, ‘What’s the day job then?’ she asks.

‘Just finished a master’s in screenwriting. Who needs a job anyway. And You?’

‘I finished my degree in Ed in June. I’ve been working in Dunbar since July.’

‘Doing?’

‘Lexicography.’

‘Tickets please folks. We’ll be in Edinburgh in five stat.’

The inspector’s demand takes her full attention. His eyes wander to her body. Petite. Skinny. Freckled. To him, no matter how she composes herself in the seat, it encompasses her. Stretching himself across her body, he hands the inspector his ticket, her breathing slightly elevating his forearm hair in the process. Giving them his thanks, the inspector moves on.

‘Not as exciting as writing film scripts, but it pays rent.’

‘I wouldn’t say that,’ he says with a sharp tone of voice.

‘Would you not? Enlighten me so.’

Sucking her top lip into her teeth, the bottom is left exposed. Chapped. Looking out the window at an anonymous part of Scottish suburbia, he jostles with his tie before turning to reciprocate her stare.

‘It’s still words, isn’t it? Just because your job has more rigid conventions to its writing doesn’t mean you can’t enjoy every word and its meaning.’

Worried that she will lose his stare, she releases her lip from the grasp of her mouth. She feels her bottom lip moistening, hydrating itself in time for her reply.

‘Wow, I didn’t know you were a poet as well as a screenwriter,’ she says half-mockingly.

‘Why don’t you define it in dictionary terms then?’ He bows his head to emphasise his interrogatory remark.

Ambivalent to his unknown intentions, she sacrifices their gaze for the safety of the *No Smoking* sign stuck to the back of the seat in front of her. Lifting his feet before his head, she mimics the implication. Simpering as she waits for her path to become clear, she examines the consistency of his expression.

‘Evanescence,’ she says. ‘Enjoying the meaning of something is rooted in the ability to recognise its importance only after it has vanished from both sight and mind.’

Stunned by the articulateness of her answer, he smirks and gazes at her whilst she leaves the carriage, watching her backpack sway from one aisle to the next. She doesn't look back.

II

Up Oldtown, down Cowgate and through the Grassmarket. Perplexed by the morning's events, he stands at the door to his apartment. Having to turn the key and twist the handle simultaneously, he tosses his bag to the concrete floor and boots it with a kick.

'Fucking hell, *yah* scared the shite out of me Shay.'

Standing in the hallway is Alasdair. Short. Chubby. Ginger. Bald. Arrogant. Stagnant.

'Apologies. Where's Liam?'

'*Wee Spice Boy* was out last night. He's in bed.'

Accepting the indirect invitation, Shay follows Alasdair through Liam's door. Waking up due to the enforced entry, Liam stares at them both with contempt. Sleepy. Frail. Blonde. Hungover. Driving his fists into the duvet, he hoists himself upright and challenges the dryness of his mouth.

'Ah Shay, how was the christening?'

'Ah sure, grand. How was your night? You look a bit rough.'

'I tell ya what was rougher. That bird you brought home last night Liam. She looked like a right *Bawbag* leavin' here this morning.'

'Shut up *noy* Alasdair. If you tried to actually chat to a woman instead of critiquing me and Shay's, you'd have christened that wee bed of yours by now. Wanker.'

Disapproving of the derogatoriness, Shay sits at the foot of the bed and stares into the carpet. Although, he finds solace in Alasdair and Liam's incongruity. It diverts any attention from him. It reassures his role as the flat mediator. Alasdair, unable to bear the humility, breaks the silence.

'Oh yeah, sit down with him there. You Irish always were clannish *basturds*. What time's your flight tomorrow Flynners?'

'Three on the dot,' Shay answers. 'Why do I have to go back?' he thinks.

'Are ya lookin' forward to movin' back home?' Liam wonders, resting his heels on Shay's knees.

'Ah yeah sure, I suppose.'

'What are the *lasses* like in Westmeath Flynners?' Alasdair asks.

Tapping Liam's shins, Shay stands up to signify his withdrawal from the conversation.

'Too fucking PC to answer the question,' Alasdair shouts, nodding at Liam for approval.

Now at the door of the bedroom, Shay pulls the door handle down and freezes into motionlessness.

'You have a sister and mother don't you Alasdair.' Opening the door, he shuts it closed without hearing a reply.

III

Cracking an eggshell on the countertop, its splatter against the base of the frying pan is tamed by the creakiness of the kitchen door.

‘Only the one and only Ms Dalton could look that angelic making fried eggs.’

Opting for the famished conservatory, Rosalind returns shaking a box of *Cap’n Crunch* cereal. Long-legged. Burly. Bronze curls. Laughing.

‘O.M.G *Darling*, look what I found. I know it’s your favourite. I saw the yellow sticker hanging off it in Asda.’

Concentrating on the trickles of oil from the now blistering heat, she acknowledges the shake of the cereal box.

‘You’re so kind, thank you. Did you travel home this weekend?’

Sliding the cereal box across the kitchen table, Rosalind frowns and sprawls herself on the two-seater sofa. Beige. Moulded. Ripped.

‘Oh gosh, no. Seeing them every fortnight is insufferable enough.’

In one sardonic motion, she glares at Rosalind and slips the broken-handle spatula underneath the crisped edges.

‘Yep. A mansion house on the Lymington seafront really spells out prison walls to me.’

‘Oh but, you don’t know my family *Darling*. Last week my father...’

Flipping the egg onto its stomach, the yoke shoots out over the top of the frying pan and onto the gas cooker. Rosalind, noticing the carelessness, switches the topic of conversation.

‘How was your week? Did the fuckboy try to seduce you again on the train home?’

‘No. Some other guy sat beside me.’

‘Oh, is he from Edi?’

‘No, he’s Irish.’

‘Oh, what was he like? Was he hot?’ Rosalind asks, springing herself upward.

‘I suppose. He was a bit odd if I’m honest. He intrigued me though.’

Ready to become a martyrdom along with the egg, Rosalind stands over her. Heaving.

‘Did you get his number? his name even?’

‘Fuck,’ she mumbles.

The egg now burnt into the pan’s aluminium induces her to abandon the cook altogether.

‘I’m going to head into the city centre and get some shopping to bring back with me tomorrow,’ she states.

‘Are you coming to *Kitty’s* with me tonight? You promised. You might even bump into Mr Mysterious,’ Rosalind says, cackling.

‘I’ll go for an hour. I don’t want to be sick for the journey back tomorrow.’

Reinforcing her aim of abstaining from intoxication by slamming the kitchen door, the egg remains welded to the frying pan. Smouldered.

IV

Walking through Princes Street, he relishes its hecticness. For Shay, this city has bestowed an abundance of experiences that only few people will encounter in their lives and even fewer in the transition from dismal youth to blissful adulthood. The stench of cheap lager and fag butts courtesy of outdoor dining. The thundering of public transport engines being quelled by the onslaught of crossing pedestrians. The nervousness of cyclists as they waver between parallel tram tracks. The mundanity of these things frees him. Grasping his palms on the fringe of the Wavery Mall terrace, he fixates his eyes on Edinburgh Castle. He feels the shackles tightening.

Stooping onto her heels, she scans the bottom shelf for a four-pack of cider. Spotting a member of floor staff, she taps him on the shoulder as he restocks the confectionary stand.

‘Excuse me, sorry. Do you have any four-packs of *Bulmers*?’

‘*Magners*, you mean? In the fridge by the register,’ he replies, glaring at her with hostility.

Instead of thanking him, she nods expressionlessly. On the way to the refrigerator, her steps are fueled by her newfound antipathy for corner store off-licences.

‘*Bulmers*, *Magners*, even hangovers are becoming politicized. What a cunt,’ she thinks, nearly ripping the flimsy cardboard handle off of the pack of cider. Planting the cider onto the rolling till, she rummages through her backpack for her purse.

‘This one’s on the house *Love*. Sorry about him. *Wee Dafty* is already on thin ice with me as it is. Isn’t that right Euan?’

Stacking the last packet of *Walker’s* onto the stand, he gawks into his boss’s eyes, only dropping his head back down when she uncrumples the ten pound-note with her fingers.

‘No, no. I’ll pay,’ she says adamantly.

‘If you insist *Madam*.’

Breathing out through her nose, she snatches the cider from the barcode scanner before he can place it back onto the rolling till.

‘Maybe next time, tell Euan to avoid politicising my pronunciation of *Bulmers*.’ Stuffing the alcohol into the bottom of her backpack, she drives the palms of her hands into her hips and arches her head over the cash register.

‘And one more thing. My name is not *Love*, nor is it fucking *Madam*.’

With condensation seeping through his glasses, the boss hands her change for the alcohol and ducks down to fetch her a lukewarm spritzer bottle. As he anchors himself back upright, she has already left the double-acting door to battle with its hinges.

At the self-checkout, he rethinks the essentials needed for his last night. *Smirnoff*. Twenty *Marlboro Gold*. Sugar-free *Red Bull*. An azure-coloured mug with the Scottish flag decorated into it for his mother.

‘Have you got *i-den-ta-fi-cation* for that booze and those fags mate?’

Without glancing up, he reaches into his tracksuit pocket and pulls out his wallet. Handing his driving licence to the cashier, he wraps his jumper around the mug and shoves them into the depths of his gear bag. Creased and protected.

‘Christ, *Fookin’* Shay Flynn,’ the cashier cheers, fanning the licence as if it were to cool him down from their meeting.

‘Ah, Murray. How are tricks? I haven’t seen you since the first year of our undergrad.’

Shay, avoiding any form of eye contact, continues to transfer the items from the bagging area to his gear bag.

‘*Aye shagger*, last time I was *wiv’ yuh*, all I could hear were cheeks being clapped in the bed next to mine.’

Zippering the gear bag up rapidly, Shay calmly takes the licence out of Murray’s fingertips to avoid the appearance of eluding himself from their conversation.

‘Do you need to do a *fookin’ jobbie* or *sumvin’* Shay?’

‘No man. I’m just in a rush to catch the twenty-seven home.’

‘*Aye, Nae Bovver*. Let me know whenever you’ll be back in Ireland. I’m doing my postgraduate in DCU.’

‘Oh, Savage. Yeah man, I’ll let you know.’

Murray, offering Shay a customary fist pump to conclude their sudden reunion, reminds him that, unlike Edinburgh, Ireland never forgets. There is no distinction between indifference and ignominy in Westmeath.

Leaning on the glass edge of the bus shelter, she glances at a couple walking out of Princes Street Gardens. Giggling. Fooling. Kissing. An elderly female stranger next to her has noticed the irregularity of her gaze.

‘Wouldn’t you think the *numpties* would just get a room *eh?*’

‘They’ll be kicked out of the one they’re in if they aren’t more subtle about it,’ she replies, sniggering at the couple’s expense. She sees her bus in the distance and lifts her backpack onto her right shoulder. The routine que begins to form. At last, reaching the steps of the bus after enduring an inaudible dispute between the bus driver and a passenger, she taps her *Ridacard* against the plastic-covered payment machine.

‘Sorry *Sweetheart*, the bus is full. You’ll have to catch the one at ten to the hour.’

‘I can just stand,’ she replies, widening her eyes to indicate her desire to stay on board.

‘No can do. The bus is full. Please step off.’

‘Fine. One thing though. Do not fucking call me...’

Although she finishes her sentence, the bus’s door flaps are enough to nullify her vocal cords. Now leaning back against the glass, she glares at the onboard passengers.

‘No, it can’t be,’ standing perfectly upright to reassure herself.

‘It is him,’ she thinks.

Clutching his left hand onto one of the safety railings, Shay Flynn patiently waits for the vehicle to recoil into forwardness.

To her, he looks different now, rocking a pair of lime *Nike* tracksuit bottoms and a white *Hollister* t-shirt. His posture doesn’t change. His expression. Wishful. Gasping, she attempts to get his attention merely by curling her pinkie finger through the tips of her tawny hair. Being truded forward by the double-decker going into gear, he turns his back to her. Chuckling to the same elderly woman that she sniggered with moments before.

V

With the pint swivelling in the palm of her left hand, she forces her right thumb and index finger through the packet of peanuts. Cheap. Salted. Distasteful.

‘I know we aren’t used to exquisite tastes but they can’t be that bad *Angel*,’ Rosalind says.

‘Cheap nuts for a cheap girl,’ she replies, uncomfortably laughing at her self-deprecation.

‘Well, if you are going to degrade yourself, I’m sure that boy at the bar won’t need a second invitation to help. He’s been staring at you since we sat down.’

Standing up, she straightens the lines in her high-waisted skirt. Rose-red.

‘I think I’ll get us a drink, shall I?’

‘I don’t think you’ll have to buy one *Angel*,’ Rosalind replies sarcastically.

Walking towards the bar counter, she observes that his eyes are not meeting hers.

‘Finally. I *dinnae* think I was *gunny av*’ to drag *yuh* up *ere*’ myself’ he says.

‘Maybe you should have. Then again. I need to find out how much of a *chancer* you really are,’ she replies, mimicking his accent.

As they journey through The Meadows, he swigs out of the vodka bottle incessantly.

‘Nothing like a *sayonara bevvie eh laddies*?’ Alasdair shouts.

‘Nothing like a *wee fuckin’ gargle* is right,’ Liam reiterates.

‘Where are we parking ourselves for the night?’ Shay asks.

‘Not *The Sis-ders* anyway. My *ex lassie* is working tonight,’ Alasdair asserts.

‘Fuck it, will we just go to *Kitty’s*?’ Liam replies, having to contend with the bitter taste of *Tenants* in his mouth.

‘*Aye*. We’ll just go to *Kitty’s*,’ Alasdair concludes, shadow-boxing a gust of wind that almost thrusts Shay onto his backside.

‘*The Sisters. Kitty’s*. What the fuck does it matter,’ Shay thinks. Directing his attention onto Edinburgh Castle for the second time today, it is partly hidden by the evening midst. He can only see its outer wall. Mounted into the edge of the cliff.

His breathing. Ceaseless. His voice. Croaky. His nose. Dripping Sweat. His hands. Clasped onto her neck. Her eyelids. Shut.

‘Open your eyes,’ he demands. She obeys the order.

‘Do you like that!’

‘I can’t fucking feel anything,’ she thinks to herself.

‘I said *di-ya like that. You Little Fuckin Slut!*’

‘No. I don’t fucking like it,’ she cries, pushing the soles of both her feet against his chest.

‘Who the fuck do you think you are,’ she bellows.

Glaring at her in a state of disbelief, he pulls the duvet from her body.

‘Get your stuff and *geh oot* of my *bit*. *Yuh* little fucking Tramp!’

Grabbing her hair at its roots, he pulls out a strand of it. Its tawnyiness now spread out across her freckled shoulders. Sitting up in the bed, her shaking soles are first to touch the wooden floor. She crumples her clothes into her hands and dashes for the bedroom door.

‘Fucking look me in the eyes before you leave,’ he screams at her.

Physically unable to turn her body one-hundred and eighty degrees, she drives the handle down just enough to disengage the door-latch from the cross-bore.

VI

Looking into the bathroom mirror, she brushes the knots out of her hair.

‘What time is your train at?’ asks Rosalind, standing in the doorway eating a bowl of the *Cap’n Crunch* cereal.

‘Half-eleven. I have to get the tram to Waverly first though,’ she says, throwing the brush down into her backpack.

‘I’ll see you next weekend so *Darling*. I’m going to go to *M&S*’.

‘*M&S*. Yeah, you’re really living on the impoverishment line,’ she thinks.

‘Oh, before I go. How was the sex? Did he make you...?’

As she walks towards the door, Rosalind blocks it with her arms stretched parallel into the shape of a T.

‘No. I was too drunk. It wasn’t bad though.’

‘I knew it wouldn’t be *Angel*. You should get used to the old hook-up culture. It’s surprisingly relieving. Anyways. See you next weekend.’

‘See you then,’ she yells, already hearing Rosalind’s footsteps crash against the concrete steps.

VII

Standing on platform seven, Shay watches the wheels of the train slowly roll into inertness. Holding both suitcases by their handles, he stands among the clamour of travellers waiting to board. 'If she was on this train, she'd be sitting upright. Tall and proud,' he says to himself.

Slouching in her seat, she covers her shoulders by using her bomber jacket as a blanket. 'I wonder where he is now? His eyes would be fixed. His voice would speak with intent. His shit fucking suit wouldn't even matter to him,' she thinks to herself.

Sitting in his seat, he sips on his bottle of water before tucking it between his knees and pulling off his jumper. 'oh my fucking god,' he mutters under his breath.

Sitting across from him, she cannot do anything but smile. Her eyes. Watering. With nothing separating them but two glass windows and a gap in the track, he gazes at her for the last time and waves. His train. Pulling away.

With tears dripping onto her leggings as she tries to untangle her earphones, an elderly man sitting in the seat across from her has spotted her weeping.

'Now, now *Dear*. Don't cry. What's wrong?' He asks her.

'Nothing,' she replies, finally having her earphones untangled.

'What's your name *Dear*,' he asks considerately.

Cupping her earphones into her eardrums, she does not look back up at him.

'Enya.'

