

Spanish Wine

Her fingertips skim the back of the fridge and she feels the blood starting to drain from her hand.

‘Make sure to reach right in for the best date,’ Jenette says, examining Shona’s efforts from behind.

‘They’re all the same. The 26th is the freshest,’ Shona says, checking the caps.

‘Feck sake. Right, it’ll do.’

Using all her wrist strength, Shona lifts the furthest milk carton out over the others and places it into the trolley. The local EUROSPAR is not where a person does their actual grocery shopping. Its grimy flooring, paired with overstocked shelves and underwhelming produce, labels it a store you only visit when the drive to Carlow or Kilkenny outweighs convenience. The proprietor, Declan Nugent, is aware of this and has his prices set accordingly, knowing locals will complain but still prefer to pay the markup than travel far for the essentials.

‘C’mon Shona, we’ll keep moving,’ Jenette says, as if the supermarket is a battlefield and each aisle a trench.

Like a good soldier, Shona follows Jenette as she marches around the store, questioning if this shopping trip counts as a mother-daughter bonding activity. After Jenette tells her to ‘fetch some of that chocolate her father likes’, Shona determines that it probably doesn’t. She grabs a caramel-flavoured chocolate bar from the confectionary aisle and returns to Jenette, who’s now standing in the alcohol section surveying the limited wine selection.

‘D’ya think we need more wine?’

Shona shrugs and watches Jenette scan one bottle for a price tag. Her attention is taken away from her mother’s frugality when a woman appears from around the corner with a basket tucked neatly into the head of her elbow. The symmetrical face structure, matched with gunmetal blue eyes and long, thick, dark hair tied into a ponytail tells Shona that she’s looking at Máire Casey. She’s become thin. Yet, it’s a healthy sort of thin. A visual embodiment of a woman who watches her figure without feeling the need to weigh seven Jaffa Cakes. While waiting for the inevitable conversation, Shona searches for a word that perfectly describes Máire. She settles on enchanting. Máire Casey is an enchanting woman.

‘Jenette! Shona!’ Máire says, beaming like she’s grateful for the opportunity of human interaction.

‘Máire,’ Jenette says softly, switching from army general into friendly local. ‘How are ya?’

Shona notes how her mother's eyes scan Máire's body, giving her the impression that she regrets not having put more effort into her own appearance. Máire is wearing a woollen double-button black coat, a white silk scarf so smooth that you could set a dining table with it, and black platform ankle boots made from real leather. Jenette, on the other hand, is dressed in a ragged tweed jacket, faded denim jeans, and worn pink runners. This attire, along with a lined forehead and calloused hands gives her a tired look, and for the first time, Shona clearly sees that her mother is ageing.

'Great thanks. How are you two? Doing the last bit of shopping are we?'

Shona politely smiles before glancing at Máire's shopping basket. Hummus, sourdough bread, organic cheddar cheese. It makes their trolley of own-brand milk, pre-packaged sherry trifle and ready-made custard look inedible. Although, the upmarket groceries don't surprise Shona. During her transition year work experience, Máire always made lunch from scratch before washing it down with a freshly-squeezed juice.

'Ah ya, doing the last bit alright. Sure, we've it mostly all gotten now. I'm just looking at the wine here. I don't know which bottle to get. I probably don't even need anymore. There's already loads at the house.'

'You're making yourself sound like an alco,' Shona thinks.

'Ah well, I'm sure this young woman here knows her wine,' Máire says, winking at Shona.

'God, I don't know about that now,' Shona says, blushing.

'I'm the same though Jenette,' Máire says, voicing her solidarity. 'I can never pick one and there isn't a great selection here, but this one isn't bad.'

Máire reaches her hand to the top shelf, taking an expensive-looking bottle down and handing it to Jenette.

'Oh right, let me see now. I don't have my glasses with me,' Jenette says, squinting. 'French is it?'

'Spanish,' Shona says from over her mother's shoulder.

'I'll try that so,' Jenette says, clutching the bottle by the neck. 'Is there anyone giving ya a hand with the shopping Máire?'

'There is. I've Tommy with me. I told him to spin across to Lanigan's there and fill the car with diesel. Sure you know yourself, you don't do it now and you'll forget about it and be left stuck on Christmas Day.'

Shona catches Máire glimpsing at her after mentioning Tommy and wonders if she's aware that they're texting, not texting-texting, just texting, talking. They've always been

friendly. She doesn't want Máire thinking that she's fucking her son or that she wants too. Does she want to? Well yes, but also, no. Maybe Tommy is the one that wants to fuck her. His texts have become slightly flirtatious in the last few hours, or is she just interpreting them like that? Realising that she's probably overthinking the chest-bearing photograph from earlier, Shona focuses her attention back on the conversation.

'I know!' Jenette says, throwing her head back. 'It's all a big rush for nothing this Christmas lark, isn't it?'

'Terrible,' Máire says, tutting. 'And how are you Shona? Still working in Lake's?'

'Ah well, I . . .'

Behind Máire, Shona spots Tommy carrying a biscuit tin. He's casually dressed, wearing a plain navy jumper and rugby shorts that barely reach past his knees. Shona stares blankly at him, unable to comprehend why young Irish men think it's smart to wear shorts during winter. It's not fashionable to be hypothermic.

'How are we?' he says, throwing the biscuit tin into Máire's basket.

'Well look at this young man, he's gotten so tall,' Jenette says, feigning astonishment.

Tommy looks at Shona smugly with his lips drawn to one side.

'He has, hasn't he?' Máire says, looking proudly up at her son. 'He's eating well up in Belfast anyway.'

'Belfast? What has you up there Tommy?'

Shona almost interrupts but registers that her mother will quiz her later on how she knew Tommy was studying there.

'Oh, I'm doing a Master's in Journalism.'

'Well, excuse me,' Jenette says, lowering her chin. 'Fair play t'ya.'

'Thanks.'

There's a silence and Shona feels the meeting has finally reached its end until seeing that Máire is once again looking at her.

'Sorry Shona, you were saying? About Lake's?'

'Oh, ya. I finished up there yesterday. . . '

'Ya never told me it was your last day,' Tommy says, finishing the sentence with a gulp that almost makes Shona giggle. 'I mean, when I was chatting to ya at Twelve Pubs last night, remember?'

'Ah, must've forgot to mention it. Anyways, finished there yesterday. I'm emigrating to Sydney on the third of January.'

‘Really? How exciting. That’s a big move isn’t it?’ Máire says, nudging Tommy. ‘Are ya going with anybody?’

‘Just herself. I’d love for her to stay but sure, ya can’t stop them from leaving,’ Jenette says.

‘You’re right you can’t, but she’ll be grand,’ Máire says reassuringly. ‘You could even meet a man over there Shona.’

‘Oh she’ll never come home then. She’s no interest though, isn’t that right Shona?’ Jenette says, rolling her eyes.

Shona fixes her eyes on Tommy.

‘No mammy, course not.’

‘I thought that alright. What about this man?’ Jenette says, nodding at Tommy. ‘Has he any interest?’

‘Oh, he’s the opposite problem,’ Máire says. ‘He’s too interested.’

Shona tilts her head at Tommy and he frowns.

‘Well isn’t that the best way, keep a few of them on the go.’

‘Ya, maybe so,’ Máire says and Shona catches a glimmer of disappointment behind the gunmetal blue.

‘What’s the time?’ Jenette says, checking her watch. ‘Christ, half-four. We better get going Shona. The lads will want their dinner. It’s a full-time job cooking for this lot Máire.’

‘You’re telling me,’ Máire says, forcing a chuckle.

‘Well, ‘twas lovely chatting,’ Jenette says, readying herself. ‘We’ll have a drink together after the Christmas Máire and best of luck with the master’s Tommy.’

‘Thanks.’

‘We will Jenette! Shona, if I don’t see you before you leave, have a great time down under.’

‘Thanks. I’m sure it won’t be too long before you hear from me again.’

They exchange parting smiles and walk to opposite ends of the aisle. Once Máire and Tommy are out of their sight, Jenette can’t help herself.

‘Christ, that Tommy fella kept his looks didn’t he?’

‘Shush!’

‘I’m only saying.’

‘At least wait till we’re in the car.’

‘Alright, touchy. Here take this,’ Jenette says, handing Shona the Spanish wine. ‘Slip it onto a shelf before we get to the till.’