

Sweat crawled in rivulets down Richie's back. The city, although packed with people, moved as though time had slowed down. Everyone stuck to the small pockets of shade cast by tall monuments and shop fronts, so that the large main square remained deserted, the sun beating blankly on the smooth grey stone. It was the summer of 2014 and Munich was waiting with bated breath, sweating, heaving, hoping.

Richie sat under an awning which provided little relief from the heat, sipping a pint of *Puntigamer* and barely listening to the inane chatter of his two mates, who sat across from him.

"I *know* you're lyin' Fitz, I know it. There's no way you got off with her. She was a solid nine. Would've been a ten, if she hadn't been absolutely plastered in make-up."

"I *did*. How many times do I have to tell ya? Listen, it doesn't even matter whether you believe me or not, ya sap."

"Where was she this mornin' then?"

"She LEFT. She left before the rest of ye woke up!"

Fitzy's voice had gone up an octave, and its pitch, combined with the heat, was doing very little to help Richie's hangover.

"Lads." His voice was quiet but they both looked over immediately. "Would ye ever give it a rest? My head is bangin'." He stretched and took another sip of beer. "Do either of ye have a smoke actually?"

"Yeah here, take one of these," replied Shane, proffering a pack of Marlboro Lights to a grateful Richie. The dull ache behind his eyes receded as he smoked, and he relaxed back into the wicker chair to take in his surroundings. It was only two in the afternoon and the pub was already full. Most of the other patrons were dressed in German football shirts with flags around their shoulders or painted onto their faces. They all chattered away in their musical Bavarian dialect, probably discussing the previous matches. Germans took their soccer seriously.

They had flown out to Munich on a whim; him, Fitzy and Shane. Watching the last game at the pub, Shane had joked that they should buy one-way tickets to Brazil for the final, that the atmosphere would be electric. Fitzy had laughed, but Richie was struck by an idea.

"Well Brazil is a bit unrealistic —" he began.

"A bit unrealistic? Well I certainly don't have a spare five grand or so rattling around in my account, do you?" Fitzy interrupted, still laughing. Richie glared at him until he shut up.

"What I was *going* to suggest was a little trip to Germany instead. Atmosphere is bound to be stellar there as well, isn't it?"

He sat back, gratified by the look of delight which had replaced Fitzy's normally gormless expression.

Shane had already gotten his phone out, and was looking at flights.

"Yeah they're not too bad. About one-fifty return to Munich."

"I say we go," Richie declared, draining his pint.

“What about time off? I already used up all my holidays on the Alicante trip.” Fitzzy looked anxious again. He worked on the production line of a biscuit factory, and his supervisor was an infamously horrible woman. Richie had always thought of her as one of those power-hungry career women who break balls just to prove they are worthy of the same respect as men. It never worked, though, did it.

“Tell her you’ve a family emergency. Make something up. Be grand.”

Fitzzy seemed appeased. He trusted Richie.

“I’ll talk to Ross, sort out days off for us.” Richie was addressing Shane now.

“Thanks,” was all Shane said, his eyes still locked on his phone. Richie and Shane both worked for a phone company, but Richie was Shane’s boss, something they always laughed about although Richie thought he saw mutiny in Shane’s eyes whenever anyone brought it up. They had practically grown up together, the three of them, had gone to the same primary and secondary school in the small town of Ballingrange. Richie had wanted to leave Ballingrange behind, but when the Leaving Cert results came out his plans were scuppered. He had always taken his natural intelligence for granted, and had depended on it to see him through to NUIG to do arts, but a sixth year spent drinking and getting with girls had gotten in the way of that. He had considered repeating, but couldn’t bear the humiliation of it. He took a job on the factory floor and worked his way up, Shane following predictably in his footsteps. Fitzzy had stuck with his summer job, and five years later he was still packing up boxes of digestives. They were best mates, indestructible. Still, Richie often thought about how he had blown the chance to leave his dusty midlands town, and his two best friends, behind.

He was leaving the town temporarily though. Next thing they knew, they were in Dublin Airport, taking Snapchats of their pre-flight pints with the caption ‘lads on tour’ and getting so wasted that they nearly missed their boarding call. A day later, there they were, hungover under the Munich sun.

“You want something else? Another beer?” A sallow-skinned girl was standing over their table, one hand on her hip, the other stacking up their empty glasses. Now she, thought Richie, was definitely a ten. He shaded his eyes against the sun and looked at her properly: hair plaited, hung like a rope over her shoulder, wide and warm eyes. And her body... Richie glanced over at his friends, who were trying their best not to stare.

“Yeah, another round would be great. Please.” He gave her what he considered his best smile, a cheeky kind of grin. It amazed him how much could be communicated through the set of someone’s mouth or the flash or their eyes. She gave an embarrassed laugh.

“Ya of course, no problem,” she said, turning away.

“Jesus she was fairly decent, wha?” Shane’s eyes followed her as she walked.

“She looks a bit like Laoise Ryan,” mused Fitzzy, “remember her?”

Richie did remember. Laoise Ryan had been his first love, not that he’d ever admit that to anyone. She had gone to school with them, and Richie had admired her from afar for three years but failed to ever ask her out. Her limbs were long and rangy like an athlete’s and her eyes were a kaleidoscope of colour; sometimes brown, sometimes gold, sometimes green. He had loved her with the kind of

nervous intensity that only fourteen-year-old boys are capable of, an intensity that no one had taught him how to express. So he teased her instead, shouting raw comments about her body as she passed him in the corridor, pushed on by his friends' ensuing laughter. He grew aware of her presence on the pitch at lunchtimes, and would attempt to perform a soccer trick, or, failing that, beat up a first year in a bid to get her attention. Her eyerolls and haughty stares stung him like physical blows. The summer after fourth year, she returned to school looking skinny and strung out. Her eyes didn't seem to change anymore but remained a constant, dull brown. Midway through the year, her parents pulled her out of school and lunch tables buzzed with speculation and snippets of overheard teachers' conversations: Anorexia, basically lost her mind, making herself throw up in the toilets, special hospital up in Dublin, attention-seeking slut, poor girl, poor family. Richie heard the rumours with a faint and horrifying sense of guilt for the comments he had once thrown at her. But it surely wasn't his fault? She must have known it was all just a joke. And, comforting himself with this, he pushed the feeling deep down inside, swallowing it, forever hating the taste of it.

"Before she went mental and started throwing up, obviously," Fitzzy continued, laughing before lighting up another cigarette.

"She didn't go mental, for fuck's sake. She was sick, wasn't she?" The words were out of Richie's mouth before he could shove them back in. His two friends stared at him, surprise etched on both of their faces.

"Well yeah, I suppose," Shane conceded, "but I never liked her anyway. She always seemed a bit stuck up, like" There was a beat of silence as Shane and Richard regarded each other across the table.

"Here, what time is this match starting anyway?" It was obvious Fitzzy wanted to change the subject. Richie decided not to get into it with Shane. It was too hot for a row, apart from anything else.

"Half eight, far as I know."

"Lovely. Plenty of time to get nice and smashed." Fitzzy beamed at them.

That's exactly what they did. They ordered round after round, pausing only to eat and take Snapchats. The waitress with the plaited hair had stopped serving their table, but Richie could see her now and again in his peripheral vision. Just before the match was due to start, Shane's girlfriend rang him. Scowling, he pressed the phone up to one ear and stuck his finger in the other.

"But I text ya... Yeah I know but sure we're in a pub... The match is about to start... No 'course not, I just forgot... I better go... Ok yeah I love you too... Bye bye bye."

Richie and Fitzzy smirked at him and started to make kissing noises.

"Jesus lads would ye ever grow up, acting like a pair of five-year-olds." Shane shook his head.

"Ara relax man, we're only slaggin' ya." laughed Richie, but Shane's words had penetrated his drunken stupor. They *did* act like five-year olds. Shane had been with Jenny for two years, but neither Richie nor Fitzzy had ever had anything like a long-term relationship. Richie started picking apart his beer mat. Fuck it. He had hit that stage of drinking when the negative thoughts started creeping in, and he hated it.

He turned his attention to the big screen, where both teams were lining out. Excitement in the room pitched; all eyes were trained on the screen, all phones stashed away. Time moved differently during those ninety minutes, and Richie could feel himself become part of the collective consciousness which surrounded him, willing the German team on. A woman bit down on her lip so hard it started to bleed. One man was crying silently. They won by a goal, and the three Irish men integrated themselves seamlessly into the celebrations. They sang until they were hoarse, arms around shoulders of people whose names they didn't know and would never learn. They drank so much it seemed to hang over them like a fog as they moved from pub to sweaty, thumping club. Richie had no idea where they were, or how they'd get back to their hostel, but those problems seemed small and far away. All that mattered was the heavy bass and the swaying room and his friends, the absolute two best friends in the whole world. He told them this, something he'd normally never say, and their response was a sweaty and putrid embrace as they jumped around like animals. Richie felt a wave of something other than love at that moment, a reaction to all the different spirits bubbling up in his belly.

"I'm goin' to the jacks," he shouted over the music, "wait here for me, will ya? Right here."

Fitzy and Shane nodded their assent and clapped him on the back. He found the toilet and tried to throw up, but nothing would come. He returned to the dancefloor, but couldn't see his friends anywhere. After pushing through the bodies, he gave up and stumbled out into the cool relief of the night. He tried to call them, but they wouldn't pick up. *Fuck* was all he could think. He wandered along, keeping to what he thought were the main streets, hoping something would start to look familiar. Without warning, another wave of nausea hit him, and he ducked down an empty side street. He began retching into the gutter, his insides turning out, the skin on his head stretching as he convulsed.

"*Ist was los?*" He heard a soft voice behind him say. "*Brauchst du Hilfe?*" He turned to see a girl peering at him, frowning with concern. He realised with a jolt that it was the hot waitress from the bar.

"I'm sorry... I don't em... ich bin no Deutsch?" Richie said feebly, and the girl laughed.

"Hey, I recognise you! You were at the bar earlier, right?" Her English was flawless, her accent almost completely neutral. "You need something? You want me to call your friends?"

"Ehm, no I tried, they're not picking up." His mouth was dry, hands shaking. "You don't have any water on you by any chance?"

"Water? No," she looked conflicted, "but the bar is right here, I could return, just for a moment..." her voice got quieter, almost like she was speaking to herself. Richie looked up, and recognized the bar where they'd been drinking earlier. She must have just gotten off work. "Come on," her tone was decisive. She helped him up, and unlocked the door of the pub, before turning off the alarm. Richie sat himself down on one of the bar stools, and she set a glass of tap water in front of him. He gulped it down gratefully.

"You're English?" She arched an eyebrow.

"Irish," he replied.

They talked back and forth about the match, Munich as a city, Ireland. Richie began to sober up, and he was doing the calculations in his mind as they spoke. She had remembered him from earlier, when he had clearly caught her eye, and she had led him here, to this dark, empty bar where it was

just the two of them, alone. She was having a beer while he sipped his water, leaning into him as they spoke. Her breasts were straining through her shirt, and her plaited hair was loosening across her face.

“You’re beautiful, you know that?” He told her in a low voice, interrupting whatever she’d been saying. She darkened but didn’t reply. He leaned in and kissed her, and she kissed him back for a moment before pulling away.

“Gross!” She laughed, “you’ve just thrown up everywhere.” Richie had the decency to look abashed, but it didn’t stop him trying again, more forcefully this time. His hands roamed over her body greedily, and to his surprise all he could think about was Laoise Ryan, and how she had rejected him in school. Not that she’d even rejected him, because he’d never actually asked her out, but still. Shane was right. She’d been a stuck-up bitch. She’d gotten what she deserved. This was the trajectory of his thoughts as he forced open the top button of the waitress’s jeans. He heard a cry, but it seemed to come from a distance. Then, with a mighty shove, he was thrown back against the wall, head still spinning with lust and the jagged edges of memories.

He looked up to find her standing across from him, chest heaving, her t-shirt ripped. Her face was stained with tears and she was shaking.

“What are you doing?” Her voice was a whisper, which proved far more disturbing than if she’d shouted.

“I... I...” Richie looked down and realized his fly was open. He zipped it up hastily and looked around the room searchingly, as though the answer to her question was lying somewhere, just out of reach.

“Get out,” her voice was firmer now, “get the fuck out of this bar.”

He left, emerging into the thin dawn. He expected to feel ashamed, the welcome dose of shame prickling along his skin, but all he felt was a roaring sense of injustice. Something that should have been his, warped and lost again. His head rung with words: rapist, sexual assault, sexual deviant. None of them felt sufficient. Then, louder: asking for it, tight clothes, attention-seeking whore, frigid slut, stupid bitch. And these words were richer, juicier, easier to grasp. He took out his phone and dialled his sister’s number. She answered, her voice thick with sleep.

“Richie? Why are you calling me? It’s four in the fucking morning.”

“Yeah, I- I’m sorry. I just wanted to hear your voice.”

Her tone changed immediately. “Why, what’s wrong? What happened?”

“No no, nothing, I’m grand... They won the match. We had a mad night, and I’m just heading back to the hostel now.”

“Where are the lads?”

“Ah, I lost them in the club. I think Fitzy was tryin’ to get with some girl. I don’t think he was having much luck. They’ll probably be passed out cold when I get back.”

“That sounds about right,” she laughed, “what are ye like? Ah sure, boys will be boys I suppose.”

“Yeah,” he replied, and relief washed over him like rain. “Boys will be boys.”