

“South Circular Road”

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Fiction

July 2023

Micah wakes earlier than his body wants him to, trudges to the bathroom, and squeezes into the shower, which is so tight that, if he drops the soap, he has to ape a contortionist in order to scrunch down and pick it up. As usual, the hot water has not yet kicked in, so he suffers through an icy spray. While he attempts to scrub the booze out of his system, he closes his eyes and summons an image of Emily. It begins to materialize – her dusky eyes, her wavy, amber hair, her womanly form – but she is fully clothed and scowling; not precisely what he hoped to envision.

A knock at the door and Luke enters. “Gotta piss,” he announces flatly.

“Do your thing,” Micah grumbles.

Afterwards, Micah dresses and finds the girls congregated around the Formica kitchen table, scooping eggs and beans onto toast. Diane and Jules look the worse for wear in pajama pants and wrinkled t-shirts. Mia, fully dressed, emits a healthier aura. They are all college-aged, as are Micah and Luke.

“I am royally hungover,” Diane declares, tying her blonde locks into messy bun on top of her head.

“Me too,” Jules mumbles.

“How about some hair of the dog?” Micah suggests.

“What do we have?”

He checks the fridge. There is a quarter pint of Smirnoff and three cans of Guinness aside from a block of cheese, a half-carton of eggs, and two bottles of Coke.

“I’ll take a Guinness,” Diane says.

He hands it to her and looks to Jules.

“Fine... fine.” She reaches out her hand and he places a can in it.

“Mia, why are you so fucking sprightly?” Micah asks.

“I have self-discipline.”

“Apparently.”

Luke appears, shirtless in basketball shorts. “I’m hungover as shit.”

“Join the club.”

He appraises his roommates, then: “Mia, why do you look like a fucking prom queen?”

“What are you talking about? I’m just wearing regular clothes.”

“It’s too early for that.” Luke snatches a triangle of toast off of Diane’s plate and shoves it into his mouth.

“Help yourself, Luke,” she says dryly.

“We doing Bullwinkles tonight?”

“I’m sick of Bullwinkles. We need to do something special for our last night!”

“How about The Kitchen?” Micah suggests.

“Ooh, The Kitchen! You know Bono owns that place.”

“No shit. Why do you think I proposed it?”

“Who took the last Guinness?!” Luke asks, peering into the minifridge.

“Early bird gets the worm.”

“Bullshit.”

The group have been living together, the five of them, in that shabby apartment on South Circular Road since early May – just over three months. It is an unusual arrangement that began with an unusual encounter.

Luke and Micah had been searching for a short-term apartment lease for nine days and the outlook was rather bleak. There was a housing shortage in Dublin in 1998. As soon as a vacancy appeared in the newspaper, it was snapped up. Their only hope: to get a jump on the competition. Each day, one of the boys would wake up early, run out and grab the paper, and begin making calls from a payphone.

Finally, one morning, Micah managed to connect with a landlord who informed him that, miraculously, a suitable flat was available. They agreed to meet for a tour in half an hour. Micah hurried back to the hostel and roused Luke.

To the boys’ chagrin, when they arrived for the appointment, the landlord, a lilliputian, white-haired Irishman, was already completing a showing with other prospective tenants.

“Goddammit,” Luke hissed as they waited their turn out on the sidewalk.

“This doesn’t look good.”

The apartment seekers were two pretty, young women, and they appeared to be charming the pants off of the old geezer. Their conversation lasted about ten minutes and concluded with affirmative handshakes.

The girls passed by the boys as they departed.

“Hey,” Micah said.

“Howdy,” the short one with the brunette pixie cut replied cheerfully.

“They’re American,” Micah whispered to Luke.

“Who gives a shit.”

“Just sayin’...”

The boys stepped over to the landlord, who said, “Hello, gents. I’m sorry to tell you, but the lasses are taking the place.”

“Jesus Christ!” Luke sputtered.

“That’s how it goes.”

“Would you mind showing it to us, just in case something falls through?” Micah asked.

“Sure. Not a problem.”

It was a fairly sizable two-bedroom, sparsely furnished and musty, priced at nine hundred Irish pounds per month, which was a bit out of the boys’ reach considering they were earning only seven pounds an hour for the summer. Otherwise, it was situated well: walking distance to work, on a nice street, a stone’s throw to the Bleeding Horse Pub.

When the tour finished, Micah offered a proposal to the old timer. “What would you say if we got those two girls to share the apartment with us?”

“Well, I don’t think that’s what they are interested in, but, in principle, I have no objections to it.”

Micah looked to Luke, who squinted and said, “C’mon, bro... Are you joking right now?”

“No! I mean, it’s an idea...”

At that moment, quite providentially, the girls came walking back up the sidewalk. The one with the pixie cut began, “Guys, we have a crazy idea...”

“Should we all live together?” Micah interjected.

“That’s what we were thinking!”

So, before even learning each other’s names, they decided to cohabitate.

The two girls, as it turned out, were Jules and Mia. When the group convened the following day to move in, the boys were surprised to learn that there was another friend (Diane) who would make it a party of five. The girls squeezed into the larger bedroom, while Luke and Micah took the smaller.

Incidentally, the ladies had come to Dublin for the same reason as Luke and Micah had: simply to spend the summer working menial jobs, traveling around the Emerald Isle, and having some *craic* (pronounced *crack*, which they learned to be the Irish word for “a good time”). Now, in late August, just a few days before their summer vacations come to an end, the five are thick as thieves.

After harassing the girls for a few more minutes, Luke and Micah finish getting ready for their final day of work – a double shift – and head out the door. They walk to Camden Street, stopping at a corner store for a Snickers bar, and catch the number 9 bus in front of The Bleeding Horse. On the ride into the city center, they do not speak, rendered mute by the severity of their morning-after condition.

Micah, additionally, is grappling with internal demons. For the last two-and-a-half years he has battled troubling episodes of emotional instability and deep malaise. The affliction seemed to strike him out of nowhere as he entered his final semester of high school. One day, he was riding high, performing well academically, generally well-liked; the next he was obsessed with his own inadequacy, convinced that everything he had ever done in his entire life was wrong, every notable decision a grave mistake. He ruminated, quite literally, around the clock, battling incessant, malignant, intrusive thoughts both day and night. He lost the ability to focus,

to be at ease in social circumstances, even to maintain eye contact. He knew that something was seriously wrong, but rather than recognize the condition as a mental illness, he blamed himself and his apparent shortcomings for his ongoing agony.

The symptoms dissipated a bit as his college career began, but the malady never fully released its hold on the young man. He sort of bobbed up and down, sometimes above water and functional – other times, floundering in the abyss. His hope for this trip, during the summer after his sophomore year, was to get away from whatever it was that was plaguing him, to cross the ocean, to immerse himself in a different culture and, thereby, somehow, to rediscover who he once was. Fortunately, the three-month stay in Ireland with his best friend indeed has proven to be therapeutic in a way. Stabilizing, clarifying. He feels good now – a bit uneven, but, relative to the preceding two-and-a-half years, quite good.

The boys hop off the bus at Exchequer Street and walk through the Temple Bar district. It is 9:30 AM and the city is just coming to life. Men in overalls are unloading kegs of beer from the back of flatbed trucks. Others are sweeping and hosing the sidewalks. Service workers in uniform, men and women, are making their way to the pubs and restaurants and hotels where they earn their keep.

Micah and Luke reach their place of employment: The Quays, a traditional Irish pub, one of many in the district. Their rabble-rousing, fast-lipped, wisecracker supervisor Benny is behind the bar.

“Hello, gents. You look like shite.”

“What else is new?” Luke replies.

The boys head straight to the back of the room where their breakfast awaits: a platter of scones and a steel pot filled with chicken soup. The same fare every morning. They stand at a high-top table and scarf down their portions.

Emily emerges from the office and steps behind the bar. She, like Benny, is clad in black trousers and a black top, but, unlike fireplug-proportioned Benny, she is statuesque and stunning. Tall, lithe, well-endowed, effortlessly alluring.

“What’s up, Emily,” Luke says.

She ignores him and begins to wipe down the counter. Then: “There’s twenty kegs out there, boys. They’re not going to stack themselves.”

“We got it,” Micah replies.

“When?”

“Can we finish our breakfast? It’s our last day…”

“For fuck’s sake,” she exhales bitterly.

Despite her evident disdain, Emily is the person who hired Micah and Luke. The young Americans began looking for employment the day after they arrived in Dublin, and The Quays happened to be the first establishment they approached. There was little strategy behind their effort other than to target opportunities in the Temple Bar district, which Micah’s *Let’s Go* travel guide described as the city’s “epicenter of nightlife.” It was early in the day when they walked into the pub. Emily was tending bar. When they told her that they were in the market for jobs, her immediate response was “Can you start right now?”

“Right now, as in this very moment?” Luke asked.

“Yes!” She responded seemingly exasperated.

“Well, I don’t think we’re quite ready, but we could start tomorrow if that works.”

“Fuckin’ shite. Tomorrow. Fine. Be here at 10 AM!” She turned her back to take an order from a customer.

Luke and Micah looked at each other, shrugged, and, befuddled by the terseness of the interaction, left.

“She’s a bit of a bitch, no?” Micah suggested on their way back to the hostel.

“A tad. Hot though.”

“True that.”

Sure enough, they were put to work as barbacks the next day. To Micah, it seems like a lifetime ago.

The boys finish their breakfast and, as instructed, head out to the patio where the kegs of Guinness, Smithwick’s, Heineken, and Bulmers cider are arrayed like a battalion of squat foot soldiers. They begin transporting the one hundred sixty-pound steel barrels from the patio into the shed – no easy task – sort of wobble rolling them, then hefting them into place. It takes the combined effort of the boys to stack them three-high.

After a time, Gary arrives. He is American, too, and he is in his early thirties, and, for some godforsaken reason, he is still working as a barback. He claims that the work provides him with the freedom that he desires of life, but also reveals that he has a young daughter back stateside. It does not seem to be a particularly responsible way to live, from Micah’s perspective.

“I got laid last night,” Gary announces in greeting.

“How?” asks Luke.

“What do you mean, ‘How’?”

“I mean how does an ugly old bastard like you with those teeth and a big nose and a ponytail pull any kind of woman.”

“There is more to the art of seduction than just a pretty face, young grasshopper.”

“The thought of you seducing someone makes me gag,” Micah says.

“I made her gag last night!”

Micah and Luke pretend to retch.

The shift proceeds with its usual drudgery. The boys trade out and tap new kegs. They run up to and down from the third-floor storeroom to retrieve supplies and crates of Coke bottles and bottles of whiskey and vodka. They restock the bars on the first and second floor and Emily elbows them in the ribs as they are reaching up to the top shelf or knees them in the back as they are squatting to fill the minifridges. She can be malicious when she’s in the mood – and the mood strikes her frequently.

Paddy Hoolihan, the affable country boy, is tending the second-floor bar. He and Jules have had a thing going lately, which Micah and Luke razz him about, although they are happy for him. His brogue is thick and rapid-fire and the boys frequently ask him to repeat himself amidst the din of patrons that crowd into the establishment for the Irish trad music that begins in the late afternoon.

This night there are two “hen parties” at The Quays consisting of randy young women who have hopped over from London to celebrate impending nuptials. These gatherings are typically loud and rowdy and, on occasion, out of control. When Micah or Luke approach to collect their empty pint glasses and clear the tables of bottles and ashtrays, the women hoot and holler and catcall and, at least a few times, grab the boys’ asses. The boys blush, but, in reality, don’t mind the attention so much.

Near closing time, a woman in her thirties from one of the hen parties, corners Micah near the bathrooms. She dons a floral dress over a somewhat pudgy frame and wears a bit too much makeup. Her eyeliner is smudged onto her left cheek.

“Take me into the jacks and give it to me, big boy,” she says to Micah. She slurs her words and sways as she stares up into his face.

“Give you what?”

“Give me the business! What do you think?” She lustily presses her body to his.

Micah considers this. He wouldn't mind a scandalous romp. At the very least it would provide him with a story to impress the fellas with. On the other hand, there is a fair chance that, if the stuffy owner, wealthy publican Louie Fitzgerald, gets wind of it, he will have a fit. Then again, this is their last shift – not much Louie could do about it.

The bigger issue, however, is Emily. She is Micah's Mount Everest. Despite her surliness, which borders on contempt, toward the young Americans, Micah thinks he might have a chance to summit her peak. He revealed his ambition to Luke a few days earlier.

“You think you have a chance in hell with that girl?” Luke asked.

“I think there is a sweet young lass underneath all of that armor,” Micah replied. “She just needs to be coaxed out of her shell.”

“Jesus, you sound like Gary.”

“Maybe the bastard is onto something.”

“OK. Fine. What's your angle?”

“I'm going to go for it at our going-away party.”

“Won't Hugh be there?” Hugh is Emily's apparent boyfriend, also a bartender at The Quays. He's a dapper, charismatic ginger, a few years the boys' senior.

“That won’t stop me.”

Luke chuckled at this. “At the very least, you are cocky.”

“That’s the name of the game, though, isn’t it?”

Micah turns the horny hen down, but she insists on a kiss, so he lets her plant a wet one on his lips then slips away.

When the pub closes for the night, after they have straightened things up and organized the place so that the overnight cleaners can do their job, Louie emerges from his office and gathers the employees at the bar.

“A round on me!” he announces. “To honor our departing Yankees.”

Everyone cheers and Louie begins pulling pints. “What’s next?” he asks.

“Next?” Micah says. “You mean in our lives? We head back to school.”

“School is overrated!” Benny declares. “Stay here and work for Louie. He’ll take care of you proper!”

“Now don’t go making promises on my behalf, Benny,” Louie says.

“How about a parting gift?” Luke suggests.

“A parting gift?”

“You know... a farewell bonus.”

“I can do that,” Louie says. He reaches into his pocket and produces two pounds fifty in coins. He drops them on the counter and says, “Don’t spend it all in one place, lads.”

Benny and Emily and the waitresses cackle at this.

Micah scoops up the money and hands Luke his share. “Laugh all you want, but we’ll take what we can get!”

Afterwards, the boys and Paddy, Benny, Emily, and Gary head to The Kitchen. It is a hip discotheque a few streets south of The Quays and when they arrive there is a line out the door. Big man Benny, however, takes the lead, heads to the front of the queue, and shakes hands with the doorman, whom he apparently knows quite well. Soon he waves the rest of their group over and the doorman pulls aside the velvet rope so that they can enter.

Inside a DJ is playing hip hop standards with a mix of newer British and American pop tunes and the dance floor is crammed with young revelers. The group winds its way to the bar. Emily pushes to the front and, quite easily, gets the attention of the male bartender. In a moment, she turns around and distributes shots of whiskey to her companions. Micah and Luke are shocked by this display of generosity.

“Holy shit, Emily! What has gotten into you?” Luke asks.

“Don’t say I never did anything for you, lads,” she says with a sly wink.

They all clink glasses and throw back the shots.

Diane, Jules, and Mia appear and they are quite clearly smashed already.

“We’ve been waiting for you!” Mia yells over the music.

“Well, we’re here now!” Micah replies.

Jules sidles up to Paddy and Benny distributes another round of whiskey shooters. Mia and Diane pull Micah and Luke out onto the dance floor and they begin cutting a rug. From time to time someone appears with another round of drinks, so, in short order, the whole group is bolloxed. Micah thinks about making a move on Emily, who is leaning against the bar, bobbing her head and monitoring the proceedings in the way a queen might observe her court. However, just when he summons enough courage, big Hugh with his nicely coiffed red hair appears. He

greet Emily, who throws her arms around him and kisses him briefly. Micah studies them. Was that a passionate kiss, or a dutiful kiss? What is their story?

He steps over to Benny who is having a blast dancing wildly amidst the crowd.

“Hey, Benny!”

“Hey, lad! You having some craic?”

“Yeah, man. Good craic. Good craic.”

Micah dances awkwardly for a bit, then poses the question. “What’s the deal with Emily and Hugh?”

“What are you talking about?”

“What’s their deal?”

“Their deal? Their snogging and shifting a bit. What do you think their deal is?”

Micah nods, trying to keep it cool. “Are they, like, boyfriend and girlfriend?”

“I don’t know, lad. Why are you asking me? Go ask them yourself!”

Micah decides to put it out of his mind for the time being. Now is not the right time to make a move: that much is obvious. He needs to get Hugh out of the picture, which he feels slightly bad about since Hugh is a good chap and has been a friend to the young Americans. Soon enough, Hugh and Emily join the rest of the group on the dance floor. They all sing along with the songs and form a circle and take turns dancing obnoxiously in the center of it. In particular, Mia and Gary make a scene, grinding on each other and spinning and dipping.

The DJ plays “New York, New York” by Frank Sinatra (who died a few months earlier) and the club closes and the patrons spill out onto the street. Everywhere Micah looks there are couples making out – Jules and Paddy, Luke and Diane, Hugh and Emily, even Mia and Gary are

getting in on the action. Benny steps over and offers him a Silk Cut cigarette. Micah accepts and Benny lights it.

“No action tonight, Micah?”

“Not for lack of trying.”

“You didn’t try hard enough, it seems.”

“Speak for yourself, Benny.

“I’ve got a woman at home, my friend. I don’t try anymore.”

“How come we’ve never met this mystery woman? I’m starting to think that you invented her.”

“I wish she was fake sometimes,” Benny exhales.

“Fair enough.”

They stand and smoke quietly for a few minutes.

Benny breaks the silence. “What’s the plan?”

“Party at our place.”

“We’re going to miss you bleedin’ muppets.”

“I hear that. This summer has been unreal.”

“It’s your last chance then...”

“Last chance for what?”

“To do whatever you’re planning to do.”

“What am I planning to do?”

“You tell me, cowboy.” Benny gives Micah a knowing look. Micah takes another drag and looks around. Emily is out of earshot.

Diane drunkenly blurts, “I need food!”

“Me, too!” Jules echoes.

“Let’s go get some kebabs then, you gobshites!” Luke yells.

“Kebabs, then party at our place!” Micah declares.

The group cheers and heads down Camden Street.

At the kebab joint they run into their preternaturally intense Northern Irish friend Johnny O’Keefe, who stands at the counter awaiting his falafel.

“Johnny the man!” Luke shouts, and they embrace.

“What’s the craic?”

“We’re all going to our place. It’s our last night in Dublin!”

“Your last night, eh? That went quick.”

“Three months. Yeah, quick.”

“Then we really have to celebrate,” Johnny states with a wink.

“That’s the plan,” says Micah.

“I have just the thing for the occasion.” He always has just the thing for the occasion.

Back at the apartment, the group has expanded a bit. Friends who have just finished late-night shifts have shown up, bringing with them various coworkers. Fortunately, the girls had a chance to stock up prior to their afternoon shift at Kehoe’s. Luke pours vodka, gin, and rum into plastic cups with Coke, tonic, and seltzer mixers. Mia distributes two cases of cold Guinness cans and cups of red wine. A mix CD featuring the Beastie Boys and David Gray and Snoop Dogg plays on the boombox. Most of the young people puff cigarettes, the cloud of smoke drifting out the open windows into the night. The apartment is tightly packed, energized.

Micah mingles, but keeps an eye on Emily, who sits at the kitchen table for much of the night and chats and plays cards with Diane and Jules and Paddy. Hugh stands in the corner of the

living room with some of the gents, drinking and laughing in a masculine way. The congregation grows increasingly inebriated and an informal dance floor takes shape. Gary and Mia unabashedly writhe and bump to the music.

Around 3 AM Benny pauses the CD and steps to the center of the room and raises his cup.

“A toast!” someone yells.

“A toast!”

And everyone crowds around and listens to the big man speak.

“Birds and lads, I think we must take a moment here to thanks our hosts and to properly recognize that this is their last night in our fair city.”

The group cheers and claps.

“When Luke and Micah first came into our lives at the Quays, we thought they were a couple of dumb Americans. Just look at them. I’m sure many of you thought the same.”

Laughter and guffaws.

“But they exceeded our expectations. Yes, they are mopey gobshites, but they are also goodfellas and true friends and they introduced us to three of the sweetest lassies we could have hope to meet: Diane and Jules and Mia. So let us raise our glasses to our special Americans and wish them well on their future adventures and send them off in the right way – the Irish way!”

Hoots and hollers. Gary appears between Luke and Micah and puts his arms around their shoulders and squeezes. “We’re going to miss you boys!”

“Speech!” someone shouts.

“Yes, a speech from the Americans!”

“Yes! Yes!”

“I think Luke should speak on our behalf,” Diane announces.

“That’s a good idea,” Jules says. “Say something for us, Luke.”

Luke’s face turns a shade of red and Micah gives him a nudge and he takes a spot in the center of the room. He looks around at the group and clears his throat.

“All right. All right,” he begins. “I guess I’m the spokesperson. I don’t know what to say. This summer has changed our lives, I think. It has been a wild adventure and we have had some really special moments. Every day has been fun for us, and we’ve made good friends that we are going to remember forever.”

“Hear! Hear!” Jules shouts.

“And now we are going back to our regular lives, back to America. But we have learned from you Irish people how to have a good time. And not just have a bit of craic, but really enjoy life and make every day count. So, I guess I should say that we thank you and we are grateful and we could not have asked for a better experience.” He raises his cup, then: “Sláinte!”

“Sláinte!” the group echoes mirthfully.

Later, someone dims the lights and plays a U2 CD and the dance party begins to slow down and the crowd thins out. Everyone is pickled and Micah slumps on the couch next to Paddy, who prattles about his plan to visit the United States in the coming year.

“I’m going to show those Yankee birds what they’ve been missing,” he says with a chuckle. “Will you introduce me to the ripe ones?”

“What about Jules?”

“Jules is great, but I think today is the end.”

“Makes sense, I guess,” Micah says. “I’ll do my best to hook you up then.”

Paddy puts his arm around Micah's shoulders and squeezes. "Good man, you are. Good man."

Hugh steps over to them. "Mates," he says. "It is time for me to bow out."

"So soon?" asks Paddy.

"Soon? The sun will be up in a bit, lad."

Micah stands up and gives Hugh a handshake and a one-armed hug. He doesn't dislike the man, far from it, and, in the moment, feels another twinge of guilt about coveting his girlfriend so much.

"You will be missed," Hugh declares, then pats Micah on the back and walks to the door, where Emily awaits him. They embrace and peck and he leaves without her. Micah notices this as he sits back down next to Paddy.

In a moment, Emily approaches.

"You look bolloxed, lads," she says.

"I'd say that is an accurate assessment," Paddy replies.

"Scooch over," she says to Micah.

He does and she drops to the couch next to him. Outside of his duties as a barback, this is about the closest Micah has even been to the girl. Her lips are wine-rouged, making them appear fuller against her fair and freckled complexion. He sits in an awkward position, careful not to take up too much space or to lean against her in a way that might irritate her.

"What a night," she exhales, then sips from her cup.

"Yeah. True." Micah cannot think of anything couth to say and they remain in silence for a minute.

Johnny O'Keefe suddenly appears before them, amped up as always despite the late hour.

“You’re not fading are yiz?” he asks.

“I’m going to find Jules,” Paddy replies, standing up.

“Oh, come on, Paddy. It’s time to get weird.”

Paddy chuckles. “I’m weird enough, lad.”

When he steps away, Johnny turns to Micah and Emily. “You two better not bail on me.”

“How weird do you want to get, Johnny?” Emily asks, sitting up.

“Come with me and I’ll show you.”

“Why not?” Emily says, then stands up and holds out her hand. “Let’s do this, Micah.”

“Right on. Right on.” Micah grabs her hand and she pulls him to his feet.

Johnny leads them down the hallway to the boys’ bedroom. He opens the door, peaks in, then shuts it quickly. “Oh boy!”

“What?”

“Somebody’s having sex in there.”

“Who?”

“Dunno. I saw a bloke’s hairy bare ass. Thrusting and such.”

“Gross,” says Emily.

“I think I can guess who the culprits are,” Micah says and Emily snickers.

They move on to the girls’ bedroom, which is empty. Johnny shuts and locks the door behind them.

“Why the secrecy, Johnny?” Micah asks.

“Because, mate, if people catch wind of this, everybody is going to want to get in on the action.”

Johnny plops onto one of the beds and Micah and Emily take a seat on the bed opposite him. He pulls a small leather pouch out of his pocket and, from it, produces a plastic sack and some rolling papers.

“Let me see,” Emily says.

Johnny hands her the sack. “It’s good stuff, I assure you. Very good stuff.”

She sniffs it and hands it to Micah who does the same. The sack contains small chunks that look like chocolate but smell quite herbal and earthy.

“What is this?” Micah asks.

“You’ve never seen hash before, lad?”

“Oh, hash? Really? My dad used to smoke that shit in the Sixties.”

Johnny smirks and snatches the sack. “This isn’t your daddy’s hash, Micah, my boy.” He pinches some of the waxy brown residue out of the sack, presses it into a rolling paper, adds a sprinkle of loose tobacco, and expertly rolls a joint. He licks the paper, then seals it. “Presto!”

He hands the joint to Emily, who produces a lighter. “Just hit it?” she asks.

“Hit it hard, baby!” says Johnny.

She burns the tip and inhales deeply. She holds the smoke in for a few seconds, then exhales and begins hacking.

“There you go. There you go,” Johnny says approvingly.

“Damn!” Emily exclaims. “Potent.”

She passes the joint to Micah, who grabs hold of it delicately, as if it were a stick of dynamite. He lights it and takes a modest hit.

“Jesus, mate!” Johnny snaps. “You need to hit it hard. Hard!”

Micah raises his eyebrows, then lights the joint again. He sucks on it with greater intensity as Johnny and Emily watch.

“C’mon, lad. Drag it to your toes. Drag it to your toes, I say!”

Micah redoubles his effort, saturating his lungs with the heavy smoke. He holds it for a long moment, then has a violent coughing fit.

“Yesss!” Johnny raves.

Emily laughs as Micah struggles to compose himself.

“That’s straight from Albania, folks. Laced with speed.”

“Laced with what?” Micah sputters.

“Speed, man, speed!”

“What does speed do?”

“It’ll make you squirrely for a while, but then you’ll settle into a comfy high. You’ll thank me later.”

At this, Emily begins to laugh. First a giggle, then a chortle, and soon a full-throated guffaw.

“What are you laughing at?” Micah asks.

“I don’t know, Mikey-boy. I don’t know!” She leans over and puts her arm around Micah’s shoulders and hangs on as she continues to shudder hysterically.

The laughter becomes contagious. In a minute, all three of them are cackling and wheezing at nothing in particular. Johnny sparks up the joint again, hits it with bulging eyes, and passes it around. By the time they have burned it down to a roach, they are very high, absolutely baked. Johnny shifts his position to lean against the wall and puts his feet up on the bed. Micah and Emily do the same on their bed, occasionally spasming with laughter.

“How you kids feeling?” Johnny asks.

“Good,” Emily says. “So good.” She presses against Micah and rests her head on his shoulder.

“Amazing,” Micah says.

“I told you. Johnny O’Keefe knows his drugs,” says Johnny.

They all giggle, then grow silent. Micah suddenly feels as though his body is made of a sort of cushioned material. He sinks into the sensation. Emily’s body is warm and soft like a marshmallow against him. Their breaths synchronize: in... out... in... out.

Micah’s mind wanders. He imagines himself in his childhood bedroom, lying face-up on the carpeted floor in the dark. There is no furniture, a bare space, the moonlight drifting silently in through an open window. He stares up at the ceiling, slate-grey in the gloom. And then he notices a shape: a trembling geometrical figure, a shimmering fluorescent angular outline, as if projected by a laser. More shapes coalesce, vibrating triangles and rotating hexagons and shifting parallelograms. Ovals and circles and figure eights and fractals. All different colors: oranges and mint greens, bright yellows and royal blues. And the images dance across the ceiling in a haphazard, jumbled way, but also in a way that seems to have symbolic meaning. And Micah focuses intently in an attempt to interpret the phantasmic display. But the significance eludes his grasp. The closer he gets, the further away it slips. And a sense of profound despair and hopelessness suddenly envelopes him, and he begins to shiver and cry.

Then a burst of light and Micah has been transported. He finds himself floating on a flat wooden raft as it makes its way down a lazy river through an otherwise arid landscape. The sun in the perfectly blue sky radiates down upon his naked body. The breeze tickles his browned skin. Birds chitter and the water bubbles over smooth rocks. On either side: sandy banks and boulders

and brambles. Micah does not know his location or his destination, but he trusts that he is exactly where he is meant to be. And soon, he comes upon a family of wild horses fording the shallow water, the gentle current lapping against their chestnut bellies. Two adults and two foals in a line. They whinny and nicker and swing their tails as they cross. As Micah passes by, he can smell them: musky and faunal. He looks at the lead horse, which appraises him with glassy, long-lashed eyes, with an air of regal detachment. Micah waves and it bobs its head knowingly.

“We’re all connected,” Johnny suddenly states, bringing Micah back to reality.

Emily, stoned, hums an acknowledgment.

“Think about it. We’re just stardust. reconfigured and reanimated. We’re just fucking stardust and we all come from the same place.”

“We’re more than stardust,” Emily exhales. “We’re souls is what we are. We are spiritual beings having a human experience.”

“Sometimes I feel like I don’t have a spirit,” Micah says.

“You have a spirit,” says Johnny.

“Why do you say that, Micah?” Emily asks, turning an empathetic face toward his.

“It’s just how I am – sometimes empty... alone... like I’m going through the motions but nothing changes, nothing matters.”

“Some things don’t matter,” Johnny notes. “Most things don’t matter.”

“But other things do,” says Emily. “And that’s what you have to hang onto. Not just the big stuff, but the little stuff... the little moments.”

“It’s hard to explain,” Micah exhales.

“When do you feel that way?” Emily asks.

“Often...”

“Now?”

“No. Not now.”

“Good.” Emily turns and drapes her free arm over Micah’s chest and tucks her hand into the side pocket of his jeans. Warmth radiates along all four of his limbs.

Time passes: seconds, minutes. “I want to stay here,” Micah mumbles finally.

Emily whispers, “Where?”

“In this moment... I don’t want to go forward. I don’t want to go backward. Just here...”

“I’ve got you,” she whispers, fading.

Micah looks through blurry eyes at Johnny, who appears to have dozed off, then down at Emily, whose eyelids are now shut and twitching ever so gently. The room is soundless, the air unmoving. Micah presses his face to the top of Emily’s head. His heartrate slows. He senses subtle vibrations passing from her body into his, then back to hers – melding – a transfer of energy, a cosmic balm. He squeezes her, then closes his eyes and everything disappears.

It is bright in the room when Micah wakes. He and Emily are fully clothed, but tightly entangled. He takes care not to rouse her as he sits up. Johnny is no longer on the other bed; no telling when he departed. On the side table, however, is a pristinely rolled spliff, clearly a parting gift.

Micah tiptoes out into the hall, then to the living room. Mia is snoring in the recliner. Two people, a girl and a boy, whom he cannot name, are sleeping next to each other on the couch. He quietly opens the door to his bedroom and peeks inside: Luke and Diane occupy one bed, Paddy and Jules the other.

Luke lifts his head and whispers, “What’s up?”

“Nothing. Just checking on you.”

“Hmm. Did you get with Emily?”

“Not exactly.”

“Tell me about it later.”

“I will.”

Micah uses the toilet, brushes his teeth, and washes his face, then returns to the bedroom.

Emily’s eyes are open now.

“Morning,” he says.

“Hi, cowboy.”

“You feel OK?”

“Not bad, actually. I slept well.”

“Me too,” says Micah. He stands near the door, unsure of what to do next. They stare at each other quietly.

“Come here,” she says.

“OK.” He slides onto the bed next to her.

She turns on her side and pulls him close, then kisses him on the lips. A long kiss. “I meant to do that last night,” she says.

“Me, too.”

They wrap their arms around each other and embrace tightly.

“I always thought you hated me,” Micah tells her.

“I know.”

“Did you?”

“Did I hate you? No. I liked you from the start. People tell me I’m a hard nut to crack.”

He chuckles. “Like a walnut.”

“Yeah.”

They doze off in that position for a while. When they awaken they hear voices coming from elsewhere in the apartment. They get up and walk to the kitchen, where they find Luke and Diane making bacon and cheese omelets. Mia and Jules sit at the table, sipping from mugs of coffee.

“Look who’s here!” Luke bellows.

“Shut up,” Emily says with a smirk.

“We finally got to see the real Emily! Better late than never.”

“Did you guys have sex?” Diane asks bluntly.

“Did you?” Micah retorts.

“Yes, of course.”

“Don’t harass the lovebirds,” Jules says.

“Fine. Fine.”

Micah and Emily take a seat at the table and Diane sets steaming mugs in front of them.

“Are you all taking the same flight tonight?” Emily asks.

“No,” answers Mia. “We’re all going our separate ways.”

“Oh, that’s a bit sad, isn’t it?”

“Very sad,” Jules says, offering a pouty frown. Then she covers her face and begins to cry, her whole body shaking.

“Oh, honey,” says Diane. She sets down her spatula and embraces Jules.

“Group hug!” Luke declares, and they all gather around Jules and put their arms around each other. Then Jules starts to snort and laugh, and they all laugh with her.

After breakfast, Micah walks Emily home. They hold hands and lollygag a bit, and when they get to St. Stephen's Green, they decide to lay down in the grass and soak up some of the late-morning sun. Emily props her head against Micah's chest and closes her eyes. The treetops sway in a languid breeze overhead.

"What are your plans?" he asks her.

"For today?"

"No, for your life..."

She lets out a short laugh. "I don't think that far ahead. Is that how you Americans are? Always crossing bridges that you haven't come to yet?"

"Most of us are that way, I guess."

"Just relax, Micah. Just relax," she says.

They lay in silence for a minute before she adds, "If I had to choose right now, I'd become a nurse."

"A nurse, eh? Since when are you a people person?"

"I've always been one, silly boy. But it's more about the medicine and the science."

"Why don't you become a doctor, then?"

"I don't think I want to spend that much time in school. But I might. You never know."

He thinks about this, then: "You could come spend some time in America."

"I don't know about that..."

"Have you ever been?"

"No, and I'm not sure it's very high on my list."

"Why not?"

“It’s a bit cliché, isn’t it? All Irish people go to America. I think I want to be different.

My next trip will be to East Asia: Japan, Korea, Vietnam...”

“Maybe I’ll go with you.”

“No, you won’t.”

“I’ll be with you in spirit, then.”

“Perhaps you will.” She grabs his hand and squeezes.

Micah knows he should be savoring this special moment with this special woman. He knows that he should feel a sense of accomplishment, a sense that, for once, all is right in his world. But, instead, he feels vacant. He feels sour. He is plagued by an undercurrent of dread and despair that threatens to pull him out to sea. The thought of returning to his “regular” life – the pressures and expectations of higher education, and, in two short years, the assumption of adult responsibilities – plainly depresses him. He meant what he said last night while they were high: both the past and the future are daunting, menacing. He considers expressing this to Emily, but decides against it. He’d likely end up crying into her bosom. No need to pollute their final moments. He caresses her head and she smiles, oblivious to his troubles.

Later, when they get to her flat, Emily says, “I’d invite you in, but I have a shift starting soon.”

“It’s no problem. I should go back and pack. Not much time left.”

She puts her hands on Micah’s cheeks and kisses him on the lips. “We’re never going to see each other again, are we Micah?”

He purses his lips, and shakes his head, “I’ve never been good at predicting the future.”

“You’ll remember me, won’t you?” she asks.

“How could I not?”

“So it was worth it then?”

“What?”

“All of it. All of this.” She gestures toward the wider world.

He contemplates for a moment, breathes deeply, then: “Yes. It was worth it.”

She eyes him curiously for a moment, embraces him tightly, then steps inside and closes the door.

Luke and Micah board their flight back to Chicago shortly before midnight. They have seats in the tightly packed coach section. Luke takes the window seat and Micah leans over him to watch the lights of Dublin fade away as they ascend through cloud cover.

They snooze for a while then wake up around the same time somewhere over the Atlantic. The cabin lights have been dimmed except for a few reading lamps which shine down like narrow spotlights.

“Hard to believe it’s over,” Luke says.

“Yeah... it lasted a lifetime but felt like a minute.”

“True. So true.”

“You going to keep in touch with Emily?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Why not, brother?”

“Not much point to it. Plus, it ended the right way... don’t want to spoil it.”

Luke sighs. “Makes sense. Makes sense.”

The plane engines drone and the beacon on the end of the wing flashes steadily. Micah stares out into the night. He can feel something slipping away – something essential

– evaporating into the stratosphere. His mind is suddenly awash with apprehensions and trepidations: nonspecific but acute sensations that seem deeply rooted within his brain. He rubs his temples and worries, for a few moments, that he might come undone right then and there. “I think I need help,” he rasps.

Luke turns to face him. “Help with what?”

“With my brain, man. There’s something wrong with me.”

Luke nods. He knows. “What’s the plan?”

“When I get back to school. I think I need to see a doctor.”

“A psychiatrist?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s a good idea. Better than suffering.”

“Right. Right.”

“Well, I got your back. You know that,” Luke says, offering a fist bump.

“Yes,” Micah replies. “I do know that.”