



TO THE WORLD OF MEN WELCOME Nuala Ní Chonchúir

His hand comes so close to my face I could lick it, taste the salt of his palm. Instead I watch him, follow the tweak of his lips and the dog-like pout of his nostrils. I think I'd like to kiss him, but that's just the flicker of want for a man I can't have. His son, Ram, is my sort-of boyfriend. The father is white-haired, his thick moustache always flat and healthy looking. He worries a string of blue beads when he speaks, reminding me of my granny. She would spend hours telling her rosary, muttering while she pressed the beads – they looked like a string of raisins – through her fingers.

Ram comes at me in the hotel-bar where I work, all brawn and puffy hair. I don't take him seriously at first, he's been after my American friend before me. But he's different to the après-ski crowd that keeps the bar busy at night: he talks to me, is always friendly. Ram presumes I'm from America; then England. I tell him I'm Irish and he thinks I've said that I'm Dutch.

'Ireland,' I repeat, as if that will be enough to explain. 'James Joyce. Guinness.' He looks at me blankly. 'Eurovision. Johnny Logan?'

'Aah, *Ireland*. Johnny Logan. IRA: boom-boom.' He points an invisible shotgun at my head.

‘Yes,’ I say, ‘Ireland.’

After a few casual meetings – drinks in cafés, a trip to the cinema – he disappears for ten days. There’s no explanation, no calling by the hotel-bar to tell me he’ll be away for a while; he’s just gone. I wait for him every day, trying hard not to wait at all. He returns nonchalant; walks in one evening at his usual time. When I see him I feel my skin prickle and a frown drags down my face. He tells me he’s been up in Zürich visiting his brother; says with a smile that his sister-in-law propositioned him one of the nights he stayed – she slipped into bed beside him. He says that she is beautiful and makes curvy motions in the air, then kisses the tips of his fingers. I laugh. Ram: dirty old Turkish goat. I’m fond of him, a small bit used to him; he’s company where I don’t have much. I like when he sits at the bar watching me work – a comforting, uncomfortable presence.

It’s while Ram is on his ten-day-away that I start to talk to Stefan, a native of the small mountain-shadowed town I’m working in. Well, really, Stefan starts to talk to me. He props himself over the bar, swirling a glass of *milch grenadine*. He always orders this vile pink concoction; it reminds me of the milkshakes I used to make at home as a child, by mixing a pale powder into milk.

‘I want to take you out,’ Stefan says.

‘Oh really?’ Bar-workers get this all the time.

‘No, no. Not like the others, I want to be a nice man to you.’ I lift his arms from the counter and wipe the beer-stickiness away with a gritty cloth.

‘No thanks, Stefan, I’ve enough on my plate.’

“‘On my plate’ – I don’t know what this means.’ He laughs. ‘Please, I will take you up into the mountains on my motorbike.’ He smiles, showing a stack of even teeth. I’ve always liked nice teeth. ‘Up to the Hasliberg in the moonlight.’ He winks and I smile.

‘It sounds lovely, but I’m seeing someone.’

‘Someone? Who? This Turkish man? Pfff, he goes with all the women.’ He waves his hand across the bar for emphasis; my smile drops.

‘That’s enough, Stefan.’

Old Köbli slides into the seat beside Stefan and raps with a coin on the counter.

‘English *Mädchen*, I need a beer.’

I pull a lager for him, re-froth the top the way he likes, smile and set it down.

‘There you go.’

‘English *Mädchen*, you always look so sad.’

I smile again. ‘I’m Irish, Köbli, how many times do I have to tell you that?’

I slot his receipt into the clip on the counter; plenty more will join that one before I tot them up when Köbli is drunk enough to go home. He chuckles and places a lick of beer-froth on his moustache with the first mouthful.

I watch Stefan’s lips pull across my nipple; the smooth yellow skin of his face glows against the pale globe of my breast. We’re staying in the Weisses Kreuz, a simple hotel off the main-street; it’s his treat. This is my first real taste of sex. I’m stirred, but in a raw way, and afterwards I bleed. His concern is for the sheets; the slip of brown blood I’ve left behind unsettles him. In the morning he strips the bed, bunches up the sheets and looks around for somewhere to leave them.

‘Just put them on the bed,’ I sigh, ‘what are you worried about?’

‘Why did you bleed?’ He’s frowning.

‘I didn’t do it on purpose.’

‘I have to go away tomorrow,’ Stefan says suddenly, ‘military service; I will be away for a while. Can I stay in your room with you tonight, before I must go?’

‘Sure.’

I push my fingers through his soft-blond hair and he throws the rumple of sheets into the corner. We leave the hotel, buy some apple-filled cakes and eat them perched on a bench in the bright, cold morning. It’s going to snow again. We kiss and say ‘Ciao’ before parting. I head back to my room in the staff-quarters at the hotel, pulling the mountain air through my nose in greedy blasts. I’m glad to be on my own. I slip into the service entrance behind the hotel and call the lift. It’s my day off. As the lift slooshes upwards, I plan a shower, a read, some letter-writing and a rest. When I open the door to the staff corridor, I find Ram hunkered down

outside my room.

‘How did you know where my room was?’

He shrugs. ‘It’s not difficult.’ He lights a cigarette, blows the smoke up at me.

‘Where have you spent the night?’ His eyes are dark.

I push the key into the lock. ‘That’s none of your business.’

Ram follows me into the room, closes the door. My bedroom is plain: it holds a slim bed, a wardrobe, an armless chair. There are photographs of my family and some Swiss postcards stuck to the wall. Ram squints at the photos.

‘Pretty people,’ he says.

Sitting on the bed, I take off my shoes; long nights behind the bar have left my feet rough and aching. I peel off my socks and curl my toes into the ridges in the carpet. Ram kneels on the floor beside me – like someone about to pray – and pushes me back onto the pillow. He strips me, staring into my eyes while his large fingers unbutton delicately. Then he climbs over me, the weight of his bones crushing into mine. His grunting unnerves me a bit – it’s animal; I just stare over his back at the white-stippled wall, wondering if the new snow has started to fall outside yet. When he’s finished, we smoke, flicking the ash into a saucer that Ram balances on his chest.

‘So,’ he says.

‘So what?’

‘Why do you go with this soldier man?’ His hand slides across my arm.

‘What do you mean “go with”?’

‘Aah, you know what I mean.’

‘He’s not a soldier, anyway,’ I say, wondering how he knows about Stefan.

‘All the Swiss are soldiers, but they don’t fight.’ I prop up on my elbow to look at him.

‘Ram, you’re not jealous are you? Remember, you’re the one who didn’t want to get too serious.’ I kiss his brown cheek.

‘You are a bad girl,’ he says and laughs, pinching my arm.

We talk about home: bits about our families, little stories. I tell him about my

granny, how I spent most of my childhood with her and that I miss her now that she's gone. He smiles, kisses my nose. Then I tell him about the summer's night I'd seen a couple arguing on Dublin's O'Connell Bridge; the woman had shouted into the man's face, then she ran at the river-wall and jumped into the soupy water. I laugh and he strokes my forehead, running his fingers over each of my eyebrows. He tells me that his sister, who is thirty, wears bows in her hair like a little girl; he says that she keeps chickens and that the 'men-chickens' bite her all the time. He bites at my fingers, making a soft beak of his lips; we giggle and the giggling turns to belly-laughing, then hands all over each other, then deep kissing, then sex. I enjoy it, the plunge and heat of it, the skin and fluidity and fast breath. Afterwards Ram speaks Turkish to me – a curdle of strange words – and I whisper back in Irish, the lyrics to a song about a beautiful girl, a *chailín álainn*. And then we fall asleep, wrapped limb on limb around each other.

I wake up to a soft knocking on the door and Stefan calling my name. I lift my head, confused, and stare around the room in a half-woken panic. It's dusk-dark and Ram is gone. I let Stefan in, wrapped just in a sheet.

'You are waiting for me,' he says, tipping my shoulder with his fingers.

'Get off, you're freezing.' I slide back into the warm spot in my bed and light a cigarette. He turns on the lamp and I see that he's in his soldier's uniform. 'Whit-woo,' I drawl. He hefts his bag to the floor and pulls a rifle from his back. It surprises me to see it.

'Where will I put this?' Stefan says.

I tell him to leave the gun in the wardrobe. I get dressed quickly and we leave the hotel to scuffle through powdery snow to the nearest bar; a soapy moon hangs low over the mountains. We spend the evening in the bar of the Hotel Hirschen, drinking merlot from green stemmed glasses, talking and smoking, our heads huddled close. Stefan tells me he likes the outdoors and that he has read whole novels in English with the help of a dictionary. I'm impressed. The wine plants a glow in my belly and when I'm too tired to drink anymore we go back to my room. I have to sneak Stefan up in the lift so that my bosses, the hotel owners, don't see

him. We're both drunk and we fall asleep quickly. The single bed is too small for the two of us and I wake in the middle of the night with cold-pains down my side; my tongue is dry from the wine. I climb across Stefan and go to the wardrobe for my nightdress – the one that my sister calls the 'asylum dress' because of its old-fashioned, shifty shape. It belonged to my granny and I wear it to feel her close. The moon throws a cold light across the room.

Stefan's rifle nests in the wardrobe among my clothes, propped long and cool against the back. I lift it out, squat low and lay it across my knees; it's chocolate brown, as shiny as boot leather. I finger it, slide my hands over it: the shaft, the trigger, the barrel. I look over at Stefan: he's like a pre-pubescent, hairless and fatless and long. The steel of the rifle is cold against my thighs; I watch him sleeping and think that I'd like to put on gloves – white cotton ones – and pass my hands over every part of him. I'd love to smooth those gloved fingers into the cave of his chest, down his stomach into the V of hair couching his penis, and watch him grow under my touch while he sleeps.

There's a knock on the door. I'm so far into thinking, I don't hear it at first. Stefan moves, throwing his head around on the pillow.

'Let me in, baby.' It's Ram. I freeze and hear myself pant. He knocks louder, calls my name. I stand – still holding the rifle – feeling like a calf, wobbly on newborn legs. The fug of my hangover lifts. I shove the gun under my bed and throw my granny's nightdress on. Ram calls out again and I can tell from his voice that he's drunk. 'Come out, I want to talk to you.'

I crouch by the wall, willing him to go away. He bangs on the door, waking Stefan.

'*Was ist los?* What's the matter?' he says, struggling to sit. 'Why are you over there?' I wave at him to shut him up. 'What?' he says, even louder. Ram whacks at the door and shouts for me to come out.

'I suppose *he* is in there with you,' he roars.

'Who is that?' Stefan is struggling out of the sheets.

'Don't open it,' I gabble, clutching at his hand. He stoops for his trousers and

finds the top of the rifle sticking out from under the bed. He grabs it up and stares at me.

‘You shouldn’t touch this.’

Ram hits the door again, this time keeping up a rhythm: thump-thump-thump-thump-thump-thump. Stefan pulls on his trousers and opens the door, the gun still swinging from his hand. Ram snorts at him.

‘What? Are you going to shoot me, soldier boy?’

Ram sways and swipes at the gun. Stefan lifts it towards him, threatening, but I can tell that Ram frightens him. I slip between the two of them.

‘Stefan, get back inside and put that bloody gun away.’ He shakes his head, but puts the gun down. ‘Please, I’m better talking to him on my own.’ Stefan goes back into my room, but leaves the door ajar. Ram sniggers. ‘Go home, Ram, you’re pissed.’ He flops forward onto my shoulder and I have to prop him up.

‘I am drunk.’ He leans into me, the jut of his hip catching me between the legs. ‘Don’t let him touch you,’ he mock-whispers into my hair and I struggle to stay standing under his weight. Then he lurches off me and weaves his way down the corridor, slamming into the door at the end to open it. I go back into my room.

‘He is crazy,’ Stefan says.

‘No he’s not,’ I snap, climbing in under the sheets and turning to the wall.

Ram is sitting at the bar, his sleeves rolled up; old Köbli is beside him, puffing on his stinking pipe. I’m serving espressos to a group of Americans who are just back from a moonlight sleigh-ride. They are giddy and they banter with me, saying next time I’ll have to go with them. I smile politely and say that I’d like that.

‘Beer,’ Ram shouts. I glance over at him, then go to him to quieten him down. He throws a fifty franc note at me.

‘What are you at?’ I give him back the note. ‘Pay when you’re leaving.’

‘Beer,’ he says again and throws the money at my chest. He holds up his wrists to show a criss-cross of cuts. ‘You’ve killed me.’ I pour a beer and put his change on the counter. He knocks the money onto the floor at my feet. ‘Keep it. This is

what you want; a money man.' I stare at him. 'A money soldier,' he hisses, leaning across the bar into my face.

'Ram,' I whisper, 'stop this.'

He snarls at me and gulps the beer, never taking his eyes from mine. 'Another,' he says, slamming the glass on the counter.

'Go home, Ram.' The Americans are watching us, murmuring. Ram throws a hundred franc note at me. It flows to the floor, drifting as slow as a winter leaf. I step back and look at him, leave the money where it is and walk away. I serve other people at the bar.

'English *Mädchen*, get this man a beer and I will also have another.' I look over at Old Köbli and shake my head. Ram slings his arm across Köbli's shoulder.

'Two beers,' he calls, wagging his finger at me. 'She has killed me,' he says to the old man, who starts to laugh. The group of Americans are silent now; one of them lifts his espresso cup and goes to a table by the door and the others follow, man by man.

'Ram, please go home.' I can feel a sweat of tears moving up my face.

'No,' he roars, 'no, I will not go home.' He splays his wrists on the bar. 'Look what you have done to me.' I go over and face him. The cuts he has made on his arms form a lattice, like something woven.

'That has nothing to do with me.' He lunges across the counter, tries to grab at my shirt. I jump back.

'Why didn't you tell me you'd found someone else? You want money so you have this soldier. You have killed me; I am dead.' He flicks another hundred franc note at me; this time I throw it back.

'Talk to me when you're sober, Ram, or not at all.' He tries to focus on my face but his head jolts and bobs.

'You must be nicer to your man, English *Mädchen*,' old Köbli says, belching his pipe-smoke at me. I grab his beer glass and fling it into the dishwasher, then slap through the swinging doors to the quiet of the hotel kitchen. I sit on the steel work-surface and smoke a cigarette; its end glows in the dark. I finish it, breathe deeply

and go back through the doors to the bar.

Ram's head is slumped on the bar. His father has come in and is standing with his hand across the back of his son's head, stroking his hair. He twirls his blue beads, pressing and tossing them and staring at me. His lips twitch under his lavish moustache and he shakes his head at me.

'You have not been good to my son,' he says. Then he pulls Ram to his feet and guides him out the door. Neither of them look back.

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