

NUDE

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*For Finbar,
for everything*

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'Nudity is a form of dress.'
—John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*

MADONNA IRLANDA

THE GUIDE BOOK said not to smile at men, that it is not a part of the culture and might be misinterpreted as flirting. For the first few days I swallowed my thanks for directions and nodded sternly at both men and women. But the people were nice, so I soon gave that up and said ‘*Merci*’ —with smiles—to all. I got lost a lot at first, though Paris is not a confusing city. Victor, my ex-husband, used to say I couldn’t find my way out of a paper bag. *Ex-husband*. That always sounds like I’m trying to state a position, make myself known; when I say it in conversation, I hear my own defensiveness.

Victor was always pass-remarkable. He could never help pointing out where I was going wrong with a painting, or with my friendships, or with the way I boiled an egg. He often told me he was jealous of me, as if that was my fault, and it was OK for him to feel like that. When we were writhing through the last throes of pretending we had a future, he told me that for the first years of our marriage, I was crap in bed. And after that I was ‘only passable’.

‘Virgins are notoriously crap in bed, Victor,’ I said.

‘But I was good, Magda.’ He wore a horribly vain crease to his mouth when he said that.

But, Victor gave me the surname Bolding which, added to Magdalone —my mother’s skewed-up version of a Bible name— always felt more ‘me’ than Magda Foley. I’m grateful for that.

Does it matter, really, how love starts or why it goes on?

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Together, Victor and I were easy and nothingish, unastonishing. We fuddled through twelve years who-knows-how. I had decided I loved him the first time I met him, drinking whiskey in The Long Hall in Dublin. He was the opposite of the men I'd loved before. Victor had money and interminable anecdotes about the shop floor in Clery's where he worked, but I liked his ursine face—he was snouty and pug-eyed—and the streak that made him wear a suit when everyone else wore denim. I mistook him for an eccentric, I think, and he was attracted by what he called my 'arty far-tyness'. We stayed together too long and became husks of ourselves. After we separated—and when I shook off the guilt and sadness—I went to Paris. That was my first time. I was glad Victor and I hadn't been there together—at least it wouldn't be sodden with memories of us, as Italy was.

Every tourist site we went to as a couple, each street and café, holds our ghosts; they spectre around me when I revisit, and I'm reminded of happiness we once had. Victor and I did have good times. But I suspect we never loved each other. Not properly. And I never had any idea that he thought I was useless in bed.

I had come to Paris in search of dead artists and living ones. My will to paint had evaporated and I wanted the city to give me the jizz-up that eluded me in Dublin; I expected a lot but was willing to accept Paris's gifts slowly. My first few days, I crawled the streets of Montparnasse, fingering paint tubes in dim art shops and eating custard-heavy pastries from sugar-smelling *pâtisseries*. I sat on a bench in the Luxembourg Gardens, sucking in the freshness, and watching the ambling tourists and young parents with pram-bound babies. Day by day I started to feel it was all right for me to be there among them.

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The hotel I had found sat on a narrow street, chock-a-block with furriers—one had the tragically funny name ‘Foxy-Minky’. My room was a slice of a bigger one that had been carved up; its mushroom-hued walls made me nauseous, but it had a soft, blue carpet and double windows onto my own balcony. At night, with the wall lamp on, and all of Paris still busy outside, the room was cosy.

Victor had instructed me to visit an old boarding school dorm mate of his—an artist.

‘Drop in on Mike Farrell,’ he had said, ‘you’ll like him.’

‘But will he like me?’

‘Everyone likes you, Magda,’ Victor said.

I was surprised by his sincerity and sudden tears dropped down my cheeks. These were the kind of tears I thought were as dead as my marriage, but clearly the well still burbled.

‘Sorry,’ I said, swiping at my cheeks with a tissue.

‘Your bladder was always too near to your eye.’ Victor hugged me. ‘Enjoy yourself in Paris. Go and see Farrell and tell him he still owes me a wad. The fucker.’

I sat on my hotel bed and looked at the man’s address in my diary; I was sick at the idea of turning up at his door, but also felt I would be letting Victor down if I didn’t. For all I knew Farrell was expecting me. I scribbled a note on my hotel’s headed paper, planning to shove it in his letter box and scarper.

The morning air smelt cool; water runnelled down street-sides and shopkeepers swept their paths. I walked down avenue de Maine and easily found the beehive shape of La Ruche—the colony on Passage Dantzig where Farrell and his family lived. The building lay in a gated garden, its turquoise front door flanked by busty caryatids. In the hallway there was a wall of postboxes and, as I stuffed my note

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in the one with Farrell's name, a man came down the stairs. He stopped to look at me and lit a smoke. I rushed through the garden to the street and the man tipped out behind me. He walked close to me on the footpath—I could smell his cigarette—so I went into a haberdasher's and stood in front of a rack of ribbons. I could sense the man at the window; I turned away, picked up a roll of black ribbon and ran its sheen through my fingers.

'If it's for your hair, I'd get a red one.' He was in the doorway. I turned to tell him to leave me alone and only then registered his Irish accent; he walked in. 'Here.' He took the spool of black from my hand and replaced it with a red.

'Micheal?'

'That's me.'

I blushed and dropped the ribbon and it unwound itself like a miniature red carpet across the floor. Micheal ran after it, whooped, and grabbed it. He took a scissors from the counter, cut the ribbon to the spot where it had unravelled, and paid for it. The haberdasher looked bemused and I grinned at her, before taking the coil of ribbon that Micheal was holding in front of my nose.

'Thank you,' I said.

'Victor told me you were as clumsy as all-get-out.' He held the shop door open for me.

Micheal brought me to Les Deux Magots; I'd passed it on my wanderings but, intimidated by the swirling efficiency of the waiters, I hadn't gone in.

'This was Wilde's local,' Micheal said, after ordering a jug of hot chocolate for us to share and a brandy for himself. 'And Picasso first met Dora Maar here.'

'Really?' I said. 'Who else?'

'Hemingway was a regular. De Beauvoir and Sartre.' Micheal lit a cigarette. 'Farrell, of course.' He blew smoke

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at me. 'Are you a Brit?'

'No.'

'You talk like one.' He stirred his brandy into the chocolate. 'What are you doing here?'

'I want . . . *need* to start painting again.'

'Fair enough. I suppose you'd like to see inside The Hive?' I nodded and he stood up.

'Right now?' I asked. 'I'm sure your wife wouldn't want a visitor this early in the day.'

'Her Maj is gone to London with the kids.'

'For good?' The question fell from my mouth before I could stop it.

'To get away from me for a few weeks.' Micheal downed his drink and shuddered his lips. 'Art and marriage are a poor match, Magda. They suck the guts out of each other.' He crooked his elbow in mock chivalry. 'Shall we?'

I snuck into a working *atelier* on rue de la Grande Chaumière and stood at the back of a class in progress. The students were young; the boys and girls had those pretty-pinched French faces and a weary confidence. Their model was a black man; his penis hung dark and huge between his straddled thighs and his skin—the darkest I had ever seen—bulged over his bones. I watched him squat and bend at intervals, under the instruction of the teacher. I looked around the rest of the studio, at the dirty easels and piles of palettes. High on one wall, someone had put a gilt frame around the words 'Rilke loves Clara'. The teacher walked towards me, his arm questioningly out-stretched, and I ducked out of the room.

That evening, I coaxed Micheal out of his studio with wine.

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'*Le Beaujolais Nouveau est arrivé!*' I said, holding up two bottles and parroting the banners that hung in all the bistros we drank in. '*Le Beaujolais Nouveau est arrivé!*'

'*Le Beaujo! C'est beau!*' he shouted back at me, getting glasses and a corkscrew; I sat down at the kitchen table.

'Hey, I went into an *atelier* today, part of an art school,' I told Micheal. 'They were doing life drawing. The model was beautiful.' I wiggled my glass at him. 'You know, I think Rilke might have gone there. Was he a painter as well as a poet?'

'Rilke was a sponging ponce.' He popped the wine cork. 'And who was Clara?'

'A sculptor—Rilke's wife, God help her.' He winked at me and laughed, acknowledging, I guessed, his own wife. He poured some wine for himself and eyed me. 'So, you want to pose for me, Mrs Bolding, is that what you're saying?'

'What makes you say that?'

'You're like every Irish man, woman and child—a slieven, slyly sliding around things instead of saying them out.' His face looked grim.

'Fuck off, Micheal, and pour my wine.'

He laughed. 'You're a cheeky bitch, Magda,' he said, 'sitting at my table with your child's smile and foul tongue. But, sure, that's why I'm mad about you.' He poured, chinked his glass to mine, kissed my cheek and we drank. 'I'm starting a political thing that you could pose for, if you wanted.'

'Oh, yeah?'

'I'm calling it *Madonna Irlanda*. It's sort of classical: Ireland as a nude, with her arse cocked to the Brits, waiting to be fucked.' He puffed on his fag. 'In the typical Irish way.'

'Spoken like a true ex-pat. Ex-Paddy, I should say.' I

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sipped the cool Beaujolais. ‘I’ll pose,’ I said, ‘but you’re to keep your paws off me.’

Micheal held up his palms. ‘With Farrell on the job, your virtue is secure.’

We went to the Louvre to see *L’Odalisque*, one of the Boucher portraits Micheal wanted to base his painting on. We stopped at the inevitable bistro on rue de Rivoli and Micheal had his two morning beers. Charged up, he marched me through the dim art gallery, bouncing up marble stairs and along corridors ahead of me, towards the Sully Wing.

‘Ta-dah!’ he said, when we reached the painting, as if he were responsible for it. The portrait showed the artist’s wife, lying on her stomach on a lake of blue velvet, her behind exposed.

‘Meaty, isn’t she?’ I said.

‘Could you do up your hair like hers?’ Micheal pushed his hands into my hair, frowning. ‘Jesus, it’s like kelp hanging around your face.’

‘Get away from me.’ I pulled his hands down and studied Boucher’s portrait. ‘I’m more concerned about the bare bum than the hairstyle.’

‘Look how pink it is—he must’ve slapped the arse off her. Naughty, naughty, Madame Boucher.’ Micheal laughed. ‘The other painting is better, the one he did of Louisa O’Murphy, the Irish girl who was the king’s concubine. But the bloody Krauts have that one. Still, you get the idea.’

‘Will I be posing like that—on my front?’ I asked. ‘My breasts hidden?’

‘Oh, for Christ’s sake, Magda, you’re a grown woman. What’s the problem?’

‘Nothing. It’s just, I’ve never posed before. I mean,

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Victor's the only person who has seen me naked, you know.'

Micheal stared at me, then hooted out a laugh. 'You're a fucking scream, do you know that?' He slapped his palms to his thighs. 'You're thirty-two years of age and Victor Bolding's *all* you've had?' He laughed again. 'My sympathies.'

He continued to snuffle small laughs and I turned back to *L'Odalisque*, my skin pricking.

'That's the kind of woman you understand, Micheal.' I pointed at the painting. 'She's your type. You couldn't care less about real women; three-dimensional ones.'

Micheal folded his palms across his chest and dropped to his knees; the other people in the gallery turned to watch.

'You're smithereening my heart, Mrs Bolding.' He jumped up and grabbed my hand. 'Now, stop the nonsense and come on. We've work to do.'

Micheal's studio in La Ruche was shaped like a triangle of cheese, with the window at the widest end. He had set up a sofa under the window, to represent the *chaise longue* in the painting; I examined its dirty upholstery.

'I'm not lying on that. Get me something to cover it.'

'Your delaying tactics are pissing me off, Magda.' He grimaced, threw down his palette and went to get a coverlet. While he was gone I fuddled out of my dress and underwear; I've always hated undressing in front of people, even Victor. I turned my back to the studio door; Micheal bundled back in with a blanket and pillows from his bed and arranged them on the sofa. 'Now,' he said.

My body felt heavy and cold; I placed my hands on my pouchy belly and glanced over my shoulder at Micheal. He smiled, a gentle smile.

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‘Will I lie on my stomach?’ I asked, and he nodded.

I draped myself over the pillows and breathed the greasy hair smell from them. Micheal came over and arranged my arms and feet. Pushing my face into my hands, I let a groan of embarrassment at the thought of my naked bum being inches from his face.

‘Bare flesh is just an ordinary part of the working day for me, Mags, so stop blushing, like a good girl.’ He stood back to appraise my position and clapped his hands. ‘Right,’ he said, pouring himself a glass of white wine, ‘let’s start.’

My nightdress stayed under the pillow. I let the hotel’s cotton sheets tease over my nipples as I slid my body around the bed, letting my legs fall open. While my fingers worked through my soft folds, I thought of Victor. Then Micheal. Then Victor. And I couldn’t say who I thought of in the end.

Micheal came to my hotel room. I heard knocking, but no one had knocked on my door before, so I didn’t think it was someone looking for me. I lay in bed, trying to fight my way into the morning. Squinting at the sky through the window, I saw a cotton-ball moon suspended in a vapour trail X in the blue sky, like a giant game of x’s and o’s. The knocking came again.

‘*Oui?* Who’s there?’

‘*C’est moi.* Farrell.’

I jumped up and let him in, then slid back into bed. He came and lay beside me, on top of the covers.

‘Her Maj and the boys are coming back tomorrow,’ he said. ‘You’d better stay away.’

‘Until when?’

‘For good.’ He went up on one elbow and looked down at me. ‘She thinks I slept with you. And she’s hopping that

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I didn't get her to pose for the painting.'

I swallowed this news.

'Tell me about Rilke and his wife, Micheal.'

'Not much to tell. They were the proverbial chalk and cheese and should never have gotten together.' He let a short laugh.

'Were they together until the end?'

'No. Rilke offloaded Clara, and their daughter, and went his own way.'

I turned to him and put my arms around his neck; I closed my eyes and gave him a kiss, pressing my mouth to his beer-smelling lips. He flicked his tongue against mine, then pulled away; I opened my eyes.

'Victor says I should come home now,' I said.

Micheal took my arms from his neck and stood up.

'Don't compromise yourself, Magda. You'll turn nasty if you do.' He opened the door, held his hand up in a stiff salute and smiled. '*A bientôt, Madonna Irlanda,*' he said, and was gone.

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THE OUTFLOW ON the bath is like a keyhole; you stopper it with your toe and let the water lap in your ears, to block out the house. If you were key-shaped, you would slither into that hole and slip down the pipes, away from here. Away from the women who breed women; the women who have cried lavishly for three days, though your daughter was an embarrassment to them and you all know it. When you called your baby Angelica, your sister said it was a waste of a good name.

There is no name for you now. You are wife and sister and daughter and aunt, but you are no longer mother or mammy or mama. If it was you who had died instead of Angelica, she would be called orphan. If it was your husband who had died, he would be a widower. If he were dead, you would be called a widow. But the mother of a dead child is left with nothing; her special name is wiped out with her child's passing.

The long funeral days are over. Angelica's white coffin was lowered into the ground on green ropes. You couldn't help thinking that it looked like a wedding cake, white and smoothly perfect, almost festive. The thought appalled and amused you; it lifted you clear of the snuffling sisters and cousins and colleagues who were huddled at the graveside, stealing your grief. Because of them you couldn't cry.

Your husband holds you in the night, as he held you at the graveyard; you sob and he says, 'It's OK, Claire, everything's going to be fine,' and you wish he would shut up. Platitudes annoy you on a good day; in your sorrow you

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want to make a ball of every wrong-headed 'It's for the best' and shove it down the speaker's neck. You can't believe that your husband is being so ordinary, so unheartfelt. He has never learnt to feel, you think.

'Nothing is fine,' you scream at him, bucking against his arms, but he stays holding you anyway. His is the kind of love that is unbreakable, like a dam.

Angelica had your husband's eyes: they were an odd milky-blue, like Achill marble. For you, after three years of loving your daughter, they were no longer his eyes, just hers. Everyone admired her eyes; they couldn't find anything else to praise. Her lips listed and drooled; her few teeth were gapped and pointy; her hair was sparse and colourless, like old straw. And she slumped, not able to do much except grunt and roll her unusual eyes. She was your one and only, your baby angel.

You feel like a paper doll; your clothes might as well be held over your shoulders and around your waist by paper tabs. You wouldn't care if your dress fell off and drifted out the door, along the street and slipped down a drain. What do you need clothes for, or food, or drink? What use is anything now?

Your mother-in-law comes to stay when your husband goes back to work.

'You'll go again, Claire, please God, when you're a bit stronger,' she says.

'No. I won't.'

She pours another cup of tea. 'Ah, you will. You'll try again and God will be good to you.'

'I don't want another child. I want Angelica.'

'Well,' she says, 'we'll see.'

You are painting a portrait of a young girl; she is no one you

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know—you have invented her—and her skin is the same colour as the inside of an oyster shell. Her face almost fills the canvas.

‘She doesn’t talk to me,’ you tell your husband.

He sits in his chair, reading the newspaper and you stand over him.

‘Who?’

‘The girl, the girl—my portrait.’

‘Why do you want her to talk to you?’ He lifts his face.

‘I didn’t say I wanted her to, I just said that she doesn’t.’ You glare at him. ‘They usually talk.’

‘Show me the painting,’ he says, and you fetch it.

You hold it up and he stares at it. The only bright spot on the canvas is the hint of red in the leaves on a distant tree. Even the girl’s eyes are flat and light-drained; her grey dress is sombre.

‘What are you thinking?’ you ask.

‘Portrait of a sick girl,’ he says.

Swirling the canvas around, you look at it again. You hadn’t thought she might be unwell; just pale, a little under-nourished maybe. Now, looking at your painting, all you see is sickness: wan skin, lips that are too pink, a dead expression. The shadows on the girl’s neck make her look even more lifeless. It unnerves you. You put the painting in the cubby under the stairs and crawl in after it, pulling the door behind you. You are hunched on the dust thick floor; the smells are of Hoovered carpet and wellies and old books. The darkness is comforting.

Angelica was no more than a grain of sand once, you think, knocked this way, then that. Pearlising. She gathered you to her, drawing your cells and her father’s around her, building herself outwards from you both. She snuggled like a shell-bound sand grain, settling, embedding, readying

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herself for nearly ten months of growing. But somewhere, somehow, in that miraculous chain, something hiccuped and Angelica became who she was, instead of who you thought she would be.

Your husband paints your portrait in the garden. You are naked, standing in the grass, and every breeze makes your skin prickle. You close your eyes against the sun and feel dizzy when you open them again; you bend to pick the white starflowers that grow all around your toes. You imagine that Angelica is playing in the sandpit, her skin burnt then browned by each passing day. She keeps up a monologue as she plays, instructing an invisible playmate. ‘You say this and I say that,’ Angelica says. Her voice is clear and high. She runs after a beetle, poking at its back with a twig. Your eyes flick around: from the elderberry bush to the silver-glass globe you have mounted on a stake; from the trailing flowers to the wending pathways. You watch your husband watching you.

Marriage is lonely; you are as alone as you were when you were a child. Your first years of married life were drowned in tears: you cried when you heard music and over soap operas; you cried at a troubled sky. You believed so long in finding a soulmate—Plato’s one who makes the other complete—but had finally realised that all you have is yourself, togetherness doesn’t make you happy. You let yourself be swallowed up in your husband. But then you ripened like a plum, belly forward, breasts retreating—an exaggeration of the old you—and soon life became even more unrecognisable.

You look at your husband. His brushstrokes are meditative, small; you strain your ears to hear the slap of brush on

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canvas—nothing. Sniffing deep on the warm, grassy summer smells, you shut your eyes tight. Your mind sways; you believe you are here but not here. It's as if you're looking at yourself, and this life you are anchored in, from somewhere else—a different plane. You pull yourself back and think of the morning bed.

You like to hear your husband's cry, the deep throated sound that means he has released his very self into you. You take his face in your hands and watch his features change as everything builds up inside him; he always tries to push his face into your shoulder—you think you distract him with your inquiring eyes—but you hold his cheeks, keep his nose a little away from yours, and look at him.

He reddens, begins to thrust quicker, and the skin pulls across his cheekbones; his mouth opens wide then wider, his head tilts back. He looks at you as if from a great distance; you wonder if he can see you. His movements become fast, distracted, instinctive, and then the words come: 'Oh, my love, oh, Claire, I love you, I love you', and his lips fall to your mouth for deep kisses. When his eyes open to yours—slowly, glazed over—he drinks you in and smiles. You lie under him and wonder if you love him, or what love is at all.

It has been six months. Your husband thinks you should get a job; and he wants to start going out again. You don't want to go anywhere but he arranges a dinner with old friends and you agree to it.

'Here comes Jim with his little Claire under his arm.' Daniel tosses the remark over his shoulder to his wife Róisín as you walk up their driveway.