

## SO LATE IN THE DAY by Claire Keegan

On Friday, July 29th, Dublin got the weather that had been forecast. All morning, a brazen sun shone down on Merrion Square, reaching onto Cathal's desk, where he was stationed, by the open window. A taste of cut grass blew in, and every now and then a warm breeze played with the ivy on the ledge. When a shadow crossed, he looked out: a gulp of swallows skirmishing, high up, in camaraderie. Down on the lawns, some people were out sunbathing and there were children, and beds plump with flowers; so much of life carrying smoothly on, despite the tangle of human conflicts and the knowledge of how everything must end.

Already, the day felt long. When he looked back at his screen, it was 14:27. He wished, now, that he had gone out at lunchtime and walked as far as the canal. He could have sat on one of the benches there for a while and watched the swans and the cygnets gobbling up the crusts and other bits and pieces people threw down for them on the water. Not meaning to, he closed the budget-distribution file he'd been working on without saving it. A flash of something not unlike contempt charged through him then, and he got up and walked down the corridor to the men's room, where there was no one, and pushed into a stall. For a while he sat looking at the back of the door, on which nothing was written or scrawled. When he felt a bit steadier, he went to the basin and splashed water on his face, and slowly dried his face and hands on the paper towel that fed, automatically, from the dispenser.

On the way back to his desk, he stopped for a coffee, pressed the Americano option on the machine, and waited for it to spill down into the cup.

It was almost ready when Cynthia, the brightly dressed woman from accounts, came in, laughing on her mobile. She paused when she saw him, and soon hung up.

"All right there, Cathal?"

"Yeah," he said. "Grand. You?"

"Grand." She smiled. "Thanks for asking."

He took up the coffee, leaving before he'd sugared it, before she could say anything more.

When he got back to his desk and looked at the top of the screen, it was 14:54. He reopened the file, reading over what was there, and was about to compose some of the changes he would have to make again when the boss stopped by.

The boss was a Northern man, almost ten years younger than him, who wore designer suits and played squash at the weekends.

“Well, Cathal. How are things?”

“Fine,” he said. “Thanks.”

“Did you get a bite of lunch, something to eat?”

“Yeah,” Cathal said. “No bother.”

The boss was looking him over, taking in his usual jacket, tie, and trousers, the unpolished shoes.

“You know, there’s no need to stay on,” the boss said. “Why don’t you call it a day?” He flushed a little then, seeming uneasy about the well-intentioned phrase.

“I’m just finishing the outline now,” Cathal said. “I’d like to get this much done”

“Fair enough,” the boss said. “Whatever. Take your time.”

The boss withdrew to his office then, and Cathal heard the door softly closing.

When he looked back out the window, the sky was blank and blue. He took a sip of the bitter coffee and stared again at the file he hadn’t saved. It wasn’t easy to see it now, in the glare of the sunlight, so he changed the font to bold and tilted the screen. For a while he tried to focus again on what was there, but in the end decided to switch to the raft of letters, which would all be identical, except for the name:

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

Thank you for your application for a Bursary in Visual Arts. The selection committee has now convened, and made its decisions. The final round was extremely competitive, and we regret to inform you that on this occasion . . .

By 5 P.M., he had most of the rejection letters printed on letterhead and was waiting by the elevator. When he heard someone coming, he pushed through the door to the stairwell. It was hotter and smelled musty there. The Polish girl who cleaned after hours was leaning against the bannister, texting. He felt her watching him as he passed, and was glad to reach the foot of the stairs and the exit, to get out onto the street, where it was noisy and a hot queue of cars pushed at the traffic lights. He took his tie and jacket off and felt for the bus pass, which was there, in his breast pocket, and walked to the Davenport, to wait for the Arklow bus. For no particular reason, a part of him doubted whether the bus would come that day, but it soon came up Westland Row and pulled in, as usual.

Almost every seat was occupied, and he had to take an aisle seat beside an overweight woman, who slid a bit closer to the window, to give him room.

“Wasn’t that some day,” she said, brightly.

“Yeah,” Cathal said.

“They say it’s meant to last,” she said. “This fine weather.”

He had chosen badly; this woman would want to talk. He wished she would stay quiet—then caught himself. “That’s good to know,” he said.

“We’re taking the kids to Brittas Bay for a dip on Sunday,” she went on. “If we don’t soon go, the summer could get away from us.”

She took a tube of Polo mints from her pocket and offered him one, which he refused.

“How about you?” she said. “Any plans for the long weekend?”

“I’m just going to take it easy,” Cathal said, threading the speech into a corner, where it might go no further.

He would ordinarily have taken out his mobile then, to check his messages, but found that he wasn’t ready—then wondered if anyone ever was ready for what was difficult.

“And we’re taking them to my brother’s dairy farm,” the woman went on. “We don’t want them growing up thinking milk comes from a carton. Aren’t children so privileged nowadays.”

“They are, surely.”

“Have you children yourself?”

Cathal shook his head. “No.”

“Ah, you could be as well off,” she said. “Don’t they break your heart.”

He thought she would go on, but she reached into her bag and took out a book, “The Woman Who Walked Into Doors,” and was soon engrossed and turning the pages.

The traffic was heavy at that hour, heading out of town and along the top of the N11, but once they’d passed the turnoff for Bray and got on the motorway the road opened up. He looked out at the trees and the fields sliding past, and the wooded hills beyond, which he noticed almost daily but had never climbed. Sooner than he’d expected, they were bypassing the turnoff for Wicklow Town and heading farther south, at about the usual time.

It had been an uneventful day, much the same as any other. Then, at the stop for Jack White’s Inn, a young woman came down the aisle and took the vacated seat across from him, wearing a familiar perfume. He sat breathing in her scent until it occurred to him that there must be thousands of women, if not hundreds of thousands, who smelled the same.

Little more than a year ago, he had almost run down the stairwell from the office to meet Sabine, at the entrance to Merrion Square where the statue of Wilde lay against a rock. She was wearing a white trouser suit and sandals, sunglasses, a string of multicolored beads around her neck. They crossed over to the National Gallery, to see the Vermeer; she’d booked tickets online. He stood close, breathing in her Chanel, as they viewed the paintings. Although she admired Vermeer’s women, most, to him, looked idle: sitting around, as though waiting for somebody or something that might never come—or staring at themselves in a looking glass. Even the hefty milkmaid seemed to be pouring the milk out at her leisure, as though she had nothing else or better to do.

They took the bus down to his place in Arklow afterward and lay in bed with the window wide open: warm air and the steely sounds of his neighbor’s wind chimes coming in. She slept for an hour or more before walking to Tesco for groceries and making dinner: chicken roasted with branches of thyme, and shallots, fennel. The woman could cook; even now, he had to say that much for her. But part of him always resented the number of dirty dishes, having to rinse them all before stacking them in the dishwasher—except for the roasting dish, which she usually said

they could leave to soak overnight, and which was sometimes still there in the sink when he got back from work on Mondays.

They had met more than two years earlier, at a conference in Toulouse. She was petite and dark-haired, with a good figure and oak-brown eyes that were not quite properly aligned, a little bit crossed. He'd been drawn to how she was dressed—in a skirt and blouse of slate blue—and how at ease in herself she seemed, and alert to what was around her. He'd sat behind her on that first morning, and while the introductory speaker jargoned on he'd looked at the little buttons on the back of her blouse, wondering if she'd fastened them through the loops herself. There was no ring on her finger. He approached her at the coffee break and it turned out that she, too, worked in Dublin City Centre—for the Hugh Lane Gallery—and was renting a flat in Rathgar, which she shared with three younger women.

“Have you spent any time in Wicklow?”

“I have visited Glendalough and Avondale,” she said. “And walked the hills. It is such pretty countryside.”

“You might come down to visit again sometime,” Cathal said, and got her number.

Things were lukewarm on her side at the beginning, but he didn't push. Then she started coming down on weekends, and staying over. She had grown up in Normandy, by the coast, and liked getting out of the city, liked the town of Arklow with the river running through it, and the nearby beach where she often walked the strand barefoot, even in winter. Her father was French, had married an Englishwoman—but her parents divorced when she was a teen-ager, and hadn't spoken since.

At some point, Sabine began spending most of her weekends in Arklow, and they started going to the farmers' market together on Saturday mornings. She didn't seem to mind the expense and bought freely: loaves of sourdough bread, organic fruits and vegetables, plaice and sole and mussels off the fish van, which came up from Kilmore Quay. Once, he'd seen her pay three euros for an ordinary-looking head of cabbage. In August, she went out along the back roads with the colander, picking blackberries off the hedges. Then, in September, a local farmer told her that she could gather the wild mushrooms from his fields. She made blackberry jam, mushroom soup. Almost everything she brought home she cooked with apparent light-handedness and ease, with what Cathal took to be love.

One evening, they walked to Lidl and bought half a kilo of cherries. They halved and stoned them at the kitchen island with glasses of the Beaujolais she'd brought, and she made a tart, which she said was a version of a French dessert, a clafoutis. The pastry had to be left to chill while she made a custard. Then she rolled the pastry out with a cold wine bottle and fluted the edges deftly, with her thumbs.

Finally, when the tart was in the oven, he looked at their empty glasses and replenished them, and asked if they should marry.

“Why don't we marry?”

“Why don't we?” She let out a sound, a type of choked laughter. “What sort of way is this of asking? It seems like you are almost making some type of argument against it.”

“I didn't mean it that way,” Cathal said.

“So what is it then that you did mean?”

Her command of the English language sometimes grated.

“It's just something to consider, is all. Won't you think about it?”

“Think about what, exactly?”

“About making a life, a home here with me. There's no reason you shouldn't live here instead of paying rent. You like it here—and you know neither one of us is getting any younger.”

She was looking at him with her brown eyes.

“And there's no reason why we couldn't have a child,” he said, “if you wanted.”

He watched her closely then; she didn't seem to turn from the idea.

“And we could get a cat,” he said. “You'd like a cat, I know.”

She let out a genuine laugh then, and Cathal felt some of her resistance subsiding and gathered her into his arms—but it took more than three weeks and some persuasion on his part before she finally relented and said yes. And then another month passed before she found an engagement

ring to suit her, at a fancy jeweller's off Grafton Street: an antique with two diamonds set on a red-gold band, but it was loose on her finger and had to be resized.

When they went back to collect it, some weeks later, on a Friday evening, an additional charge of a hundred and twenty-eight euros plus vat was added, for the resizing. He took her outside to the street then, saying that they should refuse to pay this extra charge—but she insisted she'd told him about the additional cost.

“Do you think I'm made of money?” he said—and immediately felt the long shadow of his father's words crossing over his life, on what should have been a good day, if not one of his happiest.

She stared at him and was about to turn and walk, but Cathal backed down, and clutched her arm, and apologized.

“Please wait,” he pleaded. “I didn't mean it. I just didn't want to be taken advantage of, is all. I got it all wrong.”

He went back into the shop then and, with some difficulty as his hands weren't steady, prized the Mastercard from his wallet.

The jeweller, a red-haired man with gold-rimmed glasses, placed the ring into a little domed box and handed him the card reader.

“You know that this item is nonrefundable now that it is custom-made?”

“There'll be no need for anything like that,” Cathal said.

The jeweller pressed his lips together as though resisting the urge to say something more, but when the transaction was approved he simply handed Cathal the receipt and the little box, which weighed no more than a box of matches.

Afterward, they went to Neary's, where it was quiet, and ordered tea and grilled cheese sandwiches, which the barman brought to their little marble-topped table. She reached for the sugar, the ring catching the light, shining freshly on her hand, where he had placed it—but she had little appetite, took just a few bites out of the sandwich and let her second cup of tea grow cold.

A drizzle of rain started coming down as they walked past St. Stephen's Green to the bus stop. For almost half an hour they waited there, outside the Davenport, before the bus finally came.

But the rest of the weekend went remarkably well: as the hours passed she seemed to slowly forgive him, to soften, and the time between them grew sweet again, perhaps even a little sweeter than it had ever been, the hurdle of their first argument having been crossed.

When the bus stopped in Arklow, Cathal got off, along with some others. A big man in work clothes and Wellingtons was sitting on the wall outside the newsagent's, licking an ice-cream cone, a 99. The man nodded but did not speak, and Cathal wondered if this wasn't the same man who'd told Sabine that she could gather the mushrooms from his fields.

He wasn't sure he would make it back to the house without meeting others and was relieved to reach his front door, where a bunch of wilted flowers lay, on the step. He stepped over them, turned the key in the lock, and pushed the door. A small pile of post had gathered there, on the mat. He stooped to lift the envelopes and placed them on the hall stand, alongside the rest.

As soon as he had the door closed, he felt that the house was unusually still, and quiet. He stood for a minute and called out to Mathilde, the cat. When he called again and still there was no sound, his heart lurched and he went looking, opening doors, but the cat was nowhere to be found—until he found her, in the bathroom. He must have locked her in there by mistake that morning, before he left for work. He opened the back door and let her out, then looked into the fridge.

There was nothing fresh there: a jar of three-fruits marmalade, Dijon mustard, ketchup, a packet of short-dated rashers, champagne, a phallus-shaped cake with flesh-colored icing, which his brother had ordered, as a joke, for the stag party. He took a Weight Watchers chicken-and-veg out of the freezer and stabbed the plastic a few times with a steak knife before putting it into the microwave on high for nine minutes. Then he emptied the last pouch of Whiskas into the cat's dish and filled her water bowl. As the bowl was filling, a thirst came over him and he dipped his head and drank from the running tap. A feeling not unlike happiness momentarily passed through him. It was something he used to do in college: drinking from the water fountain at U.C.D. after cycling in from the flat he shared with his brother and two other fellows—but he was so much younger then.



In the sitting room, he took his shoes off and picked up the remote, sifted through the channels. There was little of interest on: a rerun of the Wimbledon final, a “Dr. Phil,” “Judge Judy,” a cookery program with a man in chef’s whites cutting an avocado in half, removing the stone, the skin, and mashing it up with a fork.

He opened the window and looked out at the street, at the brightness of the houses across the way. This evening, a bunch of helium balloons was tied to a gate and there were children bouncing on an inflated castle, screams. He drew the curtains together, closing out the light, and instantly felt a little better. He told himself that he should take a shower and change out of his work clothes, but he did not feel like going upstairs, or changing. He slipped his belt off and pushed all the cushions to one side of the couch, and punched them together. There was no need for all those cushions; six of them, on one couch.

When the microwave dinged, he sifted through the channels again. Still there was nothing there he wanted to see, so he went back to the kitchen and took the carton out of the microwave, peeled off the cellophane. He sat at the island for a while with a fork, chewing and swallowing. Weight Watchers. That had been her big thing since the first of April, so she wouldn’t fit so snugly into the little vintage dress she’d found: a white, lacy dress with pearls stitched onto the bodice. She hadn’t minded showing it to him, was not superstitious. She’d stopped making dinner most evenings, except for the big green salad with vinaigrette dressing that she usually made. He’d told her that it didn’t matter, that she wasn’t fat—but she wouldn’t listen. That was part of the trouble—the fact that she would not listen, and wanted to do a good half of things her own way.

And then, this time last month, the moving van had arrived with all her things: boxes of books and DVDs, CDs, a table and chairs, two suitcases filled with clothes, a large Matisse print of a cat with its paw in a fish tank, and framed photographs of people he did not know, which she placed and hung about the house, pushing things aside, as though the house now belonged to her, too. A good half of her books were in French, and she looked different without her makeup, going around in a tracksuit, sweating and lifting things and making him lift and move his own things, rearranging furniture, the strain showing so clearly on her face. And there were pans and a wok, a yoga mat, skirts and blouses, wooden hangers, a water filter, cannisters of tea, a coffee grinder, lamps.

“Tell me you still love me,” she said, once most of her things were in place and several of his had been repositioned.

They had sat down at that point, on the edge of the bed.

“Of course.”

“So what is wrong?”

“There’s nothing.”

“Tell me.” She insisted.

“I just don’t know about this stuff, that’s all.”

“Which stuff? My stuff?”

“These things. All your things. All this.” He was looking around: at the blue throw, the two extra pillows, pairs of shoes and sandals, most of which he’d never seen her wearing, poking out from under his chest of drawers.

He himself owned just one pair of shoes.

“Did you think I would come with nothing?”

“It’s just a lot.” He tried to explain.

“A lot? I do not have so very much.”

“Just a lot to deal with.”

“What did you imagine?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “Not this. Just not this.”

“I cannot understand,” she told him. “You knew I had to vacate the apartment at Rathgar by the end of the month. You asked me to come and live here with you, to marry you.”

“I just didn’t think it would be like this, is all,” he said. “I just thought about your being here and having dinner together, waking up with you. Maybe it’s just too much reality.”

He made an attempt to pull her to him then so as not to see what was in her eyes, to block it out, but she was rigid in his arms and got up, determined to empty out the last box, moving his razor and toothpaste to one side on the little glass shelf in the en suite, to make room for her own. And there were lotions, contraceptives, hair conditioner and a makeup bag, tampons.

She took a long shower then and changed and drank a full litre of Evian over a Chinese that he'd had to order on the phone. The restaurant charged four euros for delivery. He'd wanted to walk down to collect it—it wasn't far—but she didn't feel like walking that night, and he didn't think it right to leave her there, on her own.

After they'd eaten, a change seemed to come over her and she opened up a bit, and started to talk.

“I went out for a drink with your co-worker Cynthia last week.”

“Oh?”

“Yes,” she said. “She took me to the Shelbourne.”

“I didn't know you knew each other.”

“We don't, really,” she said. “She just handles the funding for some of our work at the gallery. In any case, we wound up drinking a bottle of Chablis, and started talking about men, Irish men—and I asked her what it is you really want from us, what is her experience.”

Cathal felt a sudden need to get up, but he made himself stay in the chair, facing her.

“Would you like to know what she said?”

“I'm not sure.” He almost laughed.

“Then perhaps you can answer?”

“I don't know,” he said, truthfully. “I've never once thought about it.”

“But I am asking you to think about it now.”

Cathal lifted his hand and reached for her plate, rose, and placed it on the draining board with his own before leaning back and holding on to the edge of the counter.

“I really don’t know,” he said. “What did she say?”

“She said things may now be changing, but that at least half of men your age just want us to shut up and give you what you want, that you’re spoiled and become contemptible when things don’t go your way.”

“Is that so?”

He wanted to deny it, but it felt uncomfortably close to a truth he had not once considered. It occurred to him that he would not have minded her shutting up right then, and giving him what he wanted. He felt the possibility of making a joke, of defusing what had come between them, but then the moment passed and she turned her head away. That was the problem with women falling out of love; the veil of romance fell away from their eyes, and they looked in and could read you.

But this one didn’t stop there.

“She also said that to some of you we are just cunts,” she went on, “that she has often heard Irish men referring to women in this way. We had reached the end of the bottle and had not yet eaten, but I remember clearly—that’s what she said.”

“Ah, that’s just the way we talk here,” Cathal said. “It’s just a cultural thing. It means nothing, half the time.”

“Monika, the cleaner, told her that you were the only person in the whole building who didn’t give her so much as a card at Christmas. Is this true?”

“I don’t know.” He genuinely didn’t. He couldn’t remember giving her something or not giving her anything.

“Do you know you’ve never once thanked me for a dinner I made here or bought any groceries—or made even one breakfast for me?”

“Did I not order our dinner tonight? And haven’t I helped you here all day, moving your things?”

“The night you asked me to marry you, you bought cherries at Lidl and told me they cost you six euros.”

“So?”

“You know what is at the heart of misogyny? When it comes down to it?”

“So I’m a misogynist now?”

“It’s simply about not giving,” she said. “Whether it’s not giving us the vote or not giving help with the dishes—it’s all clitched to the same wagon.”

“Hitched,” Cathal said.

“What?”

“It’s not ‘clitched,’ ” he said. “It’s ‘hitched.’ ”

“You see?” she said. “Isn’t this just more of the same? You knew exactly what I meant—but you cannot even give me this much.”

He looked at her then and saw something ugly about himself looking back at him, not angrily but calmly, in her gaze.

“Can you not even understand what I am talking about?” She seemed to be genuinely asking, and looking for an answer.

But Cathal didn’t say much more. At least, he didn’t think he had said much more. He might, later on, have made some ugly remark about her eyes—he did not like to think of this—but the fact was that he couldn’t remember much else about that evening, except that he was glad he hadn’t had to help with any dishes afterward; he’d simply put his foot down on the pedal of the bin and thrown the cartons from the Chinese in on top of the other waste that was there, before letting the lid drop.

It was past 8 P.M. when Cathal went back into the sitting room. He’d decided to watch a series on Netflix, to binge-watch another over the weekend, but a documentary had come on, on the BBC, about Lady Diana, some type of commemoration, or an anniversary. He had never taken any interest in the Royal Family, yet found himself watching in a kind of trance: there she was, in the white dress, with a veil over her face, getting out of the carriage with her father and turning to

wave before climbing the steps and taking the long walk up the aisle to marry the man waiting for her there, at the altar.

As soon as the vows were made and the wedding rings had been exchanged, Cathal automatically pressed the Rewind button on the remote before realizing that it was not something he could rewind. And then Mathilde came in—he felt her coming back—and soon afterward, during the ads, the screen grew a bit fuzzy and his eyes stung.

He felt hot and took his socks off and dropped them on the floor and left them there. There was such pleasure in doing this that he wanted to do it again. Instead, he sat watching the second half of the program: Diana getting pregnant and producing a son, and then another. Toward the end, after she had left her husband and gone off with another man, a wealthy Egyptian, she was sitting out in a bathing suit, on a diving board. And then there was the car crash in the tunnel in Paris, and all those flowers rotting outside Kensington Palace and Buckingham.

When the credits started to roll, he felt the need for something sweet and went into the kitchen. He opened the fridge and reached in for the flesh-colored cake, lifted it out onto the island. He took the steak knife and sliced the whole tip off. Then he took out the champagne and removed the foil and untwisted its wire cage. The bottle had been in there since the night of the hen party, as Sabine had no taste for fizzy drinks. The cork was stubborn and tight—but he kept pushing at it with his thumbs until it gave and came away with an exhausted little pop.

Back in the sitting room, he flicked through the channels. Again, there was nothing he really wanted to see. He ate mouthfuls of the cake and drank the champagne neither slowly nor in any rush until the cake and the champagne were gone, and then a painful wave of something he hadn't experienced before came at him, without blotting out the day, which was almost over. He would have liked to sleep then, but sleep, too, seemed beyond his reach.

At last, he took out his mobile and switched it on: there were several e-mails, most of them junk, and just a few text messages. Nothing from her. From his brother, his best man, there was one missed call and a text of just two words: "You O.K.?" Cathal made an effort to reply, then read over and deleted what he had written, and turned the mobile off.

After a while, he put his head down on the cushions and let his mind fall into a series of difficult thoughts, which he labored over. At one point, something from years ago came back to him: his mother standing at the gas cooker, making buttermilk pancakes, turning them on the griddle. His father was at the head of the table, he and his brother seated on either side. Both were in their

twenties at that time, in college. His mother had served everyone, brought their plates to the table, and they had begun to eat. When she went to sit down, with her own plate, his brother had reached out and quickly pulled the chair out from under her—and she had fallen backward, onto the floor. She must have been near sixty years of age at that time, as she had married late, but his father had laughed—all three of them had laughed heartily, and had kept on laughing while she picked the pancakes and the pieces of the broken plate up off the floor.

If part of him now asked how he might have turned out if his father had been another type of man and had not laughed, Cathal did not let his mind dwell on it. He told himself that it meant little, that it had just been a bad joke. When he no longer felt able or inclined to think over or consider anything else, he turned on his side, but at least another hour must have passed before sleep finally reached out and he felt himself falling into its relief and a new darkness.

When he woke, it was past midnight. The TV was still going: some poker tournament with men in baseball caps and dark glasses, guarding their cards. For a while he watched these near-silent men placing and hedging their bets and bluffing. Most lost and kept losing, or folded before they lost more. Eventually, he turned the TV off and sat listening to the quiet of the house, and realized that Mathilde was there on the armchair, purring. He reached for her, lifted her into his arms. She weighed far more than he'd expected her to weigh and he put her out the back, watched her going off through the hedge, and locked the door.

By now, they would have had their first dance and might still have been dancing, into the early hours, at the Arklow Bay Hotel. He had paid for trays of snacks to be served with tea at 11 P.M.: several types of sandwiches, cocktail sausages, and mini vol-au-vents that would, by now, have been served and eaten by those with whom they might, in one way or another, have spent their lives. It was money he would never again see. His mind hovered half stupidly over these unwelcome facts while he stared at the empty champagne bottle on the floor, realizing he probably wasn't sober. He thought of those cherries and what his going over their cost, those six euros, had cost him. Then he thought of the tart, the clafoutis, and how it had turned out to be burned at the edges and half raw in the center—and a strange, almost comical noise came from somewhere deep inside him. Didn't they say that a woman in love burned the dinner and that when she no longer cared she served it up half raw?

When he pulled the curtains, the window was wide open. The inflated castle was still out there—he could see it clearly, under the street light—but there were no children now.

“Cunt,” he said.

Although he couldn't accurately attach this word to what she was, it was something he could say, something he could call her.

He stood in the quiet for a minute or two, then heard a noise and realized that a wasp had come in and was flying about, zigzagging and bumping against things. He took one of his shoes up off the floor and turned the overhead light on and found himself going after the wasp, following its haphazard motions. A current of excited anger was rising up through his blood and, at one point, when he was standing on the sofa to reach, unsuccessfully, to kill it, he thought of Monika, that foreign cleaner on the stairs, and how she'd watched him as he passed on what should have been his wedding day; and of Cynthia, and how she had smiled that morning and how she had taken Sabine off, unbeknownst to him, to the Shelbourne.

"Fucking cunts." It sounded better in the plural, stronger.

He kept after the wasp, making bigger, bolder swipes until it flew back to the window to get away from him and he had it cornered between the pane and the sill, and killed it.

After he'd thrown the dead wasp out and closed the window, he felt a bit cooler and used the downstairs toilet to take a long piss. There was some satisfaction in doing this without having to lift the lid, without having to put the lid back down or having to wash his hands or make a pretense of having washed his hands afterward—but the pleasure quickly vanished, and he then had to make himself climb the stairs.

As he climbed, he felt himself holding on to the bannister, realizing he was pulling himself, woodenly, up the steps. He knew he could not blame the champagne but nonetheless found himself blaming it. Then a line from something he'd read somewhere came to him, to do with endings: about how, if things have not ended badly, they have not ended.

When he went into the bedroom and unbuttoned his shirt and took his trousers off and lay down, he did not want to close his eyes; when he closed his eyes he could see more clearly the white cuff of his wedding shirt poking out from the built-in wardrobe and the stack of unopened, congratulatory cards and letters on the hall stand and the diamond ring, which he couldn't return, shining inside its box on the bedside table, and heard her saying, yet again, and so late in the day, and very clearly, that she did not want to marry him after all. ♦