

Marianne

Kevin Ryan (Caoimhín Ó Riain)

Sun splashes through whiteout and hail — peeking at the ice-rankled farmhouse — as Dolt Cameron stamps his boots on yellow garage floor, eyes toward the attic. In a rush of sunshine, enough to make him squint, Dolt teeth off cap and mittens, heaves jacket with a grunt from cold lungs, then strips down to the pale, checkered integument of long-johns and toe-socks. Tilting, he falls over. His cousin Agriss yells from inside, “Who’s there?” then the heavy door squeals outward in warmth. Noises scurry from behind the tinted screendoor window. Dolt’s vision blurs, so he listens, listens to the kids playing hopscotch on kitchen tile.

Agriss grins into the window, spreading the fog of his breath, “That you, Dolt?” Thunder grumbles into hail, and sunlight is gone. Agriss grins, grins hearing the freezer growl clinks of ice into a highball, then another, then enough for the three men.

“Sure is,” says Dolt in the garage. The two older kids run out from the kitchen, grabbing, and drag him inside. Dolt nearly spills a drink onto an up-turned face, whose excitement reveals a few lost teeth, but he sets the glass on a table, then lifts Ramona by her armpits, and places her on the counter.

She plays with a collar button, “Where are my surprises, Uncle Dole?”

“Hmm, well, where . . . wait a minute! They must’ve gotten snatched by that bear I had to wrestle on the way over here.” Giggles from one child; horror, the other.

In a whirl, Marianne paces through the kitchen, face slack and patched with frown. Dolt barely sidesteps Marianne, her head down-and-bobbled, with little Celeste at her neck. Whenever she has her scrubs on, she looks stern — now, in an overlarge t-

shirt and teal pajama bottoms, she seems more angry and blurred than concerned with admonishing. “Ramona get down off the counter,” she says, swatting toward Dolt as he lowers the young Ramona, “And what the — !” she stomps, all haste and fury. The dog, shaken from sleep beneath the table, perks her ears, groans, then tail-between-legs it into the front room until she spots Agriss, darts his way, then settles her head on the man’s workboot. “Marianne,” says Dolt in chatter, “Why ruin our fun?”

“Yes. Hello Dolt. It’s always nice when you drop in unexpectedly like this,” registering what he said, “Oh . . . well,” in need of a nap, “I have to — .”

Genuine, Dolt: “Sorry, Marianne.”

“It just started snowing again,” says Agriss, “Heavy snow, and if it didn’t stop, the power’ll go out.”

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When Agriss journeys out with a cart of gas cans — enough to light the generator (“How do I know we’ll need it? I just do”) — Dolt and Forner get so sloppy that one of them trips over a pair of slippers and busts his lip and glasses, laughing through crimson teeth as he sweeps at jagged ringlets. The men pause and lean, paused and lean, pausing and leaning to eavesdrop as Marianne argues in the master bedroom. After a shrug, Dolt and Forner dance with the kids to “Just a Gigolo” by Luis Prima. The stereo is turned up so loud that they can hear when fuzz treads under the needle as it shakes a hurdle of dust. The men make promises to the kids, who are too young and naive to realize that the grown-ups will forget it all by morning — and even if they happen to remember, they’ll be so sick with hangover that a small betrayal will seem, right then, hardly worth lamenting.

Agriss wheels his gas-perfumed cart into the garage, then starts a noisy heater. His layers peel off with the smacks of ice. Tiptoeed, quiet, he sneaks to the corner and lifts a shelf from the chest freezer. Under vacuum-packs of venison and turkey and colorful Popsicle twigs, an ice-plashed bottle hides like an unleavened wafer. Agriss sneaks it to his lips — although is it sneaking if the sneakiness is a routine everybody knows about, has known about, and takes every chance to deride? I don't want to think about it, he says to himself, or to the fog of his breath.

Ramona at the door asking Daddy where's the colors?

The word "color" reminds Agriss of Marianne at the altar: Her blonde hair woven to the thread of a modest gown, braless and fragrant with lavender, beside green candles that curved turquoise in her blue eyes. It was May, but an unceasing downpour hassled them indoors, one giant room made mostly of glass, hilltop to a river and surrounded by gardens. Okay, she said. He may now kiss the bride. Then that glass-ceilinged chapel became the greenhouse reception hall. When DJ Huney Moon's lightshow started, the building shone prismatic, and it was like being inside a star, poised tender yet midair. Each camera flash illumined into a sky of constellations as boys dove for the pink bridal garter. When Marianne lobbed the bouquet her gown spilled open, and her breast was exposed. Nobody noticed except the orange-dressed bridesmaid, and she felt something sacred, ancient, maternal, and years later she would recall it and cry . . . Agriss hears tiny footsteps and scuttles inside then returns to his window. Simon, the oldest, age ten, shrinks his look up, as if he knows what will come. Agriss smiles at the boy, whose eyes descend, then, with a yawn and a fidget, become vague, tawny.

Forner dashes into the room between father and son, “Right, now,” he shouts toward Agriss, “You needa” (hiccup) “cutch up.” Wind carps through the doorway. Forner makes a run to shut it, yelping. And as he laughs into his belly, there’s a tug at the lowest ridge of his shirt. It’s Ramona, lipping a smile.

“My mommy says you’re a prick,” she says, then wanders off toward the fireplace with her crayons, to draw over yellowed newspaper, fireplace scrap reserved for winter days without firewood, curled and hard, all the old words and faces called back to stagelit lifespan. Uproars of wind denizen night. Wild animals inhabit the shadows. Handsome earth winks up at its own cold, slanting downpour. The stereo-voices meld with percussions of storm — of things gathering outside, as the three men hack mildewed cigar smoke into Nascar-themed saloon cards, inhaling all but the glass around the vodka, then gin — beer long gone — and, last, the wine so red it reminds them of communion.

“Think we needa put some gas in that generator, Agriss?”

Deep laugh: “Nah, Forner, no need. Not yet, at least.”

“But,” says Forner, “what if it goes out, we’ll be stuck in the dark?”

Agriss closes an eyelid and lifts a hand to his earlobe, teeth at rear: “Is that your voice I hear?” slapping his own knee, “Come on, princess, dance for us — wiggle.”

“Princess?” says Forner, blushed and reeling. Dolt, half-fainting, picks at his nail.

With a look at Forner, Agriss lowers his head into his version of an apology:

“Boys, will you show me your hands already or do I have to take your money myself?”

Everyone in the room, dog included, listens to Marianne’s rout with the bedroom television, some political talk show, her voice barbed with something cold and pointing.

For the next hour the men cackle and laugh from their bellies, dizzy with a warmth, a tender. Anyone could look at them and see: they are arrogant about it, this ease Marianne is without.

Agriss leaves the table and the game breaks apart. Doric sheaths of ice leap to ground, no one pays attention. Then, with Dolt Cameron, hair matted by travel and the yank of little hands, prostrate beside the two children, all giggling together as they draw; with Agriss in the backroom, unzipped and holding Marianne, who was nearly ready to say yes; with Forner at the table clenching a fitful mess of cigar as he thumbs through the deck of cards, saying “How did I lose it all” — and when he drops his head into his hands: the pulse stops: the power goes out.

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It’s too dark to see what’s happening around them. Slushed rain clings to the limbs until the trees are heaving with ice. When they break and collapse it’s like hearing someone’s femur snap in half, entire forests which bend then lean, arms straining to embrace an earth that cannot give a damn.

“Hold it up higher, sweetie,” Agriss says to his daughter. The flashlight’s oval gyrates as he tugs on his snow-boots, cursing into laughter. He falls down, and from the tile floor, cackles out something.

Marianne blank-eyed, to herself: “Mom is out of town.”

“What a fuck — of a pair of boots,” hollers Agriss, then kicks them.

At this, Marianne rushes the kids inside but returns with Celeste at her shoulder.

Agriss, snarling, turns to the two others: “Something’s wrong with my good boots. One of you hasn’t been wearing them has you? huh? come on, faggits, talk. now have

you . . .” Dolt and Forner answer No into the floor . . . “Well good. These boots are made for stomping, not ballet” . . . Dark laughter. Agriss laughs alone. “Get on your boots, boys, what’s wrong with you?”

Outside, darkness ascends to a limitless height. Nothingness has a presence more engulfing than all objects, sometimes, thinks Dolt. Tough work, this generator, rented for the winter, difficult enough to startup in daylight, imagine now, in absolute dark, too much booze in their guts to keep steady. But nothingness can never surpass the motion that things follow. Agriss yanks on the generator’s cord like he’s jerking off. The tiniest sound has more vigor than all nihility, the sun against a shadow. Marianne watches from the doorway, occasionally disappearing back into the house. Each unseen, silent charisma thrives at the perfect moment, through an exact object, then onward. Agriss shoves Forner, but Dolt is already looking too far down to notice.

Dolt Cameron does not understand his thoughts, his mind for finding what good can come, a déjà vu gone up to screen and waiting for the untold things. Like how he can see flashes, a soundless whirl of instants, of moments hours away. He envisions later, inside, after the light comes back on, Forner will be asleep in the bathtub and Agriss shivering huddled on the guestroom bed, mumbling, numb; the children will be draped into the floor together, back-to-back under their blanket.

Dolt will leap awake in the backroom. Then, unable to sleep, he’ll wonder around for a comic book or a menthol cigarette, and find Marianne on the couch, nursing. Dolt will look at Marianne, lift his eyes, and between breaths he will remember what kind of nurse she is. That she spends her days mending the incurable, though it’s a mend that carries on alongside you. She works in the terminal ward. But watching her as she

smiles and coos with Celeste, smiling, he won't know what to do. She will be the one who's lighthearted; her laughter, her joy; she will glance up at him by accident, notice his gaze, and return it with a smile — and so his face will be the one covered from patches.

He will burp. She will pardon. "What's it like, your job?" he asks. He will remember the stories; Marianne at age nine, comforting her mother through DTs, and hiding bottles and cigarettes but not able to find enough space; Marianne at 16, upper left arm branded by an angry boyfriend's cigarette; and a scar hidden over one of her ears that simply the mention of will change the mood.

"It's sad," she says, "Sometimes, it's too sad. You go home, you go home and you cry. But that's expected, isn't it? Other days, it's beautiful. You get to see, in a person's eyes, see how they're replaying their life, how they're ready for what's next, how they decide to live, because life is never over, it's not over at the end," her pale blue eyes drift off like clouds in sway, "Some days, you can talk with someone and it will be so deep and the words will be so deep into you that you can only laugh and be happy. Most of the time they aren't bitter. If they are," she'll say, "Let your heart break, because every little kindness matters."

She will say a word or two, then move her attention to the baby. A rotation of this. She will not stop purring, and he won't mind. The occasional groan will escape the backroom, and, for a moment after it does, she'll pause, but with a look Dolt hasn't seen, a pacified glance. Dolt will listen as she continues — that life, if it's real can be seen, even heard. You just know. He wants to know, "Is life something you learn?"

"No," she says, "it's in the quietest voices. Or else it's branded into you."

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He will wake up, most of the lights will be off, but not the guestroom's. Agriss wiggling under covers. There's a stir, that stir of an active mind — a gifted thing, really, with personality to the hilt, mumbling to himself between laughs and winks, Agriss will confess things. He won't remember any of it.

Dolt leans in, "Here, have some water."

"That's your dad right there," says Dolt, "He treats people right even when he doesn't have to. Your dad," he will tell Dolt, without his accent, in some other voice, "he's a good man. And it's hard to be a good man, it's hard to be a good anything. Your dad is the guy that will help someone out of that place. He's the kind of guy who would walk up to us when we were still at the kid's table and ask how things were, and really mean it, too, and all the other adults might tell some great fart jokes, but their faces changed whenever they turned away from you," grinning, more faded, "time to turn on those lights, kiddo." Dolt Cameron, aware of only the sound of his breathing and the snowy air, now, and recognizing the odor of gasoline, sees that, after tucking Agriss in, he will walk barefoot outside and listen to the air and do his best to remember promises.

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The fuel is in the industrial-sized generator (big as a fridge), but when Forner and Agriss yank at the cord nothing happens. They don't ask Dolt Cameron if he will try, or notice his sudden quiet as he thinks, patient-eyed and still a romantic person. Without pointing — without giving too much away — home, to Dolt, is travel, pasture, farmland, and steak fat.

Marianne stands at the door, asks, “How is it going?” rocking the baby as four eyes peer round her thigh, clung to it, their ladder. Behind things wait the lives you find by hearing.

“Well-hell. What do we do now?” No one’s laughing anymore. Agriss mumbles from under the generator. After a quarter-hour spent cursing through spit, Agriss shoves the fortified machine so hard that it falls on its side like some motorized bull, lifeless at first, then wigwagging a tad, till thundering engine sounds bray howling, and the electricity is back. The house’s light melds over porch lamps and into sprawling Christmas décor of every variance and plentitude : the whole department (it’s Christmas, so you’ve gotta make your house a sculpture,” Agriss often says): from traditional bulb-and-string to the fiber optic noodles; there are fisherman nets of pointy micros and the bulbless ropes you see at yoga studios; curlicue dangles and clinging ivy, neon-light bar signs, faux-candle waver and ivory rod; mini lights, string lights, twinkle lights, rice lights, micro garland pulsating starlights, you name it; LED or proper-old-school fairy-glass, neon-tube or halogen; bulbs shaped like icicles, stars, roses, Jesus, arrows; lights strung across every window and shingle and hedge, along the gutters and the doorways and the shed, over crevice and fencepost and tile; a single 75-watt projector sanctifies the nativity scene, which is scattered with Reindeer lit by one paltry bulb each and strewn around a panoply of flashing North Pole insignia, an entire Arctic scene with elves that stand taller than the miniature Wiseman — all are huddled under a cartoonish, well-lit palm-tree that has a craning beach-hut stapled into it, brought into light — — as all at once the world is illuminated. Marianne alone is not

surprised, as if she has expected it. She only sighs calm and pats Celeste's back. But Dolt and Agriss and and Forner look around and they finally get it.

It had been sleeting while they were inside, they knew this; and, from the crunch of their shoes any time they took a step, they knew that the sleetfall had probably frozen solid; and they can tell it's still snowing, but they can't say how much — so what they see in the new light shakes them to quiet. They move through warped time. They stare ahead, unable to believe what they're seeing all round them, sculpted and hallow apparitions of ice.

While Marriane and the family were inside, sleet mounted branches and slowly bent the limbs down, forcing each tree into peculiar architecture, cathedra of another planet twice the height of Agriss, twelve feet of something unreal, with tipped ends whispering into the ground, the patio, the concrete, the gravel, what else?

Now, as the family watches, the light shines wide onto the lands all around them, and they realize there's an entire hillside of these ice cages, and more, more wherever they look, an empire of glazed townships, each with its own hospitals and backdoors, and fortresses and sanctuaries and highways and towers — that's how it feels, looking at the tendrils of ice brought into compose, as intricate as Rome or Paris or the American Great Plains, an untried world that sank onto our own — spreading out in its fanatical pallor of columns and rooftops, domed crests of a wandering city so ancient that Dolt faints and the others don't even notice, bewitched by the castles of ice, each with its own romance, its leonine contention, a hill with no peak, a city of glass that hurled itself down and will do so again, at odds with the end it can't exist without.

Marianne and her family stare motionless at pacific landscapes, unable to believe the earth can have flesh. The snow has kept falling, alongside grey slush and rain, but the air doesn't move — nothing seems to move, as if they are being lifted, held. They are occupied by incredulity. All worlds tumble to a spool, inventory breath, and drift off overhead. "For something so barren it's lovely," says Agriss. Everyone agrees. They can see for miles, across each frozen lake, each glimpse by tiny cloud-tuft, as some lambent spoil engulfs their own bare lands. And Agriss trips and drags a cord and yanks the generator off and all the light is gone.

Marianne steps forward, into the pitched-dark, and a tiny light comes out of her hand as she moves toward night-hid Agriss with candles, and Marianne looks to him and says: "Do you remember the day we got married? How upset I was because of the rain? Remember what you said to cheer me up?"

Holding the candle Marianne gave him, Agriss lowers his head, "Of course," he tells her. "I'll never forget." Dust coils indecisive about view. A flow, a pinwheeling arrival, of noiseless inertia, the bacteria of clouds, lost or bare. Dust that crowns empty rooms and yellowed paper.

Marianne, holding her candle, "You said, 'Love and good intentions, we're in luck if that's all we have'. Then you reminded me of that time our picnic got rained on, our cupcakes were ruined, but we ran and hid in a phone booth. That's when you knew." Agriss's head becomes the cotton of his eyes. A breeze a lash of tender rives the pall. Amid gusting wind, the candlewick slumps into ashen falter. White and undulous, the night feels like a row of tilted fences. It is too dark to see. But there are sounds. Like the sound of trees snapping back upright, of machines, of coldness without fog. The sound

of children, talkative children with stormcloud faces, peeking up at men stuck in window, these children, whispering soft and low, like many-colored tree leaves shook by wind, etched children, there all along, can you hear them out tonight?

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The moment passes when Dolt Cameron shoves the cord-handled key back into the generator. When the light floods back over, everyone has this dumb look on their face, like they just woke up to a deafening alarmclock.

“The first thing we have to do,” says Dolt, “Is unplug all these lights and shit. There’s no telling how long we’ll be without power.”

Agriss, the only of the three men to remain drunk, spits, winking toward nowhere, saying, “What the hell have you guys been saying?”

“Wha?”

“What do you mean ‘whaa?’ I want to know what the hell it is you all keep talking about. Comparing the ice storm to a gott-damn planet, like we took a ship to Mars all ah sudden,” spits, “you’re making it so romantic, when really it’s a pain in the ass, real pain in the ass — I mean, you try shoveling your truck out of the snow — then, and then try driving through that shit, phew,” his grey eyes meet with everyone else’s, “because the truth is, there is no imaginary place, and — ” stopping for a moment as Forner tries to interrupt him, “Man, I know you weren’t about to step in a talk, I know you weren’t about to give me some un-war-anted advice — because all I hear when someone tells me unwarranted advice is ‘Fuck you,’” at which Marianne chases the little ones inside and off to bed. “And, you know what else . . .,” his speech manic, without pauses — congested like afternoon traffic after a bad accident. The three men are in the garage,

passing a joint around. Agriss is still drinking, with Forner on sips behind him. The alcohol — some dusty bottle of cheap whiskey he hid and forgot about — accelerates Agriss' pace, brightens his yellow face and deadens his gaze.

Dolt nods, strolls through the doorway and goes straight to the backroom, collapsing in sleep, drool here and there. He dreams about Marianne, and it's almost word-for-word as he presaged, only in the dream Agriss has disappeared — yet, in the dream, nobody cares that he has gone missing (“That’s what he gets for saying there’s no imaginary places,” says Marianne in the dream, “better off just at least saying maybe.”)

Forner keeps up with Agriss for an hour, then panics when he has drunk himself into double-vision. Like a dying hog he charges the door, missing twice before the mechanisms are figured out — a witless battle between man and the surfing doorhandle. After which Forner barrels down hallways in search of a toilet or a bucket, and pukes so much that he decides to sleep in the bathtub, wrapped like a mummy in wedding-gift towels. His red flannel shirt rubs dirt into the white linens, and his feet smell worse than the puke, as he snores happily from his seat in the tub.

Dolt Cameron blinks awake after a couple hours' sleep, and goes wandering for Marianne, just as he had imagined. There's nobody on the couch. The living room is dark and quiet, absolute in its quiet. A din and chatter from the garage leads Dolt to the kitchen door, opens it. Agriss, hunched over, has a new bottle — and when Dolt opens the door, the hunch tosses himself back, spilling vodka on the floor, and the backward effort is so much that Agriss is stiffened so that his neck leans back and his eyes cannot move from the ceiling. “Come on een,” Agriss hollers, slapping at air, “plenty left.” His

eyes tear up red as he continues to stare up at the ceiling, which leads to the attic via a drawstring stairway. “Where you at?”

Still on the kitchen side of the doorframe, “In here. Think I’m going back to bed.”

“Shiiiiit,” growls Agriss, “Just come in and join me,” tears streaming down his grin — the tears, not of a man, but one who refuses to blink. “Plenty more to drink, and, say, would you roll me a green pepper — I’ll split it.” He pauses, listening. “Dolt?” With his head in rigid back-tilt, eyes fixed on the ceiling above. He prods around blindly for Dolt, slowly getting louder, for a good ten minutes.

When Agriss gives up, Dolt, who’d been sitting at the kitchen table, peeks in: Agriss even more rigid, sweating. A handsome man, Dolt realizes, classically handsome; American good looks. Of everyone, though, his face changes the most, if you believe that kind of thing. Dolt does. Which is why he is not surprised when glimpses in once more, as he pushes the door, and sees a mean panic lavished over his face, slant-chinned and bleary-eyed as he glares up, up, up. Dolt sees a man caught by surprises but unwilling to let go — unwilling to let go of himself, the disparaging heart of it all. With that thought, Dolt turns away, toward the backroom, but he’s startled by Marianne — he nearly runs into her — as she leads a frowning Ramona.

Apologetic, “She wet your bed,” whispers Marianne. “Sorry, kid.” The snow belts down, still falling — no lighter than before. Cycles of sleet. But the electric is back on. Leaning in, “Dolt, where’s Agriss?” He tells her, notices that the girl is asleep on the couch, stretched out in all directions. “Will you do me a favor,” Marianne asks him. He nods. She tells him.

“Have,” asks Dolt.

Chuff, “Me? No, I couldn’t.” It’s 4:00am. This storm will last for weeks. Then another five days for the black slush to melt into the piled sand along the roadways, highways, backroads, and main streets. A lot of times the sand is worse than the ice. “He’s not as heavy as he looks. And I’ll take care of the other situation,” she points to the garage, then rounds the corner, opening the garage door onto a rush of snoring mutters.

Dolt thinks about the long walk home as he lifts Forner. About maybe he’ll get lost, maybe he’ll just wander, stumbling along, patient-eyed and still a romantic, who, as he travels, sees a field as a patchwork of oceans, a sonnet of thread, mothered by the consequences of life, how useless things find their better way: the ballet or the market, the street or the opera, the photo or the violin — Dolt Cameron blinks and the pale mist of thought flits off, receding in time for the morning sermon from the man-of-the-house. In this forest of wobbling houses, heavy with snow, a civilization of marbles, a soil weighed heavy by the pearlhandled cobbles of hail, hope is scattered like the rubble of bad teeth. You can bet he’ll probably freeze to death. It happens to people all the time. They walk out into a storm or a disaster and assume that they’ll survive. And think of the poor bastard who will find him, what will Dolt look like by then? Frostburn, flesh pecked at or gnawed off by all kinds of scavengers. What spine he ever had will snap like chalk into the mush of his decomposition. So why is he still walking, further away from survival with each step? Where is he even going? And why doesn’t he know? Maybe he’ll survive. Not likely. He’s going the wrong way, it’s getting darker. A strange thing, really, that he’ll have been dead and alive in the same day.