

FICTION MARCH 18, 2019 ISSUE

# COLOR AND LIGHT

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*Audio: Sally Rooney reads.*

The first time he sees her she's getting into his brother's car. He's sitting in the back seat and she gets into the front, closing the passenger door behind her. Then she notices him. She cranes around, eyebrows raised, and then turns back to Declan and says, Who's this?

That's Aidan, Declan says. My brother.

I didn't know you had a brother, she says mildly.

She turns around again, as if accepting the inevitability of having to speak to him. Older or younger? she asks.

Me? Aidan says. Younger.

The interior of the car is dark, and she narrows her eyes before concluding, You look it.

He's only a year younger, Declan says.

The woman has turned away now to roll down her window. She has to wind it down using the small lever on the door.

Your parents were busy, she remarks. How many others are there?

Only us, Declan says.

They got it all out of the way quickly then, she says. Sensible. Declan pulls out of the parking space and back onto the main road. Cool night air floods through the open window. The woman is lighting a cigarette. Aidan can see only the back of her head and her left arm, elbow angled.

I'll drop this lad home and then we'll go for a spin, Declan says.

Sounds divine, the woman says.

On their right is a row of houses and shops, which tapers off as they reach the end of town. Then the caravan park, the golf links. Does the woman already know where Aidan lives? She doesn't seem curious about how long it will take to get there. She exhales smoke out the window. The surface of the golf course glitters darkly.

What do you do, Aidan? she asks after a minute or two.

I work in the hotel.

Oh? How long have you been there?

Few years, he says.

Do you like it?

It's all right.

She flicks the stub of her cigarette out the window and rolls the window up. The car is much quieter then and things seem to hang unspoken. Declan says nothing. Aidan bites gently at the rough side of his left thumbnail. Should he ask her what she does for a living? But he doesn't even know her name. As if apprehending this very problem, Declan says, Pauline is a writer.

Oh, Aidan says. What kind of things do you write?

Films, she says.

For some reason Aidan does not wish to seem surprised by this knowledge, though he doesn't think he's ever been in a car with a screenwriter before. He just makes a noise like Huh. As if to say, Well, there you are. The woman, whose name is apparently Pauline, unexpectedly swivels around to look at him. Her hair, he notices, is pulled back from her forehead by a wide velveteen band. She has a strange smile on her face.

What? she says. You don't believe me.

He is alarmed, feeling that he has offended her and that Declan will be angry with him later. Of course I believe you, he says. Why wouldn't I?

For a few seconds she says nothing, but in the darkness and silence of the car she looks at him. In fact she stares at him, right into his eyes, for two or three seconds without speaking, maybe even four full seconds, a very long time. Why is she looking at him like this? Her face is expressionless. She has a pale forehead and her lips are pale, so her mouth appears as one delicate line. Is she looking at him just to show him her face, the face of a screenwriter? When she speaks, her voice sounds totally different. She simply says, O.K. And she stops looking at him and turns around again.

She doesn't speak to him again for the rest of the journey. She and Declan start talking instead, about people and events that have nothing to do with Aidan. He listens to them as if they are performing a play and he is the only audience member. Declan asks her when she's heading off to Paris and she tells him. She takes out her phone and starts looking for a photograph to show him. He says that someone called Michael never got back to him about something and Pauline says, Oh, Michael will be there, don't worry. Outside the windows, the darkness is punctuated only by passing headlights and, far up in the hills, the flickering lights of houses, hidden and revealed through the leaves of trees. Aidan has a feeling of some kind, but he doesn't know what the feeling is. Is he annoyed? Why should he be?

Declan indicates left for the estate. The street lights grow brighter as they approach, and then the world is populated again, with semi-detached houses and wheelie bins and parked cars. Declan pulls up outside Aidan's house.

Thanks for the lift, Aidan says. Have a good night. Pauline doesn't look up from her phone.

**H**e sees her again a few weeks later, in the hotel. She comes in one night for dinner with a group of people Aidan has never seen before. She's not wearing a hairband this time—her hair is fixed quite high on her head with a clasp—but it's definitely the same woman. Aidan brings a carafe of water to the table. Pauline is talking and everyone else is listening to her, including the men, some of whom are older and wearing suits. They all seem fascinated by her—how unusual, Aidan thinks, to see grown men hanging on the words of a girl in that way. He wonders if she is famous, or somehow important. When he fills her glass she looks up and says thank you. Then she frowns.

Do I know you? she says.

Everyone at the table turns to stare at Aidan. He feels flustered. I think you know my brother, he says. Declan.

She laughs, as if he has said something very charming. Oh, you're Declan Kearney's brother, she says. Then turning to her friends, she adds, I told you I knew all the locals.

They laugh appreciatively. She doesn't look at Aidan again. He finishes filling the glasses and goes back to the bar.

At the end of the night he helps Pauline's party to get their coats from the cloakroom. It's after midnight. They all seem a little drunk. Aidan still can't tell what they are to one another—friends or colleagues or family? The men are watching Pauline, and the other women are talking and laughing amongst themselves. Pauline asks him to call some taxis for them. He goes behind the desk and picks up the phone. She places a hand delicately on the counter, near the bell.

We're going to have a drink at my house, she says. Would you like to join us?

Oh, Aidan says. No, I can't.

She smiles pleasantly and turns back to her friends. Aidan dials the taxi number, gripping the phone hard against his skull so the ringtone shrieks in his ear. He should have said thanks, at least. Why didn't he? He was preoccupied, wondering where her house was. She can't live in town, or he would know her. Maybe she's just moved to town, or maybe she's working on a new film. If she even really writes films. He should have paused for a second to think about her question, and then he would have remembered to thank her. On the phone he orders two taxis and then hangs up.

They'll be here shortly, he says.

Pauline nods without looking back at him. He has made her dislike him.

I didn't know you lived around here, he says.

Again she just nods. He has the same view of her now as he did in the car the other week: the back of her head, and her neck and shoulders. When the taxis arrive outside, she says without turning to him,

Give Declan my best. Then they all leave. Afterward the waiter who cleared their table tells Aidan they left a huge tip.

A few days later he's working the front desk in the afternoon, and a queue forms while he's on the phone. When he hangs up, he apologizes for the wait, checks the guests out of their rooms, wipes their keycards, and then sits down on the wheelie chair. Guests really don't have to do that—wait to be checked out. They can just leave their keycards on the desk and walk off, without the formal goodbye. But Aidan supposes they want to get the official go-ahead, to have their departure acknowledged in some way. Or maybe they just don't know that they're allowed, and assume they're not without being told so, because after all, at heart, human beings are so extremely submissive. He taps his fingers on the desk in a little rhythm, distracted.

Declan and Aidan are in the process of selling their mother's house. Declan has a house of his own already, a smaller one, closer to town, with a twenty-year mortgage. People thought Aidan might move back into the old house, seeing as he's renting outside town and has to share with housemates, but he doesn't want to. He just wants to get rid of the place. Their mother was sick for a long time, though she wasn't old, and he loved her very much, so it's painful to think of her now. And in fact he tries not to think of her. The thought creates a feeling—the thought might at first be only an abstract idea or a memory, but a feeling follows on from it helplessly. He would like to be able to think of her again, because she was the person on earth who loved him most, but it isn't yet possible to do so without pain—maybe it never will be. In any case, it's not as if the pain goes away when he doesn't think of her. A pain in your throat may get worse when you swallow, may be almost unbearably painful when you swallow, but that doesn't mean that the pain is gone when you're not swallowing. Yes, life is full of suffering and there's no way to be free of it. Anyway, they're selling the house, and Aidan will come into a little money, though not a lot.

That night Declan comes to pick him up from work very late, after two in the morning, and Pauline is lying in the back of the car, apparently drunk. Ignore her, Declan says.

Don't ignore me, Pauline says. How dare you?

How was work? Declan asks.

Aidan closes the door and puts his bag down at his feet. O.K., he says. The car smells of alcohol. Aidan still feels that he doesn't really know who this woman is, this woman lying on the back seat. She's coming up fairly often in his life at this point, but who is she? At first he thought she was Declan's girlfriend, or at least a candidate for that role, but then in the hotel the other night she seemed different—glamorous in a way, with all those men looking at her—and of course Declan wasn't there, and she even invited Aidan for a drink afterward. He could ask his brother, How do you know this girl? I mean, are you riding her, or what? But Declan's sensibilities would be offended by that kind of thing.

How would you get home if you didn't have a lift? Pauline says.

Walk, Aidan says.

How long would it take?

About an hour.

Is it dangerous?

What? Aidan says. No, it's not dangerous. Dangerous in what way?

Ignore her, Declan repeats.

Aidan is my good friend, Pauline says. He won't ignore me. I left him a very generous tip in his restaurant, didn't I?

I heard about that, he says. That was nice of you.

And I invited him to my house, she continues. Only to be cruelly rebuffed.

What do you mean, you invited him to your house? Declan asks. When was this?

After dinner at the hotel, she says. He rebuffed me, cruelly.

Aidan's face is hot. Well, I'm sorry you felt that way, he says. I can't just walk out of work because someone invites me to their house.

I didn't get an invite, Declan says.

You were busy, Pauline says. And so was your brother, obviously. Can I ask you something about your job, Aidan?

What? he says.

Have you ever slept with any of the hotel guests?

For fuck's sake, Pauline, Declan says.

They are driving past the caravan park again now, where the smooth curved roofs of the caravans glow with reflected moonlight, white like fingernails. Beyond that, Aidan knows, is the ocean, but he can't see or smell or even hear it now, sealed up inside the car with Pauline laughing and the air smelling of alcohol and perfume. Doesn't she know that Declan doesn't enjoy that kind of banter? Or maybe she does know, and she's aggravating him on purpose for some reason Aidan doesn't understand.

Don't listen to her, Declan says.

A car flashes past and disappears. Aidan turns around to look at her. From this angle her face is sideways. It's actually quite long and oval, like the shape of a headache pill.

You can tell me, she says. You can whisper.



You're flirting with him, Declan says. You're flirting with my brother right in front of me. In my car! He reaches out and punches Aidan on the arm. Stop looking at her, he says. Turn around now. You're messing and I don't like it.

Who were all those people in the hotel the other night? Aidan says. Were they your friends?

Just people I know.

They seemed like big fans of yours.

People only act like that when they want something from you, she says.

She lets him continue staring at her. She lies there absorbing his look, even smiling vaguely, allowing it to go on. Declan punches him again. Aidan turns around. The windshield is blank like a powered-off computer screen.

We're not allowed to sleep with the guests, he says.

No, of course not. But I bet you've had offers.

Yeah, well. Mostly from men.

Declan appears startled. Really? he says. Aidan just shrugs.

Declan has never worked in a hotel, or a bar or a restaurant. He's an office manager with a business degree.

Are you ever tempted? Pauline says.

Not usually.

Aidan touches the window handle on the car door, not winding it up or down, just toying with it.

We did have a writer in the other night who invited me back to her house, he says.

Was she beautiful?

Pauline! Declan says. You're pissing me off now. Just drop it, O.K.? Jesus. This is the last time I do you a favor.

Aidan can't tell if Declan is still speaking to Pauline now, or to him. It sounded like he meant Pauline, but Aidan is the one receiving the favor of a lift home, not her, unless there's another favor running concurrently to this one. Everyone falls silent. Aidan thinks about the linen room at work, where all the clean sheets are stored, folded up tight in the wooden slats, bluish-white, smelling of powder and soap.

When they pull up outside his house he thanks his brother for the lift. Declan makes a dismissive gesture in the air with his hand. Don't worry about it, he says. The shape of Pauline's face is visible through the back window, but is she looking at him or not, he can't tell.

Two weeks later, the arts festival is on in town and the hotel is busy. Aidan's manager has to call him in for an extra shift on Friday because one of the girls has laryngitis. He finishes work at ten on Saturday night and goes down to the seafront for the closing ceremony of the festival. It's the same every year, a fireworks display at the end of the pier. He's seen the display ten or twelve times now, or however many years the festival has been going. The first time he was a teen-ager, still in school. He thought that his life was just about to start happening then. He thought that he was poised tantalizingly on the brink, and that any day—or even any minute—the waiting would end and the real thing would begin.

Down on the beach he zips his jacket up to the chin. It's crowded already and the street lights on the promenade cast a gray glow over the sand and the sea. Families pick their way down the beach with buggies, bickering or laughing, and boats clink in the marina, a noise like handbells ringing, but random and disconnected. Teen-agers sit on the steps, drinking cans and laughing at videos. People from the festival hold walkie-talkies to their ears and stride around importantly. Aidan looks at his phone, wondering if Declan is around, or Richie, or any of the gang from work, but no one's said anything in the group chat. It's cold again this year. He puts his phone away and rubs his hands.

Pauline is already walking toward him by the time he sees her, meaning she has seen him first. She's wearing a big oversized fleece that drops down almost to her knees. Her hair is pushed back from her forehead by a hairband again.

So you do have days off, she says.

I actually just finished, he says. But I'm off tomorrow.

Can I watch the fireworks with you or are you with someone?

He immediately likes this question. Turning it over in his mind only seems to reveal additional angles from which it can be admired.

No, I'm on my own, he says. We can watch together, yeah. She stands beside him and rubs her arms in a pantomime of being cold. He looks at her, wondering if the pantomime demands some kind of response from him.

I'm sorry I was such a mess the other night, she says. When was that? Last week, or whenever. I think Declan was annoyed afterward.

Was he?

Did he say anything to you about it?

Me, no, Aidan says. We don't really talk about things. The lights overhead go down and the beach is in darkness.

Around them people are moving, huddling, saying things, taking out their phones and shining torches, and then at the end of the pier the fireworks begin. A line of golden sparks shoots upward into the sky and ends in a colored point: first pink, then blue, then pink again, casting its brief hypnotic light on the sand and the water. Then a whistling noise, as low as a breath, and above them in the sky, exploding outward, red blossoms, and yellow and then green, leaving soft fronds of gold behind. When the fireworks burst, it's silent color and light at first, and a second later the noise: a loud crack like something breaking, or a deep low booming that goes into the chest. Aidan can see the tiny missiles flying upward hissing into the sky from the pier, almost invisible, and then shattering outward into fragments of light, glittering like pixels, bright white fading to yellow and then gold to darker gold and then black. It's the darker gold, just before black, that he finds most beautiful: a low ember color, darker than a glowing coal. Finally, so high above they have to crane their necks to see

the whole shape, three dazzling yellow fireworks, consuming the sky, eating the whole darkness. Then it's over. The street lights come back up.

Beside him Pauline is rubbing her face and nose with her hands. Cold again. Aidan realizes, obscurely, that a lot depends now on Pauline's having enjoyed the fireworks—that if she didn't enjoy them, if she thought they were boring, not only will he no longer like her but he will no longer have enjoyed them either, in retrospect, and something good will be dead. He says nothing. Along with everyone else, they turn back and leave the beach. It's possible to walk at only one speed, the speed of the crowd, which seems like the slowest and least comfortable speed at which humans can move. At this pace Aidan keeps bumping into people, small children keep running out unexpectedly in front of him, and prams and people in wheelchairs need to move past. Pauline stays close by him, and at the top of the promenade she asks if he'll walk her home. He says sure.

She's staying in one of the houses on the seafront. He knows the street; it's where all the holiday homes are, with glass walls facing the ocean. As they walk, the rest of the crowd falls away behind them. When they reach her street it's just the two of them alone in silence. There's so much he doesn't know about Pauline—so much, it strikes him with a different and slightly surprising emphasis, that he would like to know—that it's impossible to begin asking questions. He doesn't know her surname, or where she's from, what she does all day, who her family are. He doesn't know how old she is. Or how she came to know Declan, or how well she knows him.

You know, as to what you were saying the other night, Aidan says, I actually did sleep with a guest at the hotel once. I wouldn't go telling Declan about it, because he doesn't approve of that kind of thing.

Pauline's eyes flash up at him. Who was the guest? she asks.

I don't know, a woman staying on her own. She was a little bit older, maybe in her thirties.

And was it a good experience? Or bad?

It wasn't great, Aidan says. Not that the sex was bad but more that I felt bad about it, like it was the wrong thing to do.

But the sex was good.

It was O.K. I mean, I'm sure it was fine, I don't even remember it now. Something at the time made me think maybe she was married. But I don't know for a fact—I just thought it at the time.

Why did you do it? Pauline says.

He goes quiet for a few seconds. I don't know, he says. I was hoping you wouldn't ask that.

What do you mean?

You just seem like someone who understands these things. But when you ask that it makes me feel like I did something weird.

She stops walking and puts her hand on a gatepost, which must be hers. He stops walking, too. Behind her is a large house with big windows, set back from the street by a garden, and all the lights are switched off.

I don't think it's weird, she says. I used to have a boyfriend who was married. And I knew his wife—not well or anything, but I did know her. I'm not asking why you did it because I think it's sick that you would sleep with someone who was married. I suppose I just wonder, why do we do things that we don't really want to do? And I thought you might have an answer, but it's O.K. if you don't. I don't either.

Right. Well, that makes me feel better. Not that I'm happy you were in a bad situation, but I feel better that I'm not the only one.

Are you in a bad situation now?

No, he says. Now I would say, I am in no situation at all. I feel like my life basically isn't happening. I think if I dropped dead the only people who would care are the people who would have to cover my shifts. And they wouldn't even be sad, they'd just be annoyed.

Pauline frowns. She rubs the gatepost under her hand like she's thinking.

Well, I don't have that problem, she says. I think in my case there's too much happening. At this point everyone I've ever met seems to want something from me. I feel like if I dropped dead they'd probably cut my body into pieces and sell it at an auction.

You mean like those people you were with, at the hotel.

She shrugs. She rubs her arms again. She asks him if he wants to come inside and he says yes.

The house is spacious and, though furnished, appears curiously empty. The ceilings are high up and far away. Pauline leaves the keys on the hall table and walks through the house switching lights on in a seemingly arbitrary fashion. They reach the living room and she sits down on a gigantic green corner sofa, with a flat surface so large it resembles a bed, but with cushions at the back. There is no television and the bookshelves are bare. He sits down on the couch but not right beside her.

Do you live here on your own? he says.

She looks around vaguely, as if she doesn't know what he means by "here."

Oh, she says. Well, only for now.

How long is now?

Everyone always asks questions like that. Don't you start. Everyone wants to know what I'm doing and how long I'm doing it for. I'd like to be really alone for a while and for no one to know where I was or when I was coming back. And maybe I wouldn't come back at all.

She stands up from the sofa and asks if he would like a drink. Unnerved by her previous speech, about going somewhere alone and never returning, which seems in a way like a metaphor, he just shrugs.

I have a bottle of whiskey, she says. But I don't want you to think I have a drinking problem. Someone gave it to me as a present—I didn't buy it myself. Would you have even a small half glass and I'll have one? But if you don't want one I won't have one either.

I'll have a glass, yeah, he says.

She walks out of the room, not through a door but through an open archway. The house is confusingly laid out, so he can't tell where she's gone or how far away.

If you want to be alone, he says aloud, I can go.

She reappears in the archway almost instantly. What? she says.

If you want to be alone like you were saying, he repeats. I don't want to intrude on you.

Oh, I only meant that . . . philosophically, she says. Were you listening to me? That's your first mistake. Everything I say is nonsense. Your brother knows how to deal with me, he never listens. I'll be back in a second.

She goes away again. What does it mean that Declan "knows how to deal with" Pauline? Should Aidan ask? Maybe this is his opening to ask. She returns with two half-full tumblers, hands him one, and then settles down on the sofa beside him, slightly closer than where she had been sitting previously, though still not touching. They sip the whiskey. It's not something Aidan would ever drink of his own volition, but it tastes fine.

I'm sorry about your mother, Pauline says. Declan told me she passed away.

Yeah. Thanks.

They pause. Aidan takes another, larger sip of whiskey. You're seeing a lot of Declan, are you? he says.

He's sort of my car friend. I mean he's my only friend who has a car. He's very nice, he's always driving me places. And he usually just ignores me when I say silly things. I think he thinks I'm a terrible woman. He wasn't impressed with me the other night when I asked you those vulgar questions. But you're his baby brother—he thinks you're very innocent.

Aidan pays special attention to the fact that she has used the word "friend" more than once in connection with Declan. He feels it can have only one meaning—a thought that makes him feel good. Does he? he replies. I don't know what he thinks of me.

He said he didn't know if you were gay or straight, Pauline says.

Ah, well. As I said, I don't talk about things with him.

You've never brought a girlfriend home.

You've got the advantage of me here, Aidan says. He's telling you all about me and I don't know anything about you.

She smiles. Her teeth are extremely white and perfect, unrealistic-looking, almost blue.

What do you want to know? she says.

Well, I'm curious what brings you to live here. I don't think you're from here.

That's what you're curious about? Good grief. I'm starting to think you really are innocent.

That's not very nice, Aidan says.

She looks wounded for a moment, stares into her glass, and says sadly, What made you think I was nice?

He doesn't think he can answer this question. In truth he doesn't think of her as particularly nice. He just thinks of niceness as a general standard to which everyone accepts they can be held.

She puts her empty glass down on the coffee table and sits back on the couch. Your life isn't as bad as you think it is, she says.

Well, neither is yours, he replies.



How should you know?

Everyone wants your attention all the time, so what? Aidan says. If you hated it so much you could fuck off on your own somewhere—what's to stop you?

She tilts her head to one side, places a hand gently under her chin. Move to a remote seaside town, you mean? she says. Live the quiet life—maybe settle down with a nice country boy who works hard for a living. Is that what you had in mind?

Oh, fuck off.

She gives a light, irritatingly musical laugh.

I don't want anything from you, he adds.

Then what are you doing here?

He puts his glass down. You asked me to come in, he says. You asked if we could watch the fireworks together, remember? And then you asked me to walk home with you, and then you asked me inside. And I'm the one who's inserting myself into your life, am I? I never wanted anything from you.

She seems to consider this, looking grave. Finally she says, I thought you liked me.

What does that mean? If I liked you that means something bad about me?

As if she has not heard him, she replies, I liked you.

He now feels utterly confused as to why they seem to be arguing, confused to the point of abrupt despair. Right, he says. Look, I'm going to go.

By all means.

He experiences this parting with her—this parting he himself announced spontaneously and called into existence—as an excruciating ordeal, almost a physical pain. He can't quite believe he's going through with it, actually standing upright from the sofa and turning away toward the door they entered through. Why is everything so strange now? At what point did his relations with Pauline

begin to violate the ordinary rules of social contact? It started normally enough. Or did it? He still doesn't even know if she's his brother's girlfriend.

She doesn't rise from the couch to see him out. He has to make his way through the half-lit, cavernous house alone, fumbling through dark hallways and at one point a dazzlingly bright dining room toward the front door. Why did she say that, about settling down with a "nice country boy"? She was just trying to provoke him. But why? She knows nothing about his life. Why is he even thinking about her, then? At this moment, reaching the front door of Pauline's house, with its glazed glass reflecting back at him an unrecognizable image that he knows to be his own face, this strikes Aidan as the question without an answer.

Several weeks later he's in the back room trying to find a Continental power adapter for a guest upstairs when Lydia comes in saying that someone at reception wants him. Wants what? he says. Wants you, Lydia says. They're asking for you. Aidan closes the drawer containing the hotel's selection of adapters and, as if in a dream now or in a video game, his actions under the control of some higher intelligence, he stands up and follows Lydia out of the back room, toward the front desk. He already knows, before he sees or hears Pauline, that she will be there waiting for him. And she is. She's wearing a dress made from what looks like very soft, fine cloth. An older man is standing beside her with his arm around her waist. Aidan simply notices all this neutrally. His image of Pauline is already so confused and obscure that to see her in this situation cannot indicate anything really new about her.

All right, Aidan says. How can I help?

We're looking for a room, the man says.

Pauline touches her nose with her fingertips. The man swats her arm and says, You're making it worse. Look. It's going to start bleeding again.

It is bleeding, she says.

She sounds drunk. Aidan can see that her fingers are bloodied when she draws them away from her face. He bends over the computer at the desk but does not immediately open the room-reservations

interface. He swallows and pretends to click on something, actually just clicking nothing. Is Lydia watching him? She's at the desk, just a little way to his right, but he can't tell if she's looking.

For how many nights? Aidan says.

One, the man says. Tonight.

They're not going to have anything at such short notice, Pauline says.

Well, let's see, the man says.

If you'd told me you were coming, I could have arranged something, she says.

Relax, the man says.

Aidan swallows again. He's conscious of a kind of throbbing sensation inside his head, like the flicking of a light, on and off. He moves the mouse around the screen in a show of efficiency and then, impulsively, pretends to type something although there is no keyboard input open onscreen. He's certain Lydia is watching him. Finally he straightens up from the computer and looks at the man.

No, I'm sorry, he says. We don't have any rooms available tonight.

The man stares at him. Lydia's looking over at him, too. You don't have any rooms? the man says. Every room in the hotel is taken? In the middle of April?

I told you, Pauline says.

Sorry, Aidan says. We can get you something next week, if you'd like.

The man moves his mouth like he's laughing, but no laugh comes out. He removes his hand from Pauline's waist, lifts it up in the air, and lets it drop against his own body. Aidan is careful not to look at Pauline or Lydia at all.

No rooms, the man repeats. All booked up. This hotel.

I'm sorry I can't help, Aidan says.

The man looks at Pauline.

Well, what do you want me to do? she says.

In response the man lifts his arm again to point at Aidan. Is this your boyfriend? the man says.

Oh, don't be absurd, Pauline says. Are you going to develop paranoia now on top of everything else?

You know him, the man says. You asked for him.

Pauline shakes her head, dabs delicately at her nose, and flashes a kind of apologetic smile at Aidan and Lydia across the desk. I'm sorry, she says. We'll get out of your way. Can I ask you to call a couple of taxis? I'd really appreciate it.

Oh, we can't share a taxi? the man says.

Coldly now, Pauline replies, We're going in opposite directions. Under his breath, with a kind of frozen grin on his face, the man says, I don't believe it. I don't believe it. Then he turns around and walks toward the large double doors of the hotel entrance. Lydia picks up the phone to call the taxi company. Pauline, without any change in her demeanor, lifts the hotel pen from the desk, takes the pad of paper, writes something down, and then tears the sheet from the pad. She takes out some money, encloses it in the note, and pushes it across the desk toward Aidan. Looking only at Lydia, she smiles and says, Thanks so much. Then she exits, following the man through the double doors.

When the doors swing shut, Lydia is still on the phone. Aidan sits down and stares into space. He hears Lydia saying goodbye, then he hears the faint click of the receiver replaced in its cradle. He just sits there. Lydia finds the note on the desk and nudges it in Aidan's direction with the end of a pen, like she doesn't want to touch it.

She left this for you, Lydia says.

I don't want it.

Lydia uses the pen to flick open the note.

There's a hundred euro in here, she says.

That's O.K., he says. You take it.

For a few seconds Lydia says nothing. Aidan just sits staring blankly straight ahead. Presently, as if making up her mind, Lydia says, I'll put it with the tips. She wrote you a note as well, do you not want that? I think it just says thank you.

You can leave it, he says. Or, actually, give it to me.

Lydia gives it to him. Without looking at it, he places it in his pocket. Then he rises from the chair to return to the back room to find the power adapter for the guest upstairs. He won't see Pauline again before she leaves town in a few days' time. ♦

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