

Track

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(You will see words with unfamiliar spellings in this story; that's because Flattery is a writer from Ireland, and the UK has a spelling system different from the American system.)

My boyfriend, the comedian, took pleasure in telling me about rejection – how it came about, how to cope with dignity, how it had dangerous, possibly cancerous elements. He said if I pinched just above my waistband, where the unfamiliar portions of fat resided, that's what rejection felt like. He claimed the link between cancer and repeated failure was irrefutable. He had a lot of unusual ideas. 'Feel that,' he said, grasping at my hips and thighs, 'that's the texture of rejection right there.'

My boyfriend was famous and I wasn't. When I walked down our tree-lined street in the city, I came back with styrofoam cups of coffee, croissants, souvenirs I considered mailing back to friends. When he walked down the street he returned aggrieved and frustrated by how much people adored him. He sent me out a lot. 'Get my coffee extra-hot,' he told me, like I was an assistant type. 'I want it so hot it feels like hell,' I instructed the barista.

I loved my boyfriend. Our back and forth reminded me of black-and-white films I hadn't seen. Physically, we were unmatched. On forms, we were in different age brackets: he ticked one box, I ticked another. But we weren't the sort of people who filled out forms. He could get worked up about stuff he read on the internet and I knew how to make him happy. 'Here,' I said, handing him a snow globe containing a miniature Empire State Building, 'this is for you.' 'You're very sweet,' he told me. I guess it was true – I could be sweet. I was Irish. I didn't want to rely on it too heavily, do that whole bit, degrade myself. When my mother finalised the divorce from my father all she said was, 'Never give people what they want.' It was such good advice. At the party, where I first met him, I explained that I wasn't a famous person and I had zero intention of becoming one. I wanted to make him laugh. I liked him. That didn't happen to me every day. 'Really,' I said, 'I nurse quiet neurotic suspicions that even the people who know me don't want to know me. That's the opposite of being famous.' A week later, he moved me in. That first night, after I unpacked, I watched a topless man in the building opposite throw shirts out of his window. They were well-made, had seen fine interiors. I could tell by the way they flew. A rich, stiff quality that

sailed nicely. The shirts fluttered, then fell, and slashes of green and pink stunned the sky. The man smiled directly at me as they hit the ground.*

During our first few weeks together, he encouraged me to act. I looked like something audiences might want. I didn't have a problem with the parts, but it was the rooms I had to go into to get the parts. It was the places I had to stand to get the parts. Before I walked in, I told myself, 'Get it right, get it right,' and then I froze. Appraising women wasn't done anymore so it was all performed through a slippery new language I couldn't bear. Although I lacked presence, the directors appreciated the completely vacant thing I had going on. They said I was like a person vacuum-packed, sucked-in tight, motionless. My boyfriend compared me to a painting of a glowing, alien foetus he had once seen – powerful but unborn. Same kind of look. Work that, he suggested. Own it. I nodded like I understood and I stopped auditioning.

Apart from acting I had my occasional job which was layering make-up on collapsing faces. I'd been improving faces for years, presenting my own as aspiration. I turned up to houses wielding my toolkit, scraped off undesirable features and pencilled in better ones. These women gave me advice for the city – find people you can trust, guard your skin against pollution, look both ways when you cross the street. But I didn't work much. I didn't have to. The comedian gifted me a roll of cash and I strolled around pretending I was invested in life's little things. It was summer and I sat in Broadway shows for the air conditioning, supped Diet Cokes and watched stage children slam doors, throw cute temper tantrums. I ate bad food, food that wasn't immediately decipherable as food. You had to look at it for a while. I examined elderly women's ankles – puffy, tracked by large blue veins – on the subway. I looked forward to having ankles like this. It would make me sturdy and sturdiness was a state I always struggled to attain. I knew if I spoke on the phone to my mother she would ask how I was doing and I would lie easily. In Ireland, my early twenties hadn't been kind to me and I'd had what I generously termed a 'restless period'. I'd started thinking it might be best if I was out of the way – but I wasn't sure what exactly I was standing in front of. There had been a grave and embarrassing incident involving an ambulance, my mother at my hospital bedside, tear-stained and suddenly worn, with an expression that just said, 'Don't you dare put me through that again.' At the recovery sessions, where I feigned boredom, the other depressives weren't friendly, as if they didn't quite

take me seriously, implying that I hadn't, for reasons possibly to do with youth and make-up, earned my place there. Honestly, it felt as though I had shown up at a party to which I wasn't strictly invited. When I was no longer considered a risk to myself, I left. A nervous flier, I took pills on the plane. For three months, I slept on mattresses in trembling apartments, swayed by the subway. Then I met the comedian and my life became one impossibly smooth flight.

I liked our evenings together. I did small, bouncy things around the apartment, swept and wiped surfaces. I had nowhere else to be, no friends to visit, no family in the city. I took long, misty showers. I had full girlfriend privileges and a choice of soft, colourful towels. He told me he loved my face, the way it nodded and reassured. He didn't ask many questions about my life. He had strange, poverty-stricken ideas about Ireland, which he had caught from a regretful documentary, and referred to it only as '*that place*'. At night, he spent a lot of time on the phone speaking about his television show in low, nervous tones. He was older now, not as original or celebrated, and under his skin his organs seemed to swell outwards from stress. He was a sort of mild joke but I was the one sleeping with him so I guess the joke was on me. Still, what's there to say about that early time? Nothing much. We watched television in bed, mooched around the apartment, lived in our own mess. They were some of the happiest months of my whole life.

But we started going out. That's where we went wrong. Once summer ended, we got dressed up and went out. That first night, before it all became usual, we went somewhere monstrous and glassy, a carpet rolled out like a plush red tongue. Atmospherically, this restaurant was not unlike a morgue in its coldness and we sat solemnly at a round table as if preparing for a seance. My boyfriend was seated far away from me, almost on a different continent, and he glanced over occasionally to see if I was still upright. He loves me, I thought. I examined the cutlery, my reflection in the cutlery, everyone's reflection in the cutlery. They were so easy to agree with, these well-dressed people! I had a thrilling, weightless feeling as if I had taken several painkillers. I remembered I had taken several painkillers. I understood everything.

A woman appeared to me through a fog. 'So what was it like growing up where you came from?' she asked. 'Was it hard?'

I had no idea. All my memories were flat-green, postcard shaped. My parents, after their less than tender separation, became cartoon parents – fingers wagging into the frame of my life. When I told my friends I was leaving, they

said it would be amazing. New York. So amazing. My hometown was a strange place dressed up as a normal place; it was as if we all lived under a sheet of suffocating plastic. I remembered my fingers trailing rental Debs dresses, the rubberiness of the dry-clean casing.

‘Not many opportunities,’ I said, ‘for growth.’

The woman shook her head as if expressing incommunicable pain on my behalf. I smiled. I knew that smile would be the high-peak of my enthusiasm for the evening and I would awake in the morning, not as nicely drugged, with a new hate in my heart.

That rain-soaked night was the first time we listened to the track. When we returned to the apartment, he produced it as if he was doing me a favour. The track – its black tentacles coiling around two circular empty eye-sockets, trapped forever in a seventies style playback box – was his lucky talisman. A childhood gift from his mother, it was how he learned to hone his act in the basement of his suburban home, pantomiming for an imaginary audience. His mother was sick and growing up there hadn’t been much joy in his house. He pressed play and manic laughter burst from the lips of the ancient tape. ‘My mother was mentally ill,’ he repeated as though he was strangely proud of it, as if it legitimised him. I could have tossed out some scraped-together psychology about his present situation, but what would it have been worth? I imagined the comedian as a child, pirouetting desperately through his act, loosening an imaginary adult tie, preparing for a lifetime of being loved. A 12-year-old channelling his frantic and obsessive energy in the basement, as the laughter drowned out the sounds from the other world directly above him. When I pictured his parents, I just saw them in regulation smocks, tilling the land, unsmiling.

He promised me I was the first woman he had shown the track to. He had dated lots of girls during his time in New York – some famous, some not, asymmetrical haircuts, cool and indifferent as if it were a career requirement. He liked to make mean, primitive remarks about his exes. It didn’t bother me hugely. Types. The way he said types. I knew that a relationship could fall apart in the utterance of a single word, but this was not our word. That was society so what can you do? I didn’t blame him. I was out there, stumbling around too. I was part of the show. Yet, that first night, when he dropped to his knees and thanked the track for his

good fortune and success, I was oddly thrilled. He was a very neat person, tidy and composed, so this display of weakness was rare. As he paced through the bedroom – energetically rubbing his face, the laughter rising and falling, water leaking onto his cheeks like a reflex – I made encouraging sounds. I massaged his back, clockwise and anticlockwise, watched him like an interested viewer. Afterwards, calmed by the noise, he felt moved to explain the different forms of comedy to me, working energetically through its history. At that moment, I have to say this – my chest grew extraordinarily tight and I felt it was very likely that I was going to die.

Over the next few months, the pattern continued – we lay in bed until evening, watched old comedies, listened to the track, had lazy sex. Then we got dressed up and went out. At the wide, ceramic dinner tables I was some combination of waitress and adoptee from a vague Third World country. I couldn't comprehend the performance that was required from me by him and his friends, most of whom were on television or hovering near it. There was an older man at these tables, a man my boyfriend often referred to as his best friend, who was as wordless as I was. I happily misinterpreted his glances in my direction as solidarity. I was probably a bit high, finding meaning in nothing. My boyfriend often cracked jokes at this man's expense – about his comparative lack of success, his poor real-estate investments – and he remained motionless, his expression expired, taking it easily. I sat completely stationary as if that alone would help me evade humiliation. The man sometimes raised his glass towards mine in mute toast.

One afternoon, the comedian attempted to send me to the hairdressers before dinner. The salon was full of tanned women who picked over my scalp and commented on my blessed position. They gifted me a glass of champagne and I blew childish ripples in the surface. I left in the middle of the hair operation. I looked at my half-do in the mirror and said, 'Wow! That looks great. Thank you, thank you so much,' and I walked out. I expected security or someone like security to stop me at the door, but they didn't.

I spent the rest of the day wandering up and down the shaded, immaculate street my boyfriend and I called home. I wanted to make a discovery so I could feel like I lived there. At the end, near the subway station, was a psychic's office. She sat in a sturdy, high-backed chair and, apart from draping a red velvet curtain across the room to separate her office from her living quarters, did nothing to make herself look mystical. That's brazen, I thought as I passed. Only

someone gifted would do so little to announce themselves. That night, at dinner, nobody criticised my unusual hairstyle. It must have been decided it couldn't be an accident because nothing about the comedian was accidental. They gazed deep into my eyes and told me I looked great. When we returned from our excursion the comedian and I fucked coldly, like we were two expensive, shiny products, as if I was something sleek he could press that would produce the correct answers.

Afterwards, as we lay in bed, he asked, 'What do you want more than anything?'

'To be loved,' I said, just like that. Lately, I had become weary of the whole act I'd been cultivating. It was pathetic. 'You know, in Ireland,' I said, 'I wasn't well.'

Day to day he let me pretend to be whoever I wanted to be, a singular kindness. He had several versions of his own past; all that remained consistent was how he had overcome. In every version was the track and his mother staring blank-eyed beyond him into space. If he recognised any similarities between us, he didn't acknowledge them. I realised I didn't really know how this went. I hadn't had many boyfriends. Most of the boys I knew at home were terrified of me, though if I slept with them, they were briefly satisfied. I remembered the town boy I was seeing when it happened, carting me around as if I was on loan, glamorous but refundable, like a rental dress.

'Has that gone away now?' my boyfriend asked. He wasn't dumb but he was coddled. He was like a man with a thousand relentless wives. He had people who designed his food, sourced his conversational material. They cut up his food, cut up his words. All that was left to do was open his mouth wide.

'Maybe,' I replied. 'I think I'm scared of death.'

'Depth?'

I considered. 'Both.'

That night we listened to the track together until dawn – the curtains closed, the darkness making our bodies indistinguishable shapes. It felt like intimacy, or as close to intimacy as we could get. The track had a sedative effect on him, steering him out of his manic period. I ran my fingers through his hair, soothed him, promised it was normal, that anyone would do it if they had the equipment.

This was what he wanted more than anything, more than sex, more than love – to be told he was normal, to feel normal. As the sun came up, he encouraged me to read aloud online comments about him, bizarre and unflattering posts that implied he was past it. While I recited he looked bemused, like he was hearing outlandish conspiracy theories. At 8 in the morning, I whispered him to sleep, kissed his eyelids. It wasn't something I would usually do. It was a gesture I didn't know I was capable of. In Ireland I would have dismissed it as sentimental but here, like entire days of solitude, dinners of pressed juice, it seemed fitting.

As the day his show returned closed in, he became increasingly agitated and his insomnia worsened. I didn't sleep well either and we wandered the apartment separately, moving in and out of rooms, ignoring each other, like strangers. When I was sure he was asleep I got up and had a glass of terrible wine, wine that redeemed itself only by being alcoholic. I told myself I was okay, the best okay I'd ever been, but it was hard to believe it any more.

The night his show aired I got dressed up as I normally did. Even getting dressed had become a source of confusion for me. The comedian told me to display my body but that felt wrong to me – some small-town hangover. I wore an impersonal costume. I felt like I had ordered myself from a store window.

The dinner table rang with ugly laughter. My boyfriend was in public form. The desperation darted across his face, clawed up his cheeks. It was him but it wasn't. It was like walking into your house after it has been discreetly burgled. To his left was a young man in his early thirties, who talked constantly about wanting to learn a new language. Everyone at the table agreed that this was an excellent idea, self-betterment, refusing to allow air into the brain.

'Get a foreign girlfriend,' my boyfriend advised, 'that's the only way you'll learn.'

'What language are you learning from her?'

This was something that happened. They discussed me in front of me. I looked the other way, pretended to be obsessed with the tablecloth.

'Poverty,' my boyfriend smirked.

He went easy on me – I sensed that others had suffered more – but this wasn't for my benefit. He was maybe scared he might disturb some beloved image of

him I might have preserved from my girlhood when he was at the height of his fame. In truth, there was nothing – just a single blurry scene of him falling over, an amalgamation of gurning expressions. When we got back to the apartment, he watched the episode alone as if to punish me for some imagined slight. I wanted to apologise but I couldn't physically say the word, 'Sorry.' I hadn't slept in days. When he locked himself in his bedroom, looping the laughter over and over, I logged onto the forum that tracked my boyfriend's career. I scrolled through early, stand-up photos of him – long-haired, pretend bashful – accompanied by his most caustic one-liners, scrawled across the screen. Before I noticed my fingers moving, before I recognised the words, I'd left a detailed post where I declared the comedian not-funny, suggested that he had never been funny and that hopefully, God willing, his show would be cancelled and he wouldn't inflict himself on us any more. I drew attention to his deteriorating appearance. I might have made a remark about his mental capabilities that was out of character for me. I posted the diatribe under his mother's name and took two sleeping tablets. I passed out on the couch then, soothed by my own ugliness.

In the morning, after scouring reviews of his show, disturbed, he read the post back to me.

'Unbelievable.'

I made my eyes wide, saint-like.

'An extremely difficult person.'

'A sicko,' he said. 'Issues.'

'Oh for sure,' I agreed. 'Many issues. No doubt.'

Only once did the comedian notice my reticence at these gatherings. While his friends spoke about shows, who was on what show, the ratings of that show, the seemingly endless amounts of shows – I enjoyed fantasies of being at the airport, walking uninterrupted through the departure gates, browsing through the duty free, doing various breathing exercises at the carousel, watching a beautiful tide of bags tumbling out. They weren't imaginative visions. They wouldn't have received high ratings on any network. Still, it was impressive what was going on in my head – my own personal airport reality experience, complete with a one-way ticket.

'You're an odd little ghost person,' the comedian said, confrontationally, in the cab on the way home. It was autumn and we'd been together for five months. I'd been feeling the sharp deterioration of our love for some time. I wasn't helping by staying up all night, leaving long, anonymous messages on the forum that hated my boyfriend. I'd established a lot of friendships on there, made meaningful connections. There were some nice people.

'I don't know what you're talking about,' I replied.

'Every dinner you don't say a word.'

'I say it all with my eyes.'

'Tell me one opinion you have.'

We fell into silence.

Back at the apartment he listed out the systems he'd organised so he wouldn't be able to listen to the track. Then he locked himself in the bathroom, ran the taps and listened to the track.

I knew he'd been talking to other women online. Deleting his browser history was something he just wasn't interested in. To pass the time, I rummaged through his clothes. He had them delivered from a company that dressed the modern man. It was all decided by filling out an oblique questionnaire about your childhood, when you lost your illusions etc. He tried to get me into it. 'How was your childhood?' 'Not good,' I scrawled and handed the questionnaire back to him. He said I didn't deserve clothes and he was probably correct. In the wardrobe I found his favourite coat and slipped in a printout of the most horrific post on the forum. I also included my fortune from the fortune cookies we had eaten earlier. I guess I still wanted us to have open communication. I couldn't let go. I could never let go. I didn't know how. A part of me was disgusted by how he treated me and another part was profoundly grateful.

Every day, there were two versions of me. The one who stayed and watched him with other women, leaning in, laughing and then afterwards in cabs; listened to him object, argue, tell me I was a lot of work, a lot of hard fucking work. The me who had dreams where I climbed high, took a single breath and hit the ground like a shirt made of the cheapest thinnest material. Then the other me – walking fast, with purpose, down the shaded street.

It was a cold winter and I stayed inside the apartment most days. I did my makeup and observed myself in the mirror, fearfully, as if I was an animal capable of bizarre and impulsive movements. I practiced my accents so the neighbours would think there was a flurry of people who lived next door, a cultural mix, instead of just a comedian's girlfriend. I started watching the show which, to my boyfriend's fury, had been moved to a daytime slot. On screen he played a professor – his waistcoat ill-buttoned, his face clouded with grief for the modern world, all his actions, romantic or otherwise, hilarious and large-hearted. The dialogue was bad and it bothered me to hear him say those lines. I felt implicated in a way, like a woman who sends her husband to war without even a kind word. On-screen my boyfriend was king of a small and ineffectual country. He gestured to the scenery as if he positioned it. If he questioned the morals of a character, in the next episode they would prove themselves to be loose, unworthy. When he pointed to the sky and said, 'Sure looks like snow!' snow fell immediately and coated the ground he stood on.

One afternoon, because of the painfulness of the show, I hid in the hall cupboard for safety. I wanted to experience what it felt like to be closed-away so I just climbed right in. It wasn't so bad in the cupboard. It was definitely the best place for me. The comedian had fired our permanent maid for what he claimed was 'sinister tampering with the track', so we had irregular replacements – trains of 20-something women who trooped in and immediately out, distressed by the apartment. So we lived in immovable filth. It wasn't immovable exactly – we kicked it around – but we never completely rid ourselves of it. That day, the day of the cupboard hiding, the maid found me, swinging the door open and then shrugging her shoulders as if to say, 'Here we go, another rich wacko.' I didn't correct her. I didn't tell her I was poor with a decent personality, a fine personality, which I displayed to almost nobody. Her conviction that I was a wacko seemed to give her strength. Before I came to the city, I'd never seen a maid. It wasn't something I grew up with. I imagined them all as fusty and evangelical, but she was overweight, elderly and looked like she didn't give two true hoots about tidiness. I disliked the idea of her going through our things, hoisting out bags of our private rubbish, touching the spines of the empty books that lined the shelves. I'm not a slow person but it took me several minutes of close monitoring to understand the connection between the maid and the street psychic. I recognised her faraway stare of other-worldliness and her thick, veined ankles.

'You're not a maid,' I said, my hand thrusting in and out of a bag of Cheetos, 'you're a psychic.'

She just looked at me.

'Is it hard living a double life?'

I wanted her to say something supernatural like, 'You tell me' or 'We all live double lives.'

There was a heavy sort of silence. 'Please rate me on the website,' she said, finally.

That night, on the website, I picked the five-star option and gold stars flooded the screen one-by-one.

When my boyfriend returned I was seated in my usual place at the window, studying the opposite people, their dark and impossible lives.

'Did you have windows in *that place*?' he asked me cautiously.

'Not as clean,' I replied, smacking two fingers on the lower pane of glass. 'Smaller.'

The week after our encounter, I walked past the psychic's office at least twice a day. She looked sullenly ahead, chewing gum, flicking idly between cards, casually discarding fortunes on her foldable table. It was as if there had been no contact, no five-star review. She never once acknowledged me.

When we went out, I enjoyed the flickers of concern that passed over his rotating friends' faces. Should we know this one? I adjusted my skirt and watched incuriously, flatly as my features blurred into the women before me. 'I'm new,' I said, like I was standing in front of a classroom. Those nights we monetised my normalcy until it became hard currency. 'She's so *regular*,' I heard him repeat, 'that's what I like about her.' So I said nothing about the week I spent on a ward unable to recognise my own face, a week when I felt it was possible I would never speak to another regular human being again. In every restaurant, they sat us right up front and if the comedian demanded snow, snow fell from the ceiling.

Over time, the stuff my boyfriend did became sort of predictable – staying out late, or not coming home, or coming home reeking of downtown places. If I'd ever once spoken on the phone to my mother, I know she would have referred to this as 'evidence'. She would have used the phrase 'cheap women'. Like anybody, she had phrases she used frequently. I wanted to ask him, 'Are you going to downtown places?' but I didn't exactly know where the downtown places were. They could have been downtown or they could have been uptown. They might have been in the middle. Then again, anywhere is seedy if you want it to be.

He also moved the track into our bedroom and forced me to sleep on the couch. He said it comforted him to hear the laughter at night. It improved his routine. 'What routine?' I asked. 'Sorry,' he said, piling up blankets and pillows. I saw a doctor for my sleep problems. It was necessary. She shone a light under my tongue and performed other technicalities. A week later, I was informed I had several STDs, some of the minor ones, but also some of the major ones. I inquired whether I got them all at once, or at different times. The doctor said she couldn't tell, her education only went so far. She awarded me prescriptions and a lollipop. When I asked my boyfriend about it, he just ignored me, made me shower twice a day, repeated the weak jokes he told his mother at her lowest. If I mentioned the track, how the laughter scared me at night, he whispered, 'We will not survive without that machine,' and closed his eyes tightly. He could be melodramatic. I felt an uncontrollable terror on that couch, as if my life was speeding away from me, slipping and sliding, like a visual gag. I drew a rough sketch of the apartment and mailed it back to my mother with a note that said, 'I'm very happy here.' In many ways, I missed her, her way of looking at the world. She would have referred to my stint on the couch as 'a little holiday'.

The evenings my boyfriend disappeared, I went to the pharmacy and picked up things. American things that made me happy – teeth-whitening strips, colourful candy, painkillers, sleeping tablets. On the street, not far from the psychic's office, was a store shaped like a large barn that had everything I needed. I spent shameful hours in the yellow light. The sight of a mustard bottle and a ketchup bottle side-by-side often moved me to tears. It seemed so wholly patriotic, like the flag that billowed from the comedian's fake university.

One quiet evening, as she scanned through my items, I spoke to the counter-girl. She was young and I wondered if she went to college, had a father who

mocked her intelligence, a boyfriend who picked her up from work. I went on like this for a while before I said, 'I like this store.'

'It's okay.' She examined my tablets, eyeing the amount and dosage carefully.

'Are you taking a long and nervous journey?'

I thought of my walk from the television to the cupboard.

'Yes.'

She continued scanning. I looked at her. 'You probably want to be famous,' I said. 'All young girls do, but let me tell you, my boyfriend's famous and it's not worth a damn.'

She took in my tatty coat, my unwashed hair. People can be very critical with their eyes.

'He has some trouble on the internet,' I continued, 'It's nasty on there.'

Any space between us closed up.

'Who is he?'

I told her his name.

'Don't get excited,' I said, 'he listens to a laugh track at night, he's going very weird. He believes it keeps him funny. It's a fantasy. He's a fantasist.' I rolled my eyes in an exaggerated way. 'He has a lot of things wrong with him deep in his soul. Have you ever met anyone like that? And I think he's sleeping with other women. You could be one of those women if you liked? I mean if that's something you wanted to do – sleep with someone famous and tell your friends about it?'

She was quiet for a while. 'No thanks.'

'Cool,' I said, 'Thank you for your service.' I breezed into the open air with my plastic bag of new belongings. Out on the street I paused and thought – I will not be a person who abandons others. No, that's simply not me. I walked back into the store and confronted the counter-girl.

'Excuse me,' I said, 'Do you have anybody to walk you home? This is a dangerous neighbourhood.'

She looked up. 'This is probably the best, maybe second best, street in the entire city.'

'I see,' I said thoughtfully, considerate. 'I'm sorry. I really don't know where any thing is.'

On my journey back I thought of that girl selling her story to the ravenous tabloids, getting a small bit of tawdry cash, taking her friends out for drinks, saying a few words in my honour. In the kitchen I unpacked and divided the tablets into ones I would take now, ones I would take later and ones I would take in a relaxation emergency. I took the track out of the comedian's bedroom and examined it. I'd never been alone with it before. The laughter was a solid sound, the mirth of an old-time audience who meant it. I considered ripping its guts out and leaving the entrails on the kitchen table. I wanted to know how that would sit with me. But I didn't destroy anybody that evening. I turned off the track and slithered around on the couch for a while.

At 2 a.m., the intercom buzzed. I wasn't sure what I expected. A soft comforting voice on the other end telling me not to be scared? Someone to have an emotional moment with? God himself? 'Hello,' I said. I recognised the breathy tones of the psychic immediately. And she told me everything that would happen to me. It wasn't terrible but it was empty. It was one long flash of emptiness. I shouldn't have been surprised. Over that intercom, into the early morning, the psychic and I cried and regretted and offered the sincerest condolences to my life.

Summer came and I stood, naked, in front of my air conditioner, feeling expert bursts of air all over my body. I got the air conditioner for free from a guy on the forum who left a rambling message about how he was leaving the city. When I collected it, I pretended to be a regular woman with no connections to the comedian. Whenever I walked into an apartment – no matter the size or shape – I felt sad for all my losses, for everything I couldn't do.

He had a new girlfriend on the show. It had been a dull season and he needed someone to rub off. I watched her daily, peeking out warily from my place in the cupboard, drool pooling around my mouth, as if all the water wanted to leave my body. They tried to make her wholesome, a fellow professor, but she had

certain aspects that couldn't be contained – her breasts, her lips. I figured she was from Miami or LA or one of those places, had seen a lot of ceilings. I wanted friends so I could imitate her, call her 'Candy'. Make myself feel good. One afternoon, I came home and heard them having sex. It wasn't a secret. I was supposed to hear. I stood in the hallway and tried to guess the position. Afterwards, we went out. All three of us got dressed up and went out. In the cab, he told her she was the first person he'd played the track for. I went into the restaurant bathroom to throw up but found I couldn't. On the bathroom floor, I felt my whole body shrink, like it could fit in a suitcase, be placed on a baggage carousel.

At dinner I was seated beside an older, stately woman my boyfriend called his agent. He handed me over to her. She ran her eyes over Candy and me, said it was just beautiful to see girls who could carry themselves correctly. I wanted Candy to do something that confirmed my low expectations of her – flash teeth, simper – but she looked towards the door. I withdrew my hundred imaginary phone calls to my hundred imaginary friends. The agent reminded me of the psychic. In a way I couldn't explain she was the psychic, completely her, so when she took my hand and said she would help me, I trusted her. She made me want to be a baby again, tiny and clean.

'Now,' she said, 'I bet you would like a part on the show?'

A week later, I stood on set, in the vast maze of the fake university, feeling the weight of a mop in my hand. On a hanger beside me was a maid costume wrapped in plastic. The costume was like a question to which I had no answer. I wondered how I would put it on. In the normal fashion, I presumed. I would put it over my head. Then my neck. But what would happen after that?

I stopped a woman who was having trouble with her headset. 'May I use the bathroom,' I asked quietly.

She nodded. But I didn't go to the bathroom.

I walked outside as if I was going home. But I didn't go the apartment either. I kept walking, a lone figure crossing a city desert. I thought about all of the things I had forgotten about myself and I tried to remember. Soon I was on the subway and an older woman, with brown-spotted, delicate ankles appearing from under her skirt, like feelings I couldn't describe, smiled at me. I thought about my mother's face then and I tried to picture it. Then off the subway and

into the light. And I thought I would like weather – thunder, lightning, snow. I thought I would like weather and snow came from the sky.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR

Nicole Flattery's fiction and non-fiction has appeared in *The Stinging Fly*, *The Dublin Review*, BBC Radio 4 and *The Irish Times*. She has a story forthcoming in the arts anthology *Winter Papers*. She is working on a collection of short stories and lives in Galway. Her short story 'Track' was the winner of the 2017 White Review Short Story Prize (UK & Ireland).