

# NOW

Sarah lay on the bed, watching Oisín as he slept. This is it, she thought as she looked at his face, his slack-jawed, drooling mouth. This is the man I'm going to spend the rest of my life with.

'Baby.' Oisín yawned, rubbing sleep from his eyes. 'Babe, are you awake?'

'Of course I'm awake,' she said. 'I've been awake for hours because *someone* came home demented drunk at four o'clock last night.'

'Sorry,' he said, nestling into her, stroking her stomach. 'You know I didn't do it on purpose.'

'No, Oisín.' She pushed his hand away. 'I'm not in the mood.'

'You're never in the mood anymore,' he said under his breath.

‘What did you just say to me?’ Sarah asked, even though she had heard him.

‘Nothing,’ Oisín replied, even though he knew she had heard him.

Sarah sat upright. The curtains were still open, and outside blue skies promised a perfect June day, the sort of day that other couples would want to spend together – reading the newspaper in bed, going for walks in their local park, taking selfies and counting how many Instagram likes their love could collect.

‘I’m pissed off with you, Oisín.’

‘I know.’

‘You said you’d be home straight after work yesterday.’

‘I texted you about the leaving party, didn’t I? I had to go.’

‘I’m surprised Bryant has any stockbrokers left, the amount of leaving parties you “have to” go to.’ Before, Oisín would have wanted her there. *It’s not as much fun without you*, he used to tell her when he came home early from a night out with the lads. *Nothing is as much fun when you’re not there*, Sarah.

‘We were supposed to go to the cinema,’ she said. ‘I bought the tickets and everything, like we agreed.’

He took a deep breath. ‘Okay, can we stop? I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to let you down. Will you forgive me?’

Sarah folded her arms, reluctant to give in so easily.

Oisín tried again. ‘So, what did you get up to yesterday? Did you get into the studio at all?’

‘I didn’t have time.’

‘But I thought we said you would—’

‘We?’

‘Sarah . . .’ Oisín swung his legs over the side of the bed so he was facing away from her. ‘Sarah, I can’t—’

‘I met some friends for lunch yesterday so I didn’t have time to paint,’ she interrupted him before he could finish his sentence.

‘What friends?’

‘What do you mean, “What friends”?’

‘I didn’t mean anything by it. It’s just that I met Fionn and Robbie in O’Donoghue’s last night and they never said anything about seeing you for lunch.’

‘Fionn and Robbie were out? Together?’

‘That’s what I said, isn’t it?’

‘Whatever. I do have other friends, you know,’ Sarah said. (No, I don’t.) ‘We went to Dun Laoghaire. To Harry’s.’ (No, we didn’t.)

‘That’s nice,’ Oisín said as he got out of bed. ‘I hope you had fun.’

He stood with his back to Sarah as he stretched, razor shoulder blades biting through the flesh. Oisín was so thin; he couldn’t seem to gain weight no matter what he ate. Last year, Sarah didn’t mind. She couldn’t get close enough to Oisín then, as if she wanted to unzip his skin and settle inside his body, make a nest for herself there. (*I carry your heart with me*, Oisín had recited to her, touching his fingertips to her

chest. *I carry it in my heart.*) No one had ever told Sarah that being in a relationship could feel like coming home, that love didn't have to mean feeling scared all the time. But now, as she watched Oisín pull off his underwear, throwing it in the general direction of the laundry basket – because putting it *in* the basket, like she had asked him to do a million times, would be far too difficult, clearly – she began counting the knuckles of his vertebrae. She imagined doing that every morning for the rest of her life, itemising each bone, and she could feel her throat closing over.

After his shower, Oisín grabbed his laptop bag and leaned over the bed to kiss Sarah goodbye.

'Where are you off to, then?' she asked.

'I have to go into town. I need to get a haircut before the wedding next weekend. Alannah has very specific ideas about how she wants the groomsmen to look.'

'Why do you have to go into town for that? What's wrong with the barber in Dun Laoghaire?'

'I have to go to someone who actually understands what to do with my hair, Sarah; you know that.'

'But it's Saturday,' she said, pouting. She was copying an actress, she thought, from a French art-house film that Fionn had forced her to watch with him, although she couldn't remember which one. 'Saturday is supposed to be *our* day.'

'You just got your summer holidays; every day is a Saturday to you right now.' Oisín ruffled Sarah's hair and she glared at him.

‘My job is actually really fucking difficult. I’d love to see you try teaching for one day; see how long you’d last.’

‘Babe, I didn’t mean it like that.’

‘No, just fuck off.’

‘Sarah, you can’t just tell me to fuck off. That’s not how people in healthy relationships communicate with each other.’

‘Oh, Jesus Christ. Have you been reading Oonagh’s self-help books again?’

‘For once, just for once, Sarah, can you leave my mother out of this? She’s never been anything but lovely to you.’

‘Oh, really? Like when she walked in here unannounced without even ringing the doorbell?’

‘She thought you had gone home to Dunfinnan for the weekend.’

‘But what was she even doing here in the first place? It’s like she wants to check up on me every second of every day, make sure that I’m not wrecking her precious house.’

‘Sarah—’

‘Trekking mud through the hall.’

‘*Sarah—*’

‘Keeping livestock in the kitchen, I suppose.’

‘I’m not having this conversation with you again,’ Oisín said as he left the room. ‘My mother likes you. You need to get over this.’

Sarah waited for him to come back, to say he loved her and he hated fighting with her and he couldn’t enjoy his day

unless he knew that she had forgiven him. She waited until she couldn't wait anymore.

She dressed, applied her make-up, lining her lips in bright red. *He* used to tell her that she had 'blow-job lips', usually while she wiped her mouth clean, after he came. He liked it when she swallowed, so Sarah did. Sarah always did what that man liked her to do. She walked downstairs, pausing in front of a canvas splashed with reds and purples, a woman's face screaming in the swirling colours. Open-mouthed, her tongue cut out; silenced forever. One of Oonagh's creations, naturally. Everything in here belonged to Oonagh.

Stripped wooden floors, Aztec-print rugs, exposed brick walls, a neon-pink light fixture that made everyone look like they had rosacea but she was sure had been hideously expensive. Sarah hated all of it. 'It's a bit obvious,' she had said to Fionn, whispering, '*New money*,' under her breath, and Fionn told her she was a spoilt brat. Maybe Sarah was being a brat, but it was hard living in a house where everywhere she looked was evidence that people *could* make money from art, that being an artist *was* a viable career. If you were good enough.

Sarah reached out to touch another one of Oonagh's paintings, the coagulated oil like clots of blood beneath her fingers. The hopelessness that she so often felt in this house began to return, as if it was embedded in its very walls. She needed to get out of here, she decided. She needed to go to the sea, to taste salt on her tongue. She would be able to breathe there.

She locked the front door behind her, smiling at Mrs Morrison from next door, who was watering her flowers. The Morrisons had a gardener who came every Thursday, Johnny, but Mrs Morrison liked to pretend that she was responsible for his handiwork. ‘Natural green fingers,’ Sarah heard her tell friends who admired the pink and yellow roses sneaking up a trellis against the stone house when they came to visit.

‘Going somewhere nice, Aine?’ Mrs Morrison said, peeling off her pristine gardening gloves.

‘Why does she keep calling me Aine?’ Sarah had asked Oisín when they moved in to the house.

‘It doesn’t matter,’ he replied, pouring her a glass of champagne to celebrate this next step in their relationship. But Sarah couldn’t let it go.

‘Who is Aine?’ she asked again. ‘Who is Aine? *Who is she?*’ That had been their first fight.

‘I think I’ll go see Oonagh and William,’ Sarah said, surprising herself. ‘It’s such a nice day.’

‘Isn’t that lovely?’ Mrs Morrison said. ‘Giving up your Saturday to spend some time with your in-laws. I wish my Damian’s Paula was half as conscientious about keeping in contact with me.’

Sarah pushed out the creaking gate as she *hmmmed* her disapproval of Mrs Morrison’s daughter-in-law, a lovely woman who left the Morrisons’ every second weekend with a haunted expression on her face.

On the DART, she sat by the window, watching the sun flinch as it hit the flat sea. The train passed Blackrock, Dun Laoghaire, Glenageary.

Killiney, she told herself. Killiney. I'm going to see Oonagh and William.

She would get off the DART at Killiney station and walk to Oonagh and William's mansion, with its turrets hewn out of stone, the facade designed to resemble a medieval castle. Ostentatious, and not to Oonagh's taste – she had admitted as much to Sarah. 'I loved the house in Booterstown,' Oonagh had said over brunch in Avoca, which she insisted on paying for. 'I didn't want to leave. But William . . . Anyway,' she said, picking up the dessert menu, 'marriage is about compromise.' Sarah had wanted to ask her why it always seemed to be the woman who was expected to compromise.

The train stopped at Dalkey and, almost unbeknownst to herself, Sarah stood up. She waited for the other passengers to disembark before her: a group of teenage girls in high-waisted jeans, an elderly woman after them, her mouth wizened, like Nana Kathleen's when she took her false teeth out.

When Sarah reached Sandycove, she sat on the wall at the side of the tiny beach and checked the time on her phone. He would be going for his Saturday-morning walk soon. He was a creature of habit, she knew; he didn't like anything or anyone to disturb his daily routine.

Two skinny-limbed children were building a sandcastle, screaming with tears when an older kid ran across them,

scattering their creation to the wind. Their mother lay back down on her striped beach towel, keeping her sunglasses on so that she could comfortably ignore the children while gesturing at the man with her to go help. The father, in his swimming shorts, sheer from too much washing, went hand in hand with the knee-high boy and girl towards the water, and the screech of ‘Too cold! Too cold!’ began as waves splashed against toes. It made Sarah think of her own first time at the seaside. She was young then, and her mother was still there.

‘We’re going to the beach today,’ Helen had told her that day. ‘Are you excited, my lovely Sarah?’

Sarah remembered a light cotton dress, sandwiches buttered in the kitchen, a long car journey with the windows rolled down, sweat beading at the back of her neck and dribbling down her spine.

‘We’re here,’ her father said eventually, carrying the icebox and two collapsed beach chairs, Sarah’s mother holding her by the hand.

Sarah remembered standing at the shoreline, the view fractured by rainbow-coloured windbreakers and half-falling-down umbrellas. People shrieked as the rickety rollercoaster at the edge of the beach swooped low and she inhaled salt and seaweed and coconut-scented sunscreen.

‘Do you want to go for a dip?’ her mother asked her, and Sarah said no. All she wanted to do was stand there and look.

Being by the sea always made Sarah feel small, insignificant

in a way that was comforting somehow. It made her think that none of this would matter, in the end.

Time passed. Ten minutes? Half an hour? And then a shadow fell across her. And she knew it was him.

‘Sarah?’

She looked up at him. ‘Hey,’ she said, and something in her broke, yet again. How did he still have the power to do that, after all this time?

‘I thought it was you, but I wasn’t sure. What are you doing here?’

‘What?’ She pretended to look confused.

‘Not exactly your neck of the woods, is it?’

‘I’m living in Booterstown now.’

‘When did you leave Portobello?’ he asked.

‘I was living in Stoneybatter before, actually.’

‘Oh, right.’

‘It doesn’t matter,’ she said quickly. ‘Listen, we should catch up. Do you want to grab a coffee?’

He checked his watch. ‘Sure,’ he said. ‘I have some time.’

As they walked down Breffni Road, he said, ‘I haven’t seen you in ages. I can’t even remember the last time we met.’

It had been three years. *We can’t break up, Sarah*, he had said to her, three years ago, when she decided to stand still and to ask him for more. She had pretended for so long to be sterile, clean, to have no needs of her own except to please him. She couldn’t do it anymore. *But we can’t break up*, he had said to her while she tried not to cry. He didn’t like

women who cried; it was messy, undignified. *We can't break up because we were never in a real relationship in the first place.* They had only seen each other one more time after that, a stolen evening in an expensive hotel. But Sarah didn't want to think about that night and how it had ended. What he said. How he had looked at her.

'Yeah, it's been a while,' Sarah said now.

'You look great,' he said.

He had always commented on her appearance, but it wasn't in a weird way, she used to tell Fionn. Being admired by him didn't feel like when other men would look at her, teeth bared as if they wanted to devour her. *Smile, love,* men would shout as she passed them on the street. *You'd be so much prettier if you smiled,* as if a performance of joy was the price Sarah had to pay for existing in a female body in a public space.

'You look well too,' she said.

'Thanks,' he replied. 'I'm feeling uncharacteristically relaxed. Just back from Paris with Flo and Harry.' He held the door to the cafe open for her. Oonagh would have hated that, Sarah thought. *Chivalry is an outdated concept that only perpetuates patriarchal myths,* she'd said at one of the insufferable dinner parties William threw regularly. The beautifully arranged dining table at the Killiney house, linen napkins and silver cutlery, a single orchid in a short tumbler at each seat. The walls were laden with photos of Oonagh and William in their twenties and thirties, impossibly young and glamorous: Oonagh holding a placard above her head, demanding divorce

or abortion rights, waving at the camera as she and a group of equally rebellious women set off on the train to Belfast to procure illegal condoms. *That's why I've made sure that the men in this house know that housework isn't a woman's job*, Oonagh had said as Oisín stood up to clear plates. *All the men*. She'd winked at William and he reached across the table to kiss her.

'Paris,' Sarah repeated. The coffee shop was small, wooden tables with jam jars full of wild flowers. The waitress gave them menus when they sat down. She was attractive, blonde hair and excellent teeth, and Sarah looked at him to see what his reaction would be.

'I don't need a menu,' he told her. 'I'll have an Americano.'

'Are you sure?' the waitress replied. 'Our gluten-free brownies are fab.'

'I'm sure they are.' He leaned back in his seat, looking at her more closely. 'But, sadly . . . What's your name?'

'Luna.'

'Luna? That's an unusual name. But very pretty. I must say, it suits you,' he said, and the waitress blushed. 'But sadly, Luna, I'll have to refuse.' He looked at Sarah. 'What'll you have, Sarah?'

'A chai latte.'

'And a chai latte for my friend.' He handed the menus back. 'Thank you, Luna.'

After she left, he lowered his voice. 'What kind of name is Luna?'

'Maybe her mother was into Harry Potter.'

He didn't answer, and checked his phone instead. That was rude, Sarah thought. Oisín would never do that. Oisín's manners were impeccable; his mother wouldn't have stood for anything less.

'So. How was Paris?'

'Paris is Paris,' he said. 'Harry enjoyed it though, and that's the main thing.'

'It's cool the three of you went on holiday together.'

'Oh, we're terribly modern.'

'Was Daniel all right with Florence going away with you?'

His jaw tightened. 'No idea.'

'Well, I'm glad it went okay – for Harry's sake.'

'I'm glad too. Although I will say seven days is too long to go without getting laid.'

Sarah wasn't sure if she had heard him correctly, but then he smirked at her, confirming her suspicions. She knew that, later that evening, she would be able to articulate exactly why this had hurt her feelings, but for now, the perfect response was somehow just outside her grasp.

'I'm sure you can survive seven days,' she said, wishing her drink would arrive so she'd have something to do with her hands.

'I think we both know that's not true,' he said. His eyes met hers and, for one moment, it was as if nothing had changed.

'Here you go,' the waitress said. She banged Sarah's chai on the table, the milky liquid splashing onto the saucer. 'Sorry,' she said to Sarah, before gently placing his coffee down.

‘Is that everything?’ the waitress asked him.

‘Perfect, thanks, Luna.’ He didn’t look at her this time, too busy scrolling through his camera roll.

Luna faltered, her smile fading, and Sarah almost felt sorry for her.

‘Here,’ he said, holding his phone out to Sarah.

She could tell instantly it was one of Fionn’s paintings. If Sarah had spent her life trying to make the sea true on the page, then Fionn had attempted to do the same with the sky: swashes of inky blacks and midnight blues. His paintings were intense to look at, as if you were being swallowed whole, the paint swirling in your mouth and crawling up your nose until you thought you might suffocate in the world he had created.

‘Sure, there he is,’ Sarah said, but she looked away from the photo as soon as possible.

‘Isn’t it incredible? This fantastic place called Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac had a piece of his in an exhibition of up-and-coming artists. If you’re ever in Paris, you should check it out.’

‘If I’m ever in Paris?’

‘Yeah. You’d love this gallery. Sofia Coppola was a guest curator a few years ago.’

‘Did you go to Père Lachaise again?’

‘What?’

‘Père Lachaise?’ Sarah asked again, but his face was blank. ‘Did you buy anything by Fionn?’ she tried. ‘Or is it still only the one piece you have?’

‘I bought this one,’ he replied. ‘It was cheap as chips, really, especially compared to the Oonagh MacManus I bought the day before. I was afraid Flo was going to demand extra child maintenance when she saw the price of it.’ He took another sip of coffee. ‘What do you think of MacManus? I know some people say it’s just hype, that she’s more ideology than actual talent, but her work never decreases in value, does it?’

‘That’s weird that you would mention Oonagh.’

‘Why so?’

‘I’m dating her son,’ she said, watching him carefully.

‘The black kid in that terrible band?’

‘The Principles aren’t terrible; they’re really popular.’

‘They’re popular in Ireland,’ he said. ‘Playing Vicar Street and small pubs down the country. They’re not going to set the world on fire, are they?’

‘I don’t know,’ Sarah said. ‘Anyway, that’s Domhnall. I’m with Oisín, his older brother.’

‘Very good.’ He caught the waitress’s eye and made a scribbling motion in the air: *Bill, please*. ‘That’s why you’re here, is it?’

‘What?’

‘Are you here to see the Wilsons?’ he asked. ‘She’s an attractive woman, isn’t she? Still has it, even at her age. I met her when we sold them that house in Killiney.’ He shuddered. ‘What a monstrosity. It’s like something an itinerant would buy after they won the lotto.’

*That’s not funny*, she would have said to anyone else, but

he would have laughed at her. So Sarah stayed quiet and giggled, a high-pitched noise that announced what an *easy* girl she was – an easy, lovely girl. Sarah had always done that with him and she had always hated herself for it afterwards.

The waitress brought the bill and he insisted on paying.

‘Don’t be going on with that feminist nonsense, Sarah,’ he said, ushering her outside into the sunshine, his hand in the small of her back, and she fought the urge to lean against him and murmur her thanks. She wasn’t allowed to do that anymore.

‘Well, look who it is.’ A short, balding man was walking towards them, overdressed for the heat in a royal-blue suit.

‘Michael Gleeson, how the hell are you?’ He moved away from Sarah to shake the other man’s hand.

‘I’m good, I’m good,’ Michael said, wiping sweat off his brow. ‘How was Paris? Florence told Yvonne that you went shopping. Naughty, naughty.’

‘I did. They’ll sell on well, particularly the MacManus. How’s Noah?’

‘Ah, he’s grand.’

The two men talked about Harry and Noah, how relieved they were that Transition Year was over and the boys were finished with work experience and mini-companies and trips to Kolkata to feed starving children in slums. Yvonne was sick of having to chauffeur Noah around to rugby training and to the disco and she couldn’t wait until Noah had his full driving licence, but then you worry about boy racers, don’t you? Almost makes you wish you had a girl.

Finally, all talk of Noah's rugby-kicking technique exhausted, Michael nodded his head at Sarah. 'And who's this?' He didn't remember her, Sarah realised, even though she had taught Noah for two years at St Finbarr's before she left.

'This is Sarah Fitzpatrick,' he told Michael. 'She's a friend of mine and an artist. You should keep an eye out for her.'

I'm not an artist, Sarah thought. Artists create art. Sarah's art was trapped in her fingertips, like dirt gathering beneath her nails.

'Just a friend?' Michael winked at him.

'Behave yourself, Gleeson,' he replied. 'Sarah is involved with Oonagh MacManus's son.'

'Oonagh MacManus?' Michael said. 'I've been trying to get in contact with her for months but her agent is so bloody over-protective. Will you give her this, the next time you see her?' He handed Sarah a business card, silver font on green. 'My gallery is on Kildare Street.'

'I know where it is,' Sarah said, and she could hear how coarse her accent was, how *country*, Dunfinnan strangling her vowels. 'Kevin's place is only a few doors down.'

'Kevin Walsh? How'd you know him?'

'I'm friends with his boyfriend.'

'Ah, Robbie, of course,' Michael said. 'Does that mean you know Fionn McCarthy as well?'

'Sarah and Fionn went to Dublin Art College together,' he interrupted, and Michael whistled.

‘You know all the important people, Miss Sarah Fitzpatrick,’ he said. His phone beeped and he pulled it out of his pocket, grimacing as he read the text. ‘I’d better go; the wife is looking for me,’ Michael said. ‘You’re a lucky man; no ball and chain for you, is there?’

He laughed. ‘Good to see you, Michael. Tell Yvonne I send my regards.’

‘I will, of course,’ Michael said. ‘And nice to meet you, Sarah. Stay out of trouble.’

He waited until Michael was out of sight before he took a step towards her. ‘Stay out of trouble? You?’ he said. ‘Never.’

He was getting old, Sarah realised, the creases around his eyes cut deep, his teeth almost yellow in his thin-lipped smile. He was forty-seven now, and he looked every year of it. What was Sarah doing here?

The wind blew her hair over her face and he brushed it away. ‘You dyed it.’ His voice was surprised, as if he had only noticed now.

‘Yes.’ Blonde. I dyed it blonde, like you preferred.

‘It suits you,’ he said. ‘But, listen, I have to go. Duty calls. Do you need a lift to the Wilsons’ place?’

‘I’m grand,’ she said. ‘Thanks, anyway.’

‘Be good, Sarah,’ he said, walking away from her. She waited for him to turn around and look at her, one last time. But he didn’t.

Matthew, she thought.

Matthew. Matthew. Matthew.