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Asking for it

Written by Louise O'Neill

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LOUISE O'NEILL

ASKING FOR IT

What did she expect?

'O'Neill writes with a scalpel'

JEANETTE WINTERSON



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Monday

My eyes are sinking into my head as if they're dissolving in quicksand. It is too bright. (What day is it?) The curtains are open, sunlight blasting through the windows, drilling holes into my brain. Dust is shimmering through the air. My skin feels tight, wrapping around my bones like cling film. I claw my way up to sitting, waves of static turning in my head. (What time is it?)

I fall back down.

'You've been a silly girl, haven't you?' Dr Fitzpatrick's face flashes before me, a more lined version of Fitzy's, except for his flat nose, broken and reset too many times over years of rugby matches. Mam is there too, trying to smile at the other patients in the waiting room at SouthDoc.

'Just a touch of sunstroke, I reckon,' Mam told Mrs Ryan, an elderly woman with hairs growing out of a mole on her chin, her fingers gnarled with arthritis. 'She fell asleep outside. In *this* weather.' Mam threw her eyes to heaven in a 'kids today' type of

way. 'Oh, I know, it's terrible close,' Mrs Ryan agreed. 'Still, we shouldn't complain, I suppose. We get enough rain.' I was swaying in my seat, Mam holding me up, barely touching me with the tips of her fingers. Dr Fitzpatrick called me into the surgery, and I can see myself getting up and moving towards him, my knees buckling beneath me as I fall to the ground again. Chairs scraping back on tiles—*give her room, get back and give her room to breathe*—and then there is nothing.

The front of my body is painted in sunburn, curving around my arms and legs until it fades into my normal alabaster white. I place a hand on my chest, then both hands on my cheeks, my skin almost sizzling hot to the touch. I swing my legs out of bed, cursing as I knock a glass of water over, grabbing my iPhone to make sure it doesn't get wet. One new message.

Bryan: Seriously, Emma. FUCK YOU.

I put the phone down, a lump of nausea squirming in my throat like a worm. Maybe if I don't look at it, it will go away.

I pick up the phone.

Bryan: Mam and Dad are raging with me because of you. They've cut my weekly money and have taken the car off me for two months. You need to get your fucking act together.

I read the message again. The words feel wrong, somehow, like

the position of the letters doesn't make any sense.

The other messages were sent by me to the girls last night. There are vowels missing, and words spelled entirely wrong, there are repeated messages to Jamie, all of which are blank. But there is no response to any of them.

Why haven't they replied? Are they fighting with me?

There are dozens of notifications but I don't open them up. I don't have the energy.

Why haven't the girls replied to any of my text messages?

I try to remember. I fumble through my memories of Saturday night, but they run away from me.

It doesn't mean anything. I just drank too much. *How did I get home?* I shouldn't have drunk so much. *Why am I so sunburnt?* And it was stupid taking that wrap off Paul; why did I do that? *Why can't I remember anything?* I see a bag of pills, blue ones, and yellow ones, and pink ones, no, wait, what? It's as if my dreams are swirling through my memories, making them sticky, and I can't pull them apart to see which are which.

Voices. Laughing. Hands grabbing at me, pushing through the black felt of the night, no bodies, no faces, just hands, white as chalk against the darkness. *What happened?*

'Ah sure, look who it is.' Sheila Heffernan is sitting at the kitchen counter, her short, bright red hair gelled into solid spikes. The two

of them are sipping tea out of china cups, a half-eaten loaf of Mam's Madeira cake between them. Sheila holds her powdered cheek out for me to kiss, but I can't move any closer to her, the smell of her perfume ramming into my nostrils.

'Why are you still in your pyjamas?' Mam asks.

'I don't feel well.'

'Yes, your mother was just telling me about your trip to SouthDoc.' Sheila shakes her head, the misshapen beaded earrings she made in her jewellery design class banging against her neck. 'What on *earth* were you doing?'

'I told you, Sheila,' Mam says. 'She was doing a bit of sunbathing and fell asleep outside.' She gestures at the cake. 'Have some, Emma. Freshly baked this morning.'

I turn away, breathing deeply. Mam will never speak to me again if I vomit on the kitchen floor in front of Sheila. 'Or there's your granola in the Cath Kidston tin.' She smiles at Sheila. 'Home-made, of course.'

'I'm not hungry.'

'Now, now, Emma.' Sheila wags a finger at me. 'Breakfast is the most important meal of the day. I know all you young girls are watching your figures, although *thankfully* I don't have that problem with my Caroline, she has always been as thin as a whippet, takes after—'

'Oh, Emma has never had any problems with her weight,' Mam interrupts, looking in my direction, although her gaze seems to be focused an inch above my head. 'She's naturally slim, like the rest of us, thank God.' Sheila, another forkful of cake halfway to her mouth, pauses, and slowly drops it back on the plate.

'We should be leaving, Nora,' she says pulling at her turquoise tunic. 'The class starts in twenty minutes, and I'm so sick of Bernadette Quirke hogging the front row. And – did I tell you? – when I rang her last week to say I didn't have time to do the church flowers, she was very sour with me. And after me explaining about Aidan's flu. I was run off my feet.'

'I know, Sheila, you've been so busy.'

'I don't think I can go to school,' I say. 'I really don't feel well.'

'You're going to school,' Mam says, her left eye starting to quiver almost imperceptibly. 'Where's Maggie? She should be here by now.'

I check my phone again, but there's nothing. I step away, standing in the kitchen doorway with my back to the room. I try Maggie, then Ali, then, as a last resort, Jamie. I try Maggie again, Ali, and then Maggie again, and again, and again, but there is still no answer.

'Is there a problem?' Sheila has crept up right behind me.

'I think there's something wrong with the phone network,' I lie, taking a step back from her.

'Oh.' She peers at her ancient Nokia. 'I have all five bars.'

'Mam –' I turn to her – 'please. I don't feel well. Can I stay at home?'

'Why are we still having this conversation?' Her lips have gotten so thin it looks like she's swallowed them. She forces a smile at Sheila, gesturing at her to walk ahead of us into the corridor. 'The car door should be open, we'll be there in a second.' Mam waits until she's out of sight before hissing at me, 'And where is Maggie, I'd like to know?'

'She's not answering her phone.'

'She's probably disgusted with you for your behaviour on Saturday night, and I wouldn't blame her.'

'Please, Mam, I'm begging you, I really don't feel—'

'You have two minutes to change into your school uniform and get in the car. Now, Emma.'

There's a collective intake of breath when I open the door into my Irish class. There are three rows of tables on each side of the room, a narrow gap in between so the teacher can walk around and keep an eye on us, and every girl on every row is staring at me. I put my hands out, laughing, and say, 'Hey, third-degree burns are so hot right now,' holding my sunburnt face in my hands like I'm on the cover of *Vogue*, but no one laughs. Aisling Leahy nudges Catherine Whyte, sticking her tongue against the inside of her mouth as if she's giving a blow job, and the two of them start snickering.

'*Bi ciuin!*' Mr O'Leary snaps at them. I stare at the worn-out carpet, waiting for my punishment.

'And what time do you call this?' O'Leary sits back in his chair, peering over his half-moon glasses. He looks pointedly at the clock hanging above the whiteboard.

'Sorry, Mr O'Leary, I—'

'I don't have time for excuses. Report for detention at big lunch.'

'But—'

'Arguing is an excellent way to find yourself with after-school detention as well, Miss Ní Dhonnabháin.' He snaps his fingers at the rows of seats. '*Suigh síos*.'

Ali, Maggie and Jamie are sitting in the back left-hand row, where we always sit for Irish class, but the seat nearest to the window, *my* seat, isn't empty. Chloe Hegarty is sitting there, staring out the window at the sun bouncing off the artificial green of the AstroTurf pitch.

'Are you deaf, Emma?' Mr O'Leary heaves himself up from his seat and stands far too close for comfort to me, broken veins running like threadworms across his cheeks and nose. 'I thought I told you to sit down.'

'My seat is taken,' I say, staring at the girls.

'I don't care.' He draws the words out slowly.

'But—'

'*Sit down*. You are wasting precious *scrudu* time.'

'Test?' *Shit, shit, shit, shit.* 'What test?'

'You are, eh, *testing* my last nerve, Miss Ní Dhonnabháin. You have a grammar test today. It will count as thirty-five per cent of your mark for your summer exams. I believe I told you this on Friday, did I not? Now. Take. A. Seat.'

There's only one seat left, in the front row, next to Josephine Hurley, who everyone knows is a total lesbian because she watches the rest of us as we get changed for PE. Chloe was forced to share a room with her when we went on our school tour to Rome last year, and she told me that Josephine kept walking in on her while she was in the shower and claiming it was an 'accident'. I sit down with an exaggerated sigh, something that would usually generate a laugh, but there's nothing, and even Josephine shuffles her chair away from me, murmuring something to Lisa Keane on her other side. I can hear my name whispered, and the two of them stifling giggles. I stare at a poster of Ireland on the wall, all the rivers and mountain ranges and lakes picked out in different colours, trying to steady my breathing.

I am Emma O'Donovan.

I am Emma O'Donovan.

I am Emma O'Donovan.

I am Emma O'Donovan.

The bell rings, and I have to hand in an empty exam booklet.

'Remember, Miss Ní Dhonnabháin,' O'Leary says as he's

gathering up his board markers and books, 'detention at big lunch. And please, never arrive late to my class again. *A dhéanann tú a thuiscint?*'

'Yes, Mr O'Leary, I understand.' He frowns at me to speak in Irish too. 'Sorry. I meant . . . *Tuigim.*'

He leaves; a few girls who are in lower-level English following him to go to their next class. The door slams shut behind them. I get to my feet, knocking over Josephine's pencil case as I do so, ignoring her squeak of protest. She can pick it up herself, the stupid bitch.

'Hey.' I stand in front of the girls in the back row. 'Where were you this morning? I tried ringing all of you about a million times.'

Maggie drops her chin, but Jamie stares at me. Ali still hasn't looked up.

'I suppose you rang Eli too, did you?' Jamie says.

'Eli? Why would I ring Eli?'

'You seemed pretty friendly with him on Saturday night.'

'Jamie.' Maggie's head snaps back up. 'Just forget it.'

'Forget it?' Jamie says. 'You want us to forget that your so-called best friend kissed your boyfriend?'

Kissed? I kissed Eli? *Fuuuuuck.*

'I didn't . . . I didn't . . .' (Did I? I can't remember.) 'For God's sake, J, we were all just messing around. It was only a bit of banter. Maggie knows that. Don't you, Mags?'

She looks at me wearily. 'I do, Em. It was nothing. I'd barely even call it a kiss.'

'Maggie!' Jamie looks at her in horror. 'It was still your *boyfriend*. She kissed your boyfriend.'

I fold my arms across my chest. 'Why are you assuming that *I* kissed *him*? Maybe Eli made a move on me.'

'Emma.' A note of steel enters Maggie's voice. 'Don't do that. Eli does not fancy you.'

(What?)

(Why not?)

'I know that,' I say. 'I never said that he did.'

'Everyone *has* to fancy you, don't they, Emma?' Jamie mutters. 'One boy just isn't enough for you any more.' Someone in the row in front of us giggles at this.

'Why are you making such a big deal about this?' I ask her. 'Maggie doesn't care, so why should you?'

'As if you don't know,' Jamie says through gritted teeth. '*As if*, Emma.'

'I don't know,' I say, and then I catch myself, reminding myself that *I am Emma O'Donovan*, and that Emma O'Donovan does not cower before bitches like Jamie Murphy. I stand up straight. 'Look, J, I don't know what your problem is, but I've had a really shit couple of days, and I don't appreciate you being such a bitch to me. Like, do you have any idea what's going on for me at home? My parents—'

'I don't give a shit about your fucking parents.' Maggie places a hand on her forearm to calm her down, but Jamie jerks it off.

'No, Maggie. Stop trying to make this better. It's not like this is the first time she's fucked you over. Like, hello? The fucking Volvo? She never even apologized for that, did she?'

'That had nothing to do with you. And I *did* apologize to Maggie.' All the girls in our class are staring at us now, open-mouthed. 'I did, didn't I?'

'You did, I guess.' Maggie bites her lip. 'But I got in a lot of trouble, Em, and you kind of treated the whole thing like it was a joke. I would never have gone out in that weather if you hadn't asked me to pick you up.'

'I didn't *force* you, did I? I was stuck out in Aaron's house, and no taxi would come out because of the flooding, and Mam kept phoning me. What else was I supposed to do?'

Ali finally lifts her head and looks me straight in the eye. 'Well, maybe, Emma, you could try to be less of a whore. Just a thought.'

Her words are like fists, driving into my stomach, leaving me winded. 'What?' My head is spinning. Did Ali just say that to me? *Ali?* 'I told you, I didn't sleep with Aaron that time, no matter what he said afterwards. We only—'

'Oh, stop lying.' Ali bangs her fist on the table, and both Maggie and Jamie start. 'That's all you ever do,' she says, '*lie, lie, lie, lie*.'

'Why are you being like this?' The words come out of my mouth

in a plaintive whimper. 'What have I done that is so terrible, Ali?'

'Oh, I don't know. How about the time you told me you didn't want to lend me that red top from River Island because you were afraid I would stretch it? How about the time you went on for an hour about how beautiful my mom was, and then ten minutes later casually dropped it into the conversation what a pity it was I didn't look like her? What about the time you told Maggie that Eli kept coming on to you and they nearly broke up? What about the time—'

'OK,' I say, feeling pressure building up behind my eyes, 'I get it. I'm a fucking bitch. I'm the worst friend in the whole entire world. Why are you making such a big deal out of it this time?'

'You slept with him,' Ali whispers, and she blinks away tears.

'Aaron?' I'm confused. 'Oh, wait, *Paul O'Brien*? What do you care?'

'Not *Paul*. Although I suppose the fact that he has a *girlfriend* is irrelevant. Emma O'Donovan always has to get whatever it is she wants.' Her voice trembles. 'I can't believe you had sex with Sean.'

'Sean?' I almost laugh in her face. 'Sean Casey? What are you on about?'

'Oh, shut up, Emma.' She stares out the window for a moment to compose herself, then looks at me again, and it's like I'm looking at a stranger. 'You are absolutely disgusting, do you know that? Four guys in one night? Do you have any fucking self-respect, Emma?' I just stand there. I am waiting for someone to defend me. But no one

does. They look gleeful, like they have been waiting for this for the last eighteen years and it hasn't come a minute too soon. 'Like Paul wasn't enough for you,' Ali continues. 'You had to ride Sean too, and fucking *Dylan Walsh* – like, what is wrong with you, Emma? You're sick. You're actually *sick*.'

'Julie is going to kick your ass,' Sarah Swallows adds helpfully from the row in front of us. 'Just so you know.'

'I don't know what the fuck *any* of you are talking about.' I grip on to the edge of the desk with my fingertips.

'Maggie.' My voice cracks, and I hate myself for it. 'Maggie. Please.'

She puts her hand out to cover mine. 'Emma.' She waits until I look up at her, my eyes pricking with tears, but I can't cry, not in front of all these people. 'Listen to me – were you taking stuff at the party?'

'Of course she was.' Jamie rolls her eyes. 'Did you not see her? She was chewing the face off herself.'

'J,' Maggie warns her, then squeezes my fingers. 'Emma, come on, just tell me – did you take anything?'

'No, of course I—'

'Please, Emma.' She pulls her hand away and starts to massage her temples. 'Please. Just tell me the truth. Is that why you did this? Because you were off your face?'

'But I didn't. I don't know what you're talking about. This is—'

'There's no point in denying it.' Maggie is getting exasperated. (She is sick of me.) (They are all sick of me.) 'Eli told me. You're just making things worse by lying.'

'But I'm not lying. I admit I slept with Paul, but—'

'Stop it. He has a girlfriend. And besides that, you knew how Ali felt about Sean. She doesn't deserve this.'

'But I *didn't* have sex with him. And it's not my fault that he doesn't fancy her. I mean, I told him that she . . .' I stop myself just in time.

'Told him what?' Ali's face is stricken. 'Told Sean what, Emma? What did you tell him about me?' I look away. 'You told him I liked him, is that it?' she says. I don't deny it and she looks like she wants to kill me.

'Well, maybe I should tell him to get an STI test as quickly as possible,' she says. 'Chlamydia is *so* easy to treat these days, isn't it?'

As soon as she says it, I think I see regret in her eyes, but then it's gone. Maybe it was never there in the first place.

'Fuck you,' I hiss, as the classroom gasps in delight. I can hear people fumbling in bags for phones, the clicking of keys as people text. Lisa Keane has taken out her iPhone and is pointing it at us. 'If you're filming this, I will literally cut you.' I make a lunge at her, but she just laughs at me. Lisa Keane is laughing at *me*.

'Easy Emma,' Jamie says, then smiles in delight. 'Yes, Easy

Emma. I do like a bit of alliteration. It's nearly as good as Sarah Swallows.'

'Hey,' Sarah says. 'Don't drag me into this mess.'

I take a deep breath. 'I don't think name-calling is helping here,' I say, trying to channel Hannah in therapist mode. 'Can't we go somewhere private and talk this out?'

'No.' I've never seen Ali so resolute, and suddenly I feel very afraid. 'You *knew* how I felt about Sean, but it didn't matter. Whatever Emma O'Donovan wants, Emma O'Donovan gets, right?'

'But I *didn't*—'

'It's not enough that everybody else *always* prefers you.' Her lip starts to quiver, and Jamie wraps a hand around her waist. 'You just had to prove that Sean liked you best too.'

I crouch down until I'm eye level with her. 'Ali—'

'Fuck off and leave us alone,' Jamie says.

'But I—'

'Emma.' Maggie's voice is firm. 'I think it's probably best if you just leave now.'

'Oh, whatever,' I say as I stand up, moving towards my new seat at the front of the class. 'I don't give a fuck anyway. It's not my fault Sean doesn't like you. He's probably not into *giants*.'

No one laughs. They always laugh at my jokes.

'I'm relieved he doesn't like me,' Ali says. 'Since he's probably

riddled now anyway.'

'I told you,' I say. (Who is she? Ali would never say things like this, especially not to me. Ali is good and kind and loyal.) 'I didn't . . . I don't even fucking remember what happened on Saturday night, but I definitely didn't—'

'What are you trying to say, Emma?' Jamie narrows her eyes at me.

The room goes quiet, muffled, like when you wake up in the morning and you can somehow sense that it's snowed the night before.

I don't know. I don't know what I'm trying to say.

'That's right,' Jamie says. 'Best not to say anything. No one likes a girl who makes a fuss, do they?'

*