

Is iomaí cor

Réaltán Ní Leannáin

Stán Siubhán Ní Bhrádaigh ar an bhróigín dhearg ar taispeáint san fhuinneog. Chomh dearg le rós, mín, le péarlaí beaga daite agus fiolagrán ar a bharr, agus sála ard, ard, ard a thógfadh aon chian díot, munar thug sé do bhás ort.

Siúbhán. ‘Shoe-on’. ‘Shoe-off’. Agus í san Ardscoil i mBaile Átha Cliath b’shin a thug lucht tromaíochta uirthi, dá mba uirthi a thit a n-aird. Ba chuma gaelscoil a bheith ann, ní raibh Gaeilge sa bhaile nó sna cnámha acu, agus iad lánsásta magadh a dhéanamh ar a hainm. ‘Shoe-on’ nó ‘Shoe-off’.

Ach ‘Siú’ a bheireadh na cairde uirthi, Seán agus Rút. Idir an triúr acu chuir siad an ruaig ar lucht tromaíochta. An ‘Siú—criú’, mar a thugaidís orthu féin. Tháinig siad tríd an Ardscoil le chéile, agus nuair a chuaigh siad ar aghaidh as sin chuig coláistí éagsúla, bhuaill siad le chéile go fóill ar bhonn rialta thar na blianta. Chuaigh Rút le Ceol. Bhain Seán céim amach sa Stair. Cúrsaí trí bliana.

Bhí Seán agus Rút réidh lena gcúrsaí siúd anois. Bhí Sean ag síniú ar an dól, sa bhaile - teach beag dhá sheomra in uachtar, dhá sheomra in íochtar, é féin is a mháthair. Bhí Rút i dteach a tuismitheoirí go fóill fosta – teach mór scoite brící ar bhruach na Dothra. Ní ligfeadh tuismitheoirí Rút di síniú ar an dól, ar ndóigh. Thug siad liúntas di. Gach duine eile den aois chéanna, bhí siad ar an dól, nó ar intéirneacht gan phá, nó imithe go Ceanada nó chun na hAstráile.

Bhí cúrsa ceithre bliana á chríochnú ag Siú - Dlí agus Spáinnis. Chaith sí a tríú bliain go lúcháireach, ag staidéar in Valencia. Grian, gaineamh agus i bhfad ar shiúl ó na tuismitheoirí – agus saol mire meidhreach aici ann. Rinne sí staidéar ach theagasc sí corr-rang Béarla agus chaith sí an t-airgead sin a luaithe is a thuill sí é, sna beáir i mBenimaclet.

Ní raibh sí ag tnúth le gabháil abhaile chuig teach a tuismitheoirí féin leis an cheathrú bliain a chríochnú, ach ní raibh an dara suí aici. Ná airgead. Phill sí ar an teach a bhí cúpla céad slat níos faide síos ó theach Rút ar an Dothar.

Ach faigheann foighid fortacht. Bhí sí ag druidim le deireadh a ceathrú bliain anois. Agus céim dlí ina glac aici, bheadh seans aici giollacht d’abhcóide. Is dócha go mbeadh áit ar fáil le cara dá tuismitheoirí. Nó b’fhéidir go rachadh sí ar ais go Valencia a theagasc Béarla. Nó ióga.

Thug sí spléachadh eile ar an bhróg fhineálta, tharrantach arís. *Nah*. Bhrisfeadh sí a muineál sna sálaí sin. Níor fheil an dearg di ach oiread. Dath Rút a bhí ann.

Rút. I gcónaí ag teacht salach ar mhúinteoirí, ag rith nuair ba cheart di siúl, ag caint nuair ba cheart di éisteach. Rút bhocht. Mór an trua nár rith sí ní ba ghaiste nuair a shiúil Romeo isteach ina saol cúpla mí ó shin.

‘*Bin-dipper*’ a bhí in Romeo, ón Ghréig ó dhúchas. Ar a theitheadh ón seirbhís mhíleata sa Ghréig, thrasnaigh sé an Eoraip, ag tumadh a lámha isteach i mboscaí bruscair chun bia a chaith daoine eile amach a aimsiú – leathbhurgairí ó na boscaí sráide, sean-arán agus bia a bhí imithe as dáta ó bhoscaí móra na n-ollmhargaí. Chodail sé amuigh faoin aer ar shráideanna, ar thránna agus faoi sceacha na hEorpa. Anois bhí sé tagtha chomh fada le hÉirinn agus ní raibh a thuilleadh dul siar fágtha. Shuigh sé síos lá ar bhinse taobh le Rút, ar na céanna gar do Dhroichead Uí Chonaill. Bhí Rút i ndiaidh a cuid *CVs* uilig a chaitheamh isteach i siopaí agus i mbeáir i lár na cathrach. Anois féin bhí sí ag ligean a scíthe ón tóraíocht jab.

Thosaigh an bheirt acu ag comhrá le chéile. Rinne siad trácht ar na gnáththoipicí a bhíonn ann idir stráinséirí ... an aimsir, praghas caife-le-tabhairt-amach, an aimsir arís, polaitíocht. Fear óg, bean óg, neart ama le spáráil acu.

‘Bhal? An *item* sibh anois nó caidé an scéal?’ arsa Siú.

Bhí siad i gcistin Shiú, mugaí tae ina lámha acu. Bhí Rút ina suí thall ag an Aga – an áit ab ansa léi. Thaitin a cuid compoird le Rút. Samhradh a bhí ann ach ní raibh sé ar dhóigh ar bith te.

D’éalaigh scigireacht uaithi.

‘Is ea – an chéad chroían ceart agam ariamh. Nach bhfuil sé galánta, mar Romeo?’

‘Romeo? Á, anois, a Rút, caidé an scéal leis an ainm sin?’

‘Níl sé in ann a ainm ceart a inse d’éinne, ar eagla go n-aimseodh na húdaráis anseo nó sa Ghréig é.’

‘Fíú tusa, ní inseoidh sé duit é?’

‘Fíú mise. Chun mé a chosaint. Ach is breá liom ‘Romeo’. Chomh rómánsach. Tá gach rud faoi Romeo rómánsach.’

In ainneoin go ndúirt Seán agus Siú léi rudaí a thógáil go bog, bhí Rút dualta agus dulta i ndrúis le Romeo le paisean níos doimhne agus níos tintrí le gach lá a d’imigh thart. Cé a d’fhágfadh aon locht uirthi mar gheall air sin? Béarla briste le blas tarrantach eachtrannach, craiceann buí na Meánmhuire, gruaig dhubh chatach agus súile dúdhúdhubha. Romeo, an tuar ag teacht fán tairngreacht.

Bhuail Siú síos chuig teach Rút tráthnóna amháin cúpla seachtain roimhe sin. Ní fhaca sí Rút le tamall. Ró-ghafa leis an Ghréigeach, is cosúil. Teach mór scoite ar bhruach na Dothra a bhí ag muintir Rút. Rith an abhainn taobh le bun an ghairdín cúil acu. Fancy-shmancy-galánta. Ach ní fancy-shmancy a bhí an guth a chuala sí ón teach, gan í ach ag siúl suas an casán ón gheata.

‘Arú, bíodh ciall agat, a Rút! Is liúdramán gan dídean é, gan scileanna ar bith! Cad is feidir leis a thairiscint duit?’

‘Táimid i ngrá, a Dheaid, agus sin sin!’

‘Ní féidir leat a bheith i ngrá leis an scraiste sin? Nuair nach bhfuil a ainm ar eolas agat? Níl a fhios agam cé agaibh is measa – an óinseach iníne atá agam nó an fear siúil de Ghréigeach seo!’

D’oscail an doras tosaigh de phlab. Rút a bhí ann, cóta uirthi agus gach smeacharnach uaithi. Rith sí thar Shiú, na cosa in airde aici, agus bhí sí imithe as radharc sular stop sí. Chas Siú an coirnéal ag bun an bhóthair agus bhí Rút ina seasamh ann.

‘A Rút, bhfuil tú *alright?*’

‘Tá Deaid chomh sean-aimseartha!’ a chaoin sí, idir anáil a tharraingt. ‘Ní raibh rún agam go bhfanfadh Romeo an oíche ar fad, ach is amhlaidh gur thit muid inár gcodladh. Bhí muid ólta, agus ansin tháinig siad ar ais, agus, agus -’

De réir cosúlachta, bhí a fhios aici go raibh a tuismitheoirí amuigh ag an chlub gailf an oíche roimhe, ag ithe dinnéara le cairde. Landáil na tuismitheoirí ar ais gar don mheán oíche agus tháinig siad ar dhá ghloine fholamha ar an drisiúr. Agus buidéal folamh vodka. Bhí seomra leapa Rút faoi ghlas, don chéad uair ariamh ina saol. Chaoin a máthair. Bhagair a hathair an doras a bhriseadh síos. Nuair nach raibh gíog ná míog ón bheirt istigh, áfach, chuir sé glas ar gach doras sa teach, ar eagla go dtiocfadh Romeo amach i rith na hoíche agus go sciobfadh sé *souvenir* beag de shaghas éigin amach as an teach leis. Roinnt dá gcuid Criostal Phort Láirge, b’fhéidir, nó ceann de na ríomhairí glúine. Níor chodail tuismitheoirí Rút go dtí go moch ar maidin, traochta agus imníoch.

Nuair a tháinig Rút agus Romeo amach ón tseomra an mhaidin dar gcionn bhí a tuismitheoirí ina gcodladh. Bhrúigh sí Romeo amach an doras tosaigh sula músclóidís. Ach d’éirigh na tuismitheoirí níos moille . . .

Níor chuir a tuismitheoirí fiacail ann. Ní raibh a ainm ceart ar eolas aici, fíú, mar *Romeo*. Ní raibh pingin aige. *Hobo* gan dídean a bhí ann. D’ith sé bia as boscaí bruscair. Cad chuige ar bhac siad le hí a chur tríd an choláiste.

Nach dtiocfadh léi ábhar dochtúra a fháil, nó fiaclóir, nó cuntasóir. Ardaíodh glórtha ina stoirm agus tháinig deora ar an dá thaobh. Ba leo an teach seo, agus níor mhór di cuimhniú air sin.

Shuigh Siú ar an bhinse taobh leis an Dothar, ag éisteacht le liodán brónach Rút.

‘Tá Mam agus Deaid chomh claonta ina éadan, ní airsean atá an locht nach dtig leis a bheith ag obair anseo.’

‘Cé air a bhfuil an locht, mar sin?’

Dhearc Rút ar Shiú go feargach, a súile ag scaladh uirthi.

‘Tusa fosta, a Shiú? Níl sé in ann a phas a úsáid, agus mar gheall air sin níl sé in ann uimhir chánach a fháil anseo. Is ar an arm sa Ghréig atá an locht ar fad.’

Shuigh Siú gan focal a rá. Cad é a dtiocfadh léi a rá gan olc a chur ar Rút? Rút, céillí agus siosmaideach. Go dtí gur chas sí ar Romeo.

‘Dá rachadh sé i dteagmháil leis an arm . . .’

‘Beag an baol. Chuirfidís sa phríosún é.’

‘Ach ní bhfaighidh sé jab anseo gan uimhir chánach, gan phas, an stuif sin ar fad.’

‘Tiocfaimid ar réiteach. Ar dhóigh éigin.’

D’fhág Siú Rút, ina suí ar an bhinse, ag stánadh ar an abhainn ach gan amharc uirthi.

Níor chas sí ar Rút go dtí an tseachtain ina dhiaidh sin, oíche ar bheartaigh an ‘criú’ bualadh síos chuig *Captain America’s* le haghaidh burgar. Bhí *Captain’s* lárnach agus saor. Chas siad le chéile ag barr Shráid Grafton. Nuair a landáil Rút agus Romeo, áfach, dúirt Rút nach mbeadh an bheirt acu ag gabháil isteach ag ithe. Sheas Romeo gualainn le gualainn le Rút, sciathán caite thart ar a muinéal, ag amharc amach ar Shiú agus ar Sheán faoina fhabhraí fada dorcha.

‘Rachaidh mé féin agus Romeo síos Sráid Grafton. Gheobhaimid burgar agus caife le tabhairt amach – chuig Faiche Stiabhna. Casfaidh muid oraibh ina dhiaidh. Níl an t-airgead againn le caitheamh in *Captain’s*.’ ar sí.

Tost. Ar feadh cúpla soicind.

‘Ach tá an oíche seo pleanáilte againn le tamall, a Rút. Tá pócaí folamha againn uilig. Bhítheá linn roimh – roimhe seo.’ a dúirt Seán.

‘Bhí, ach níl aon airgead ag Romeo mar nach bhfuil aon dól aige. Níl mé chun dul isteach gan é,’ ar sí go tréan.

D’éirigh an dá mhala ag Seán suas thar a éadan agus síos arís a mhuinéal ar chúl a chinn. Bhí Sean ar an dól ó d’fhág sé an coláiste, chan ionann agus Rút le liúntas a tuismitheoirí. Chónaigh sé féin sa bhaile chomh maith, ach ní teach mór millteach ar bhruach na Dothra ach teach beag sraithe i nDún Laoghaire. Choinnigh sé cúpla pingin faoina philiúr i gcónaí, le bheith in ann bualadh leis an ‘Siú-criú’.

Beag beann ar an dreach díomach a cuid cairde, chuaigh Rút agus Romeo ag spaisteoireacht síos Sráid Grafton, le béile Romeo a cheannach dó. Bhain Seán searradh feargach as a ghuaillí. Dúirt Siú:

‘Goitse. Tá sé chomh maith againn ithe. Tá mé stiúgtha leis an ocras.’

Sheachain siad labhairt fá Rút ná Romeo. D’ith siad go gasta, áfach, mar bhí a fhios acu go mbeadh an bheirt eile ina suí ar bhinse ar Fhaiche Stiabhna, ag fanacht.

Bhuail siad le chéile ar Shráid Grafton arís, i ndiaidh *Captain’s*. Bhí Rút léi féin.

‘Cá’l ...’

‘Bhí air imeacht. Caithfidh tú a bheith sa scuaine go luath má tá tú ag iarraidh leaba na hoíche a fháil sna brúnna sin.’ a d’fhreagair Rút go giorraise.

‘Mór an trua, an créatúr.’ arsa Seán, an searbhas ina ghlór.

Rinne siad a mbealach síos tríd na scaiftí ag éisteacht leis na ceoltóirí sráide ar Shráid Grafton.

‘Tá níos mó fadhbanna ag Romeo ná a shíleann sibh,’ arsa Rút, ‘Caithfidh sé leaba a aimsiú achan uile oíche. Cuireann sé sin an-strus orm. Bím inmíoch faoi. Ní áiteacha deasa iad na brúnna sin.’

Faoin am ar bhuail siad síos chuig bun Shráid Grafton, bhí an-chur amach acu ar fhadhbanna Romeo-gan-dídean. Bhí siad ag breathnú ar na fáinní i bhfuinneog *Weirs, the Jewellers* nuair a bhris Rút amach le –

‘Ba bhreá le Romeo jab, ach níl sé in ann an dól féin a tharraingt anseo, fiú. Agus ba cheart go mbeadh, tá an Ghréig san Aontas Eorpach chomh maith linne.’

‘So? Cad chuige nach ndéanann sé sin? Jab a fháil?’ arsa Seán go neodrach.

‘Tá a stádas ... mírialta.’

‘Tá sé ar a theitheadh ón díorma.’

‘Is fear síochána é.’

‘Is fear é a chaithfeas a shaol a chur in ord.’

Bhí siad ag geataí Choláiste na Trionóide faoin am seo.

‘Níl pingin rua aige,’ arsa Rút trína smeacharnach, ‘agus gach ceirt atá a chaitheamh aige tig sé ó na siopaí Uinseann de Pól nó ón *Iveagh Trust*... seachas na léinte deasa a cheannaím féin dó, agus na bróga reatha. Tuigeann sibh féin, baill éadaí le stíl.’

‘Ceannaím féin mo stuif féin sa siopa Uinseann de Pól taobh liom,’ a dúirt Seán go séimh, ‘tugann siad lascaine duit nuair atá aithne acu ort,’ ag cuimilt a chochail go staidéarach.

‘Bhal, tá an teanga agatsa. Tá Romeo fós ag foghlaim-’

‘Uaitse.’

‘Ní mór daoibh labhairt go mall agus tuigfidh sé sibh, labhraíonn sibh róghasta.’ arsa Rút d’olagón, ‘Caithfidh sibh labhairt níos moille, agus cuidiú leis lena chuid Béarla.’

Bhí siad ag Droichead Shráid Uí Chonaill ansin, agus Rút go fóill ag spalpadh faoi Ró-mé-ó.

‘Is fuath le mo thuismitheoirí é, ní ligfidh siad sa teach arís é, deir Daidí go gcuirfidh sé fios ar na gardaí má thógaim isteach thar an tairseach arís é. Bheir sé bacach-gan-bhróga air ... bacach! Ní thuigeann siad é. Bíonn siad ag caint liomsa amhail is dá mba ghirseach bheag mé.’ ar sí, ‘Agus is fuath libhse é chomh maith!’

D’oscail Siú a béal chun tabhairt amach di, ach chuir Seán a lámh ar a gualainn, agus ar sé, de chogar ‘Drúis, a chroí, tús agus lár gach ní bómánta ar an domhan cláir. Fág í. Ní bhfaighidh tú ciall ar bith aisti faoi láthair.’

D’fhéach sí air. ‘Na hormóin, a chroí, na *bloody* hormóin’ a chogair sí leis siúd. Agus chroith sé a cheann.

Lean Rút léi. Mhínigh sí na fadhbanna a bhí ag Romeo leis an saol mór, chuir sí síos ar a cuid fadhbanna féin lena thuismitheoirí, phléigh sí fadhb an díorma san Eoraip go ginearálta, fadhb lucht gan dídean in Éirinn agus gnéithe d’fhoghlaim an Bhéarla do lucht labhartha Gréigise. Níorbh é seo an t-am le bheith ag tarraingt troda uirthi. Thost Rút, agus ghol sí go ciúin ar feadh píosa. D’amharc an bheirt eile ar a chéile. Bhí Seán ar buile, ag smaoineamh ar an liúntas maith a fuair sí óna Daidí agus óna Mamaí, agus gan í a bheith in ann cúpla pingin a choinneáil siar le gabháil amach lena cairde, in áit é a chaitheamh ar Romeo Riabhach. Bhí amhras ar Shiú nach raibh go leor muiníne ag an leannán-gan-ainm astu go fóill lena ainm dílis ceart a thabhairt – fiú do Rút.

Ní gá a rá nach bhfuair siad chomh fada le *Copper Faced Jack’s*, mar a bhí beartaithe. Scar siad ag an droichead. Fuair Seán an Dart abhaile, fuair an bheirt bhan an bus. Shuigh siad le chéile gan focal astu.

Nuair a tháinig siad go stad Rúit, níor fhág Siú slán léi nuair a d'éirigh Rúit le himeacht. Bhí cantal ar Shiúle Rúit agus le Romeo. Bhí cantal uirthi léi féin agus le Seán chomh maith, gur lig siad do Rúit agus Romeo an oíche a bhí le bheith lán craic a bhriseadh ina smidiríní.

Níor chuala siad faic ó Rúit ar feadh tamaill ina dhiaidh sin. Dheamhan téacs, postáil ar bith ar na meáin shóisialta, teachtaireacht de shaghas ar bith. Bhí briseadh de dhíth agus ní dhearna siad gearán faoi. Bhí Seán gnoitheach ag déanamh taighde ar víosa oibre do Cheanada. Bhí Siú ag tabhairt faoi na scrúduithe deiridh don chéim. Ach nuair a bhí na scrúduithe críochnaithe aici, scairt sí ar Sheán – an líne talún sa teach. Bhí an creidmheas ar a fón féin ídithe.

‘Níor chuala tú féin aon rud ach an oiread? *Weird!*’ arsa Seán.

‘Níor chuala. Agus níl sí ag freagairt aon scairt ná téacs.’

‘Bhal, níl aon uimhir againn dó féin, mar Romeo. Ní thig linn a chinntiú caidé an scéal. Níl a ainm ceart againn, fiú.’

‘Ar ndóigh,’ a dúirt Siú go dímheasúil, ‘*Romeo?* Cad a insíonn sin dúinn faoin bhoc? Cá bhfios nach pósta trí huaire cheana é agus lear mór páistí aige lena chois sin?’

‘*Ah, it’ll all end in tears*’ arsa Seán féin, agus fios maith agam go raibh na deora silte ag Rúit cheana.

‘*Oh, we so didn’t cop that on!*’ arsa Siú.

Agus bhog an comhrá go rudaí eile. Ceanada. An buachaill is nua – ag Seán faraor, chan ag Siú. Scrúduithe. Cónaí le tuismitheoirí.

Bhí Siú ina codladh an oíche sin nuair a bhuail an fón póca. Ar a trí a chlog ar maidin. ‘*Bloody deartháir*’, ar sí léi féin, ‘*bloody* eochracha an tí cailte aige arís i gclub ínteacht.’

‘*Yeahhhh,*’ ar sí i gcogar, súile druidte.

‘A Shiú, seo Rúit. ‘dtig liom fanacht tí s’agatsa anocht?’

‘Cinnte’, a chogain sí, súile druidte i dtólamh, teas mealltach na leapa thart uirthi, ag súil go raibh Rút sa bhaile mhór, ag fanacht ar bhus amach. Leathuair eile. Galánta.

‘Cá’l tú?’

‘Taobh amuigh de do dhoras tosaigh.’

Breast í.

‘Okay. Beidh mé thíos díreach.’ a dúirt sí trí na fiacla.

Shleamhnaigh sí amach as an leaba agus síos an staighre go ciúin. D’oscail sí an doras agus chonaic sí Rút ar leac an dorais, í ar crith, a cuid *mascara* ina smúr thar a leicne.

‘Sa chistin.’ a d’ordaigh Siú.

‘A Dhia na Glóire, a Rút, nach tubaisteach an chuma atá ort,’ arsa sí, ag druidim dhoras na cistine. Threoraigh sí Rút anonn go dtí cathaoir taobh leis an Aga. ‘Caidé a tharla?’

‘R-R-Romeo’ arsa Rút, an chaint ag stad uirthi, ‘Bhí sé ag iarraidh fanacht thar oíche tigh mo thuismitheoirí arís. Chaill sé an cuirfiú don bhrú. Agus is fuath le mo mhuintir é. Agus bíonn seisean ag tabhairt amach dom agus bíonn siadsan ag tabhairt amach dom agus tá mé tinn tuirseach den rud ar fad. Dúirt mé *no* leis.’

Bhí sí á téamh féin ag an Aga, a cloigeann cromtha. Níor amharc sí ar Shiú.

‘Ar bhuail sé thú?’ arsa Siú.

‘Bh-bhain sé triail as, ach bhlocáil mé é ar dhóigh éigin, agus bhrúigh mé siar é.’

‘Agus?’

‘Thit sé siar cúpla slat. Shleamhnaigh sé síos bruach na habhann ag an teach, sa chlabar. Thit sé isteach sa Dothar!’ ar sí d’olagón.

‘Ssss, bí ciúin .. ná múscail an tseanlanúin. Agus?’

‘Níl a fhios agam. Bhí sé dorcha, ní raibh mé ábalta faic a fheiceáil, bhí scanradh orm. Thosaigh mé ag rith. Rith mé an bealach ar fad go dtí seo.’

Shuigh Siú síos ag an tábla le Rút. Smaoinigh sí ar feadh cúpla bomaite.

‘Maith go leor, *so,*’ ar sí, ‘tá sé fliuch. Bíodh aige. Gheobhaidh sé slaghdán. ’Nois, tá sé leath i ndiaidh a trí agus tá tú traochta. Déanfaimid é seo ar fad a réiteach ar maidin.’

D’éalaigh gol beag ó Rút, ach thoiligh sí. Bhain sí suimín as an mhuga tae agus ansin shlog sí siar é.

‘Goitse, anois. Isteach leat sa tseomra bheag cúil – thig leat codladh ansin anocht,’ arsa Siú, agus thug sí spléachadh rabhaidh do Rút ... ‘Agus in ainm Dé, ná múscail mo Mham.’

D’éirigh Rút go bríomhar groí an mhaidin dár gcionn, spion maith uirthi, réidh lena scéal á scaoileadh. D’admhaigh sí go raibh cúrsaí idir í féin agus Romeo ag gabháil i ndonacht le tamall anuas. Bhí Rút ag iarraidh a bheith neamhspleách óna muintir, a háit féin a bheith aici. Ach bhí sin doiligh gan aon jab aici go fóill. Bhí Romeo ag cur brú uirthi chomh maith, bhí seisean ag iarraidh go mbeadh jab faighte aici fosta – sa dóigh is go dtiocfadh leis-sean bogadh isteach isteach léi féin saor ó chíos. Tháinig laghdú ar an ghrá agus méadú ar an ghráin. Ardaíodh glórtha go colgach, cancrach. Bhí leathbharúil ag Siú gur ardaíodh lámh chomh maith, ach níor dhúirt Rút faic faoi sin.

‘Ó, a Shiubhán, mothaím chomh hamaideach. Caidé mar a thiocfadh liom a shamhlú go raibh mé ariamh i ngrá leis siúd?’

‘Tharla rudaí níos saoihiúla’ a dúirt Siú. ‘Agus má thagann sé ar ais beidh tú réidh dó. Rinne sé iarracht gabháil thar fóir aréir, ach ní dhéanfaidh sé ort é an dara huair.’

Bhris an gol ar Rút arís.

‘Bhí sé chomh deas sin dom go dtí aréir,’ ar sí. ‘Ach aréir – aréir, lean sé ar an bhus mé. Níor thug mé faoi deara é go dtí gur thuirling sé ag an stad liom. Bhí se á rá go raibh sé ag gabháil a stopadh liom tigh mo mhuintire arís. Dúirt mé leis nárbh fhéidir ach dúirt seisean nach raibh sé chun glacadh le *No.*’

‘Agus landáil sé san abhainn.’

‘Landáil.’

Bhí aoibh ar aghaidh Rút anois, don chéaduair le tamall fada. Bhí sí in ann saol gan Romeo a shamhlú anois, i ndiaidh amharc air sleamhnú síos an clábar agus isteach san uisce de phleist. Bhí deireadh le hachrann, deireadh le deora. Shiúil sí go héasca, ag cinneadh gan teagmháil ar bith a bheith aici leis choíche arís. D’athraigh Siú a shonraí ar ghuthán cliste Rút, fiú, ó *Romeo go Aimsir Chaite*. An bheirt acu ag gáire faoi.

Chuir siad an lá isteach go sócúlach. Chuidigh siad le máthair Shiú sa teach. Chuaigh siad ag spaisteoireacht sa pháirc, ag caint is ag comhrá. Phléigh siad fear nua Sheáin. Phléigh siad na buntáistí agus na míbhuntáistí le giollacht dlí sa bhaile nó le teagasc Béarla i Valencia do Shiú. Labhair siad fá Romeo – an cladhaire clábarach, mar a thug siad air. Shamhlaigh siad é ina shuí sa Dothar, go dtína ascaillí i ngrinneall na habhann sna huiscí laga salacha. B’amhlaidh a lean an dea-spion. Go dtí gur amharc siad ar an nuacht ar an teilifís an tráthnóna sin:

‘Agus tá na Gardaí i mBaile Átha Cliath ag lorg aon eolais mar gheall ar fhear sna lár-fhichidí a fritheadh báite in Abhainn na Dothra gar do Bhóthar Orwell go luath ar maidin. Creideann na gardaí gur thit an fear isteach sna huiscí tanaí agus gur chaill sé a aithne nuair a bhuaíl sé grinneall na habhann. Níl na gardaí ag cuartú aon duine eile i dtaca leis an tarlúint seo. Ní raibh aon doiciméad aitheantais ar an fhear agus ...’

Ag iompú ón teilifís, d’fhéach Siú ar Rút. Chonaic sí an t-uafás ina súile. Chuir sí méar rabhaidh lena beola. Mar i ndeireadh na dála, ní raibh a ainm ceart ar eolas acu, fiú.

Many's the slip

Siubhán Ní Bhrádaigh examined the dainty red shoe in the shop window. Crimson rose more than red, made of Italian leather, so fine, with little beads and filigree details. A high heel you would die for, if you didn't die from a broken neck wearing it.

Siubhán. Shoe-on. Shoe-off. That was what they called her in school in Dublin. The Royal Institute was a fee-paying school, with both nice and not-so-nice teenagers all claiming territory and establishing pecking order. Some students had tried to put her down, calling her *Shoe-on*, or sometimes, *Shoe-off*. It worked. Shoe-on. Shoe-off. Seán and Ruth called her 'Shue', and she was okay with that. The three of them started calling themselves the 'Shue-Crew', taking away the bullies' power.

Moving on from the Institute to different universities in Dublin, they still met up regularly right through their college years. Ruth studied Music. Seán signed up for History. Both three year courses. Nearly a year now since graduating, Seán was still signing on the dole, at home in the two-up, two-down that he shared with his mother. Ruth was still in her childhood bedroom in the large Victorian redbrick on the banks of the River Dodder. Ruth's parents wouldn't hear of her signing on and gave her an allowance. Everybody else their age was on the dole, in an unpaid internship, or gone to Canada or Australia.

Shue had picked a four-year degree course, Law and Spanish. She spent a glorious third year studying in Valencia. Sun, sea, no living with parents - and a lifestyle to match. Studying, teaching an odd English class – and spending the money as soon as she got it in the

bars of Benimaclet. She hadn't looked forward to coming back to spending her final year living off her parents in her own redbrick house further down the river from Ruth. But she had no money, so no other option.

It was coming to the end of the fourth year now, and graduation couldn't come quick enough. At least with a law degree she might get a place devilling for a barrister. One of her parents' friends might take her on. Or then again, she might find herself back in Valencia yet, teaching English. Or yoga.

She looked at the dainty piece of nonsense again. Nah, she'd break her neck in those heels. And besides, red was definitely not her colour. More Ruth's.

Ruth. Always falling foul of teachers for running when she should have been walking. Talking when she should have been listening. Poor Ruth. Pity she didn't run faster as Romeo walked into her life.

Romeo was a Greek 'bin-dipper', as Shue's older brother so elegantly put it. Running to avoid military service in Greece, he dipped into bins for food right across Europe – half-eaten burgers, out-of-date bread from supermarkets, remainders of sandwiches. Sleeping rough, he dipped into bins further and further away from Greece until he reached Ireland and could go no further. He sat down one day on a bench beside Ruth, on the wooden walkway that ran along the River Liffey. She had run out of CVs to hand in to shops and bars and was taking a break from her jobsearch.

They started to chat. Normal stranger-to-stranger stuff - weather, the price of takeaway americanos, weather again, politics ... two young people with no jobs and lots of time on their hands.

'So, are ye an item now, or what?' asked Shue.

They were in Shue's kitchen, mugs of tea in hand. Ruth sitting over beside the Aga, her favourite spot. Ruth loved her comfort. Summer it might be but warm it wasn't. She giggled.

'Yes, we are – my first proper boyfriend. Isn't Romeo fabulous?'

'Romeo? Aw, come on, Ruth, what's the deal with that name?'

'He can't tell anyone his real name, in case the Greek authorities come asking.'

'Not even you?'

'Not even me. It's to protect me. But 'Romeo' does me just fine. It's so romantic. Like him.'

Despite Seán and Shue's warnings to take it slow, Ruth fell deeper in lust with Romeo. And who could blame her? Exotically accented English, olive skin framed by black curls and deep, deep, dark eyes, Romeo by name was Romeo by nature.

Shue called down to Ruth's house one evening a few weeks ago. She hadn't seen Ruth in a while. Too taken up with the Greek, probably. Ruth's parents lived in a big detached house on the Dodder bank. The river ran past the bottom of their back garden. Fancy-schmancy-posh. But the voice that she heard coming from the closed front door and her only at the front gate wasn't fancy-schmancy-posh at all.

'Ruth! Have a bit of sense. He's an eejit, a homeless nincompoop with no skills. What can he offer you?'

'We're in love, Dad, and that's all there is to it.'

'You can't be in love with that waste of space. You don't even know his proper name. I don't know who's worse – my sucker of a daughter or that Greek hobo.'

The door flew open before Shue had time to get away. Shue didn't want to meet Ruth's Dad in that mood. But it was Ruth, sobbing, her coat flying. She ran past Shue and disappeared round the corner. Shue followed and found her a little bit along the road.

‘Ruth, are you okay?’

‘Dad is so old-fashioned!’ she answered, between sobs. ‘I didn’t mean to sneak Romeo in, it just happened. We got drunk, and then they came back and, and-‘

It emerged that her parents were having dinner in the golf club, and arrived back near midnight to find an empty bottle of vodka and two empty glasses on the drinks cabinet - and Ruth’s bedroom door locked. Her mother cried, her father threatened to break the door down. When there was no answer from the two inside, he then locked every door in the house, in case Romeo would come out while they were asleep and take a memento with him. Some of their Waterford Crystal, perhaps, or one of the laptops. Ruth’s parents hardly slept until the early hours, when exhaustion finally kicked in.

When Ruth emerged from her bedroom the next morning, her parents were sound asleep. She got Romeo out the front door while they were still asleep. But she had to face them when they got up later that morning . . .

Her parents didn’t hold back. The boy had no name and no money. He was a hobo who lived in hostels. He ate out of food bins. What had they put her through college for. Why couldn’t she find a nice medical student, or a dentist, or an accountant. Words became roars, roars became tears, and they were shed on both sides. Ruth was ordered to give him up, and see sense. This was their home, and she had better remember that.

Shue sat on the bench by the Dodder, Ruth spluttering out the saga.

‘Mam and Dad are so unfair, it’s not his fault he can’t work over here.’

‘Whose fault is it, then?’

Ruth flashed angry eyes at Shue.

‘Not you, too, Shue? He can’t use his passport, so he can’t get a tax number. It’s all the fault of the military in Greece.’

Shue sat for a moment in silence. What to say without Ruth getting up and walking away? Ruth, ever-sensible, ever clear-eyed. Up until Romeo.

‘Would he turn himself in-’

‘No! He can’t, they’d throw him in prison.’

‘But he won’t ever be able to get a job here without a tax number, I.D., all that stuff.’

‘We’ll just have to find a way. Some way. Somehow.’

Shue left Ruth on the bench, staring at the river, but not seeing it.

She didn’t meet up with Ruth until a week later, the night they arranged to go to *Captain America’s* for a burger. *Captain’s* was a regular meeting spot, cheap and cheery. They met at the top of Grafton Street. When Ruth and Romeo arrived, however, Ruth explained that they wouldn’t be going in to eat. Romeo stood with an arm slung round Ruth’s neck, watching Shue and Seán through his long, black eyelashes

‘Romeo and me are going down Grafton Street to get a takeaway burger and coffee. We’ll meet you after, at Stephen’s Green. We don’t have enough money for *Captain’s*.’ said Ruth.

Silence. For a few seconds.

‘But we have this night planned for ages, Ruth. We none of us have any money. You always came – before this.’ said Seán.

‘I know, but Romeo doesn’t have any money because he hasn’t any dole. I’m not going in without him.’ countered Ruth.

Seán’s eyebrows nearly climbed round his head to the back his neck at that. Seán had graduated to the dole after college, at the same time as Ruth graduated to living off her parents. He lived at home with the Mammy, too. But his Mammy’s was a two-up, two-down in Dún Laoghaire, not a five-bed detached with a conservatory backing onto the Dodder. He

always made sure to keep some pennies under the pillow, however, to be able to meet up now and then with the old ‘Shue-crew’.

Unheeding of the expressions of her two friends, Ruth strolled down the street, trailing Romeo by the hand, to buy him takeaway coffee and a burger meal and head off to their bench in Stephen’s Green. Shue and Seán watched them go. Seán shrugged his shoulders. Shue said,

‘C’mon. We might as well eat. I’m famished.’

Seán studiously avoided talking about ‘that guy’, as he called Romeo, and so did Shue. They ate quickly, mindful of the other two outside on the park bench.

They met up again on Grafton Street after *Captain’s*. Ruth was alone.

‘Where’s-’

‘Romeo had to leave. You have to get in the queue for the homeless hostel early.’ scowled Ruth.

‘Oh dear, such a shame.’ said Seán.

They wandered down through the evening crowds listening to the buskers.

‘Romeo really has more problems than you realise,’ said Ruth, ‘he has to find somewhere to sleep every night. It’s so stressful for me. I worry about him so much. And those hostels are horrible places.’

By the time they had wandered down to the town end of Grafton Street, they were well-informed on various aspects of homelessness. They were looking at the rings in *Weirs*, *the Jewellers*, and Ruth broke out –

‘Romeo would love to work, but he can’t even draw the dole here – and he should be able to, with Greece and us being in the E.U.’

‘So why doesn’t he? Work, I mean,’ said Seán, deadpan.

‘His status is ... irregular.’

‘He’s a draft dodger.’

‘He’s a pacifist.’

‘He needs to sort things out with Greece,’ responded Seán.

They were at the main gates of Trinity at this stage.

‘He has to get his clothes from charity,’ said Ruth, ‘at least, the ones I don’t buy for him – those nice loafers, and tops. You know, things you don’t want to get from those places, or if you want to have a bit of style.’

‘I get mine from the Vincent de Paul shop up beside me. They do discount when they get to know you.’ responded Seán, quickly. He smoothed his hoodie ostentatiously.

‘Well, you can speak the language. Romeo is still learning-’

‘From you?’

‘– and you need to speak slowly so that he can understand you better. You really need to make more of an effort. For my sake.’ Ruth scolded

At O’Connell Street Bridge they stood, still listening to Ruth.

‘My parents won’t have him in the house again. Daddy says he’ll call the Guards if I bring him back again. He calls Romeo a tramp. A tramp! They don’t understand him. They’re treating me like a little girl. I hate them, sometimes!’

Shue made as if to argue, but Seán put a warning hand on her arm.

‘Lust, my dear, the root of all stupidity’ he murmured into her ear, as Ruth continued to complain, this time about society and inequality. Shue looked at him, and nodded. Now was not the time. Trouble was, it was increasingly never the time to talk to Ruth.

When Ruth finally ran out of points about Romeo’s problems with life, her own problems with her parents, Western Europe’s problems with military service, homelessness and Greco-English linguistic problems, she subsided and wept a little. Seán was unsympathetic, still quietly seething that she couldn’t save a few euro out of her allowance to

come out one night in God knows how long. Shue was suspicious that the guy still didn't trust any of them – but especially the woman he was bedding – with his proper name

Needless to say, that particular night didn't end in *Copper Faced Jack's*, as it should have. They split up at O'Connell Bridge. Seán got the Dart, the girls caught the bus together, sitting together in silence. When it came to Ruth's stop, Shue didn't say goodbye to her as Ruth rose to go. Shue was too annoyed at Ruth, annoyed at bloody Romeo and annoyed at herself and Seán for letting Ruth and Romeo ruin their night out in town. Ruth didn't speak either.

They didn't hear from Ruth for a while after that. No texts, no internet messaging, no comments on social media. To be honest, they needed a break from her. Seán was looking up work visas in Canada, Shue was sitting her finals.

A few weeks later, Shue was settled on the sofa at home with tea and telly. She called Seán – her Mam's landline, she had run out of credit on her mobile.

'So you haven't heard from her either? No? Weird!' he said.

'No. And she isn't answering any texts or calls.' said Shue.

'Well, we don't have a mobile number for himself, either. So we can't ring him to check what the story is. We don't even have his real name.'

'Yeah.' Shue snorted, 'C'mon, now, *Romeo*? What does that tell us about the guy? What odds he's married three times over with God only knows how many kids to boot?'

'Ah, it'll all end in tears' said Seán, dismissively.

'Oh, we so didn't cop that on!' Shue retorted.

They moved on to talking about other things – Seán's visa application. The newest boyfriend (his, not hers). Shue's exam. The pain of living with parents ...

Shue was asleep on the Friday night at three in the morning when her mobile rang. Bloody brother, she thought, he's lost his house keys again in some nightclub.

‘Yeahhhh,’ she breathed, eyes still shut.

‘Shue, Ruth here, can you let me stay in your place tonight?’

‘Sure I can’, Shue mumbled, eyes still shut, hoping Ruth was still in town and three quarters of an hour of a nightbus away. Her bed was so warm. ‘Where are you?’

‘Outside, at your porch door.’

Damn.

‘Mmmmmm ... Okay. Gimme a minute.’ Shue muttered.

She slid out of bed and tiptoed quietly downstairs. She unlocked the front door quietly, taking in Ruth’s shivering and her smeared mascara.

‘Into the kitchen.’ Shue whispered.

‘Good God, Ruth, you look a total mess,’ Shue said, as she closed the kitchen door firmly. She guided Ruth over to a chair by the Aga and sat her down firmly. ‘what happened?’

‘R-R-Romeo’ Ruth spluttered, ‘he wanted to stay over in my parents’ again. He missed the curfew for the hostel. And my parents hate him. And I keep getting it from him *and* from my Mam and Dad, and I’m sick of it. So I told him no.’

She was hugging the warm Aga, head down, not looking at Shue.

‘Did he hit you?’ Shue demanded, one arm on hip, eyes hard, as she put the kettle on for tea.

‘H-he tried to, but I blocked him and pushed back at him.’

‘Then what?’

‘He slipped backwards in the muck outside my parents’ house, and fell into the Dodder!’ Ruth wailed.

‘Shh ... don’t wake the oldies,’ warned Shue, ‘and?’

‘I don’t know. It’s dark, I couldn’t see, I was scared. I ran all the way here.’

Shue sat down at the table with two mugs of tea and thought.

‘Okay, so,’ she said after a few minutes, ‘he’ll have to fend for himself. It’s half past three in the morning and you’re a wreck. We’ll sort this out tomorrow.’

Ruth snivelled a little, but didn’t complain. She sipped her tea at first, then finished it in large gulps.

‘Okay, now, come on. You can sleep in the spare room’ said Shue and put a warning finger to her lips. ‘Don’t wake Mam.’ she hissed, and up they went.

A rested, more intelligible Ruth emerged from the spare room the next morning. She admitted to Shue that the relationship had been going from bad to worse. Ruth wanted a job so as to be independent of her parents. Romeo wanted Ruth to try harder at getting a job so that she could move out of home too. But only so he could move in with her rent free. Lust waned and annoyance at each other swept in. Arguments, quarrels. Shue suspected an odd hand raised as well, but said nothing.

‘Oh, Shue, I feel so stupid. How could I have imagined I was ever in love with him?’

‘Stranger things,’ said Shue, ‘and if he comes back you’ll be ready for him. He crossed a line tonight, and he won’t do that a second time.’

Ruth burst out crying again.

‘He was so nice until last night,’ she said. ‘But last night, last night he followed me onto the bus. I didn’t even realise until he got off at my stop, behind me. He kept saying that he was going to stay over in my parents’ place with me again. I told him he couldn’t but he said he wasn’t going to take *No* for an answer.’

‘And he landed in the river.’

‘Yes.’

Ruth was actually smiling now, for the first time in months, realising that no way was she going to go back to him ever again. Watching Romeo slide down the mud and fall into

the river with a splash had been an epiphany. No more arguments, no more tears. She could feel herself walking taller even now, determining never to contact him again. Shue changed his contact details on Ruth's phone, laughing, altering his entry from *Romeo* to *Has-Been*.

Shue and Ruth passed the day in a leisurely fashion. They helped Shue's mother with chores. They walked in the park, and chatted, chatted, chatted. They talked about Seán's new boyfriend, emigration (for Ruth), the pros and cons of devilling and living at home for a few more years or teaching English in Valencia (for Shue). They talked about Romeo, now villain of the piece for Ruth. They laughed to think of him sitting in a shallow river bed up to his oxters in dirty Dublin water. At least, they did until they turned on the six o'clock news that evening.

'... and finally, the police in Dublin are looking for any information regarding a man aged in his mid-twenties found drowned in the River Dodder early this morning near Orwell Road. They believe that the man fell in and hit his head on the river-be, as he drowned in a few inches of water. Foul play is not suspected. There were no identifying documents on the man ...'

Turning to Ruth, Shue saw the look of horror on her face. Shue put a finger on her lips. After all, they didn't even know his name.