Had I been given a choice, James Masterson would never have become my flatmate. The accident of our living together came about when I arrived late to my first year of college, after a holiday with my father in Venice and Genoa. Finding myself unprepared for the Dublin property market, I spent a week with an uncle and then moved in with James, the first person to reply to my frantic emails. He was back in Mayo on the day I arrived but had left the keys in Spar. The flat was nearby, on Erne Terrace Rear, facing the DART bridge that shuddered as trains passed from Pearse Station.

It was as though I had tried to make myself ill that morning, drinking coffee after coffee with breakfast and persisting afterwards in reading on the coach. Between my shirt and my spine a nauseous sweat had taken up, and the keys felt strangely cold in my hands. I wanted to shower and to eat, nothing more.

I reached the place, then, already harried beyond bearing. I was inclined to ignore the boy who stood watching my struggle with the lock , but when he laughed I shot him a glare.

“Who are you, then?” he asked, meeting my gaze. He was redheaded and no older than twelve.

I answered with my eyes on the keys.

“Oisín. I’m moving in here.”

"Ah, Oisín, who’s moving in here." In the silence that followed he began to drag a pebble over the footpath beneath his plimsoll.

"Are you Jim’s friend, then?" he asked.

I supposed "Jim" was the James I’d been emailing — was this a younger brother? The key turned in the lock and, nudging the door open with my shoulder, I regarded the boy carefully. He was wearing shorts even though it was a cool September evening, and his stalklike limbs were downed with faintish hair. Was he waiting to be invited in?

"No," I said, stepping inside, "I don’t know Jim at all."

The door fell shut. Besides a coat hung on the back of a chair and a frying pan upturned on the draining board, the bungalow looked exactly like the pictures I’d seen. A train went by across the way, and the house shook very gently.

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The only time I saw James outside was when we first met and stepped out for a smoke together, in the days before we dropped the pretense of not smoking in our rooms.

"I tried to call you, to tell you I’d be up today, but my phone was out of battery," he said.

"No bother," I replied, "I’ve just been settling in here anyway."

We stood alongside each other, leaning against the wall and blowing our smoke into the September afternoon. The bungalow — our bungalow — was a low, white building, whose broad skylights, though piercing the place at times with brilliant light, did little to dispel an air of long-ingrained austerity.

"See that?" he asked, pointing at the blurry wall of the bridge across the way.

I said I didn't have my glasses on.

"The graffiti."

He crossed the road towards the wall and I followed. His clothes, I noticed somewhat guiltily, were distinctly unfashionable: he was wearing a Mayo GAA jersey and chunky Nike trainers from the late noughties.

"ISLAM IS EVIL" was written across the brickwork in dark green paint, and responses spread out underneath for and against the motion. James hunkered down next to the wall and squinted up at my face, watching for a reaction. The sky that day was blue and cloudless and I felt, as he raised a hand to shield his eyes against the light, that I was being tested in some obscure, inscrutable manner. I smiled openly but said nothing, and James straightened up, his T-shirt catching briefly on a paunch above his belt.

"Every morning someone's added something new. It's like a little debate on the wall."

I was baffled. "Did you write any of it yourself?"

He tapped his nose, and said something that was lost as a train moved overhead.

"What was that?"

He waved in dismissal, dropped his cigarette and trod on it.

"I'm going to head in now."

James kept to his own room. Mostly, I had undisturbed use of the kitchen-cum-sitting room, but if I arrived home from college to find him on the sofa dressed only in his pyjamas, he would usually chat with me for a minute or two before finding some pretext to leave. I thought, however, that I detected a kind of loneliness about the boy. When I came home some evenings the light in my bedroom was on when I knew I'd left it off, and my bed smelt faintly of his damp, biscuity odour. Other times I found him half-drunk, poised on the arm of the sofa with chubby delicacy, his eyes almost closed — a profane Buddha — and a flagon of cider in front of him. I'd enter, his eyelids would flutter, and he'd rise and grope his way to his room.

The second time I met Rob — though at the time I didn't know that was his name — was in my sitting room. I had woken up late and was in a rush to meet a friend for breakfast on Nassau Street. My bedroom was adjacent to the front door, and I was pulling on a hat between the two when I spotted the red-headed boy shuffling on our sofa.

"Hello," I said. He flinched in surprise, contracting at the knees and shoulders.

"Hi." The boy was shy this time, and restless, zipping and unzipping his hoodie with pale fingers. He seemed familiar with the place despite his nerves, and his sloe-dark eyes,searched the room and avoided my own, reflecting a steady intimacy with all they passed over. I was about to speak when James appeared in his bedroom doorway, wearing shorts and a vest, a thermos in his hand.

"Alright, James?" He nodded, said good morning but did not look me in the eye. Suddenly I had the impression that it was I, not the boy, who was the intruder. I left — but dawdled outside, listening. At first I heard nothing; then a hiccup of suppressed laughter made me move on.

My interest in James was growing unabated. I shared wild speculations with my friends. But each time I thought I'd summed James up, discovered him, I was frustrated by some single fact that wouldn't tally, some little flaw that belied my theory. I was ashamed, in a way, of my suspicions, but my shame was of the kind that, as it repels, enthralls. The air of perversity his name suggested, I wondered, was it properly his or mine? My self-suspicion grew, and a childhood memory of imaginary friends on whom I'd foisted my own transgressions articulated itself darkly in my mind.

By mid-November I realised James and I had a mutual friend: a coursemate of James's and a College society head. I arranged to meet him on the pretext of organising an intervarsity quiz.

"Just a bit weird," he said, smiling sympathetically, when I mentioned James. He took a draught of his pint and ran his thumb along his lower lip. Car headlights swept the stained-glass windowpanes, and their red glow briefly suffused his soft-boned, grey-hued face. From a darkened alcove an American's voice rose, laughing, to a whinny.

"You see, some of the girls on our course reckon he's a bit of a creep. Not that he'd do anything or say anything, you know, nothing like that: just the way he looks at them."

I said I'd not seen him act at all strangely, but then I'd never seen him around girls. My friend smiled.

"Nah," he said, "I reckon he's actually harmless enough where girls are concerned. I think — and not a word to himself, obviously — I think I'd be more careful if I were *you*." His eyes measured me. I knew what he was suggesting, and didn't like it, so I had a sip of my drink and tried, with tact, to change the subject.

Despite all of this I found it hard to remain completely cold towards James. My personality, I've realised, has always been characterised by the uneasy coexistence of great sympathy and fastidiousness. My sympathetic side rushed out to James, embraced him, as it did all the put-upons of the world. But my fastidious side, perceiving the sordidness with which it had been forced to commune, only bristled with disgust and redoubled its disdain. I once came close to asking James about his personal life — but the thought of his becoming vulnerable before me, implicating me in his troubles, maybe even crying, repulsed me with the strength of instinct. My pity tormented me with disgust, my disgust with pity. And as I got on with my life, James moved about the house like a guilty conscience I lacked the courage to relieve.

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Later that November I met one of our neighbours as I was leaving the house. He was tall and broad, in his mid-twenties, with a veiny, equine neck.

"You live here? In number nine?"

His breath steamed in the air.

"I do," I replied. "Are you nearby or?"

He ignored me: "You Jim?"

"Oisín. James is my flatmate."

"Your friend," he raised a gloved finger to my face, "is a fucking *creep*. What's he after, spending all his time with a twelve-year-old?"

A reply suggested itself.

"I don't like it either — and I'm the one who has to live with him."

My discomfort was exaggerated. The existence of an improper relationship between the pair was, I admit, one of my early theories concerning James's behaviour, but it was one I'd since abandoned as improbable. As I'd hoped, though, my disavowing James made the man soften, and made me the conduit, rather than the object, of his anger.

"Tell that sicko to make some friends his own age. Say I'll put him in hospital if I see him near Rob again."

He walked heavily on and I steadied myself against the door.

I was unsurprised, given this altercation, to find that the stretch of wall opposite our front window was soon decorated, in familiar green paint, with the words "GET OUT SICK FUCK". If James understood this warning, however, he gave no sign of it. I suppose in hindsight, that it was remiss of me not to pass on the message Rob's brother had asked me to deliver. Though I once attributed this omission of mine to all manner of virtues on my part (tact, compassion, sensitivity and discretion among them), I now feel able to admit that my primary concern in making the decision — as in countless others I have made — was the avoidance of discomfort. I considered it needless discomfort, , arising from a private spat. And the remedy for spats, I reasoned, was simply to ignore them to death.

One day not long after this, James suggested we had dinner together. We were in the sitting room.

"We don't have to go out for it or anything," he said. "We could just cook here. I'm *sick* of Tesco ready-meals."

He was making a rollie as he spoke, straining, I thought, to sound nonchalant.

"Tonight?" I asked.

"If it suits." He glanced at me, then licked the glued edge of his rolling paper and smoothed it inexpertly down.

I was considering going to Doyle's and might have invited him along, but I knew the presence of our mutual friend, ill-disposed as he was towards James, could prove awkward.

"James, I'm sorry," I said. "I've an assignment due first thing tomorrow, and even if I do get that done, I promised some friends I'd meet them for a drink."

I paused, again considering inviting him. He nodded like he knew what I was thinking.

"Anyway," I said, "I'd better head. Dinner sounds good, though, can we do it later in the week?"

I was already up, taking my coat from the hook and pulling my arms through the sleeves.

"Yeah," he said. "Yeah, no problem. Good luck with the work."

"Nice one," I said, opening the door and stepping out. "See you later."

I arrived to the pub early, and had a pint for myself at the counter while I waited for the others. James was on my mind, and as I drank I wrought excuses. I owed him nothing. He was a flatmate, someone I split the rent with, not an actual friend. Fuck, if he was *suicidal* or something, of course I'd do more for him — but he was just lonely. And how many lonely people were there in Dublin? The intimacies of others were things I'd long avoided.

We drank, when everyone arrived, in a room by the stairs. There were nearly a dozen of us. At one point James's classmate leaned towards me, his forearm planted on the table for balance, and spoke into my ear above the noise.

"Any news on your flatmate, the old lecher?"

"None," I said. I found it strange that he thought to mention him again. "I've not seen much of him lately, to be honest."

He pulled his face away from my ear, then leaned in again.

"And you're not complaining, I'd say, ha? You've been careful like I said?"

"I have," I said, "absolutely."

It seemed he expected me to say more, and the drink made me talkative, so I continued, raising my voice.

"To be honest, I wouldn't mind moving out. He makes a bit of nuisance of himself around the place." I felt I was lying as I uttered these words — I'd never really considered moving out — but the idea, once voiced, took on a glamour of its own, and the prospect of moving out, of shutting the door on James and the bungalow for good, spread out before my eyes with great vividness.

My friend lapsed into meditative silence, and in the lull I tried to engage with the main conversation — but a few minutes later he nudged me, and said he'd been thinking about my "flatmate situation".

"And, Oisín man, I have you sorted. I've a friend who has a room — you two would be perfect together, genuinely perfect." He pulled a phone from his pocket and told me to copy down his friend's number. I finished my drink, and soon left for home.

Later, when I was trying to explain things to myself and others, it was my hat — the infuriating stiffness of the thing, which refused to stretch past my numbed earlobes — to which I attributed the distraction that prevented me from noticing, until I almost stood on it, James's body. It lay in our open front door. The head was resting on the lino flooring, and his nose was bloodied. Over the right eye a livid shadow

had spread, capillary-webbed. His left eye was glassy and open. A groan, a pained human groan, is in itself a perverse thing to delight in; but when one came at that moment from James's engorged lips, I could have kissed them. He said my name.

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I was conscious when James's parents arrived of the bloodstains he had left on the floor. Though I was never formally interviewed by the Gardaí (no charges were ever brought), I had a fairly clear idea of what must have taken place that night. After I'd left for Doyle's, James had gone to call on Rob, I reasoned, and there received a hostile reception. Whether or not James had then said anything to enrage Rob's brother, I never knew, but something — madness, probably — prompted him to follow James home and, on the threshold of our house, batter him. I relayed, of course, precisely none of this to his parents. He was awake now, in hospital, talking, and how much he chose to tell them about the incident, and the reasons for it, was a decision all his own.

They smelled, like him, of biscuits and of buses, and his father held awkwardly away from him a yellow rain poncho that dripped onto the floor. None of us addressed the fact that they had interrupted me in the act of moving out. (What else could I have been doing? They had caught me, lugging suitcases out to a running taxi, at the front door.) I offered a sweaty hand in turn to each of them and tried to look each earnestly in the eye, noticing he had his mother's.

"James," I said, "— he's ah— he's doing so much better, I've been told."

"Yes," his mother nodded, enthusing excessively for my sake, "the doctor said that in a few weeks he'll be as good as he ever was!"

"Well," his father modified, sliding a woollen jumper-sleeve further up his forearm, "not as soon as that, maybe." In his voice was a mild rebuke, and he seemed silently to add, *Nor as good as that, maybe, either.*

I shifted awkwardly on my feet, and said goodbye.

I felt small and impotent as I set the last suitcase down in the boot. I remembered, clearer now, the sense of vast and grave betrayal with which I'd first dimly conceived of my toys, my wooden tools, as things necessarily fake: useless and derivative of some genuine, adult article. And the mute anguish I'd felt then in my throat, and the rage at the real adult world of weight and consequence, seemed somehow, in the taxi, to descend on me again.