

FREE WITH THIS ISSUE

OVER 90 NATURAL BEAUTY RECIPES

FICTION



I move past the biscuits – ginger cookies on special – and reach the end of the aisle where the crackers crouch. Through a knot of shoppers, I see him. Bent over the frozen pizza. I'd recognise those shoulders anywhere

The stranger

Her last boyfriend ran off with her money and self-esteem, but this girl is a sucker for punishment. **By Ciara Geraghty**

ILLUSTRATIONS BY REBECCA WETZLER

IT HAPPENS in the confectionery aisle. There I am, dangling a fat bag of chocolate doughnuts over my basket. I'm fighting it, but I feel my resolve stumble, my grip loosen, my arm lower, when I hear the voice. Maurice's voice. I drop the bag like it's on fire and pull the brim of my hat down around my face. For a moment, I do nothing. The voice is fainter now and I think he might be in aisle four. The frozen-food section.

I move past the biscuits – ginger cookies on special – and reach the end of the aisle where the crackers crouch. Through a knot of shoppers, I see him. Bent over the frozen pizza. I'd recognise those shoulders anywhere. And the dirty blond of his hair. Although I didn't call it dirty at the time. I called it golden. Golden is the kind of word you use before and during. Dirty is what you say afterwards.

I decide to follow him.

The decision steals up on me like a mugger down a dark alley and so here I am. Trailing an ex. Stalking him, I suppose you could say. Jesus.

And really, it's not like I've nothing else to do. I've loads of stuff to do. Like buy Charlie something interesting and thoughtful for her birthday. And maybe buy myself something interesting and thoughtful to wear to the party tonight. Or come up with an interesting and thoughtful excuse as to why I can't go to the party tonight. I mean, Charlie means well. She always does. But since the Maurice situation, her mission to fix me up with one of Stephen's friends is fast becoming an obsession. And there's not a lot you can do when people mean well. It seems petty and churlish not to go along with it. People don't say I'm petty and churlish. They say I'm "nice".

They mightn't say that if they could see me now. We're outside, walking down the street. I keep

FICTION

a safe distance and plaster myself in shop doors when he looks behind... which he does twice. As if he suspects. I think the game is up when I trip over a dog lead, but other than a scathing look from the owner, a sharp yelp from the dog and a minor graze on my knee, I get away with it.

This may be my lowest ebb. Stalking someone. In broad daylight. Although I don't look like I'm stalking anyone. I just look like a small woman with a big hat strolling down a crowded street like everybody else. I could be someone in Ireland on holiday. Or a stranger to Dublin, looking maybe for an ice-cream parlour. Or maybe I'm someone who doesn't have a sweet tooth. No, that's too far-fetched. I'm just a woman. Walking. With a big hat.

If I'm completely honest, this is not the first time I've thought I've seen Maurice in the past four months. I've even seen him lying on a mat at my yoga class, which is weird seeing as I hardly ever go to yoga.

Maurice walks with the easy gait of a man with a clear conscience. I'm sorry to say that I feel a surge of something that might be a thrill at my illicit behaviour. For the first time in ages, I feel like I've got the upper hand. I smile to myself before remembering that I'm on my own. I stop smiling. People who walk on their own, smiling, look crazy. They really do. I've seen them.

The assistant insists the trousers make my bottom look smaller. Which is another way of saying I have a large bottom

I only notice the man sitting on the ground when Maurice bends to deposit a handful of coins into his upturned cap. I am startled by this behaviour. Almost as startled as the beggar when I do the same thing seconds later. He smiles a gummy smile at me and winks. Like he knows.

Maurice stops outside a bookshop. I pretend to study the timetable at a bus stop. "The next one's not for another 20 minutes, love," says a sad-looking man with a beaten-up kind of a voice. I look up. "What?" I am confused and forget to say "Pardon", like you're supposed to.

So Maurice likes books does he? That's news to me. I never saw any evidence of that. He said fiction was overrated and that people should stick to the facts. Which is ironic when you think about it.

There he is again, at the door of the bookshop. He shields his face from the sunshine, too bright after the gloom inside. It's only when he lowers his hands that I realise it's not Maurice. The resemblance was all in the shoulders. And the dirty-blond hair. I lean against the tree I've been hiding behind. Rough bark digs into my back as a dose of reality

slides down my throat like a tablespoon of cod liver oil. I step out from behind the tree and move away.

In the end, I buy Charlie a box of bath bombs, which is neither interesting nor thoughtful, although Charlie spends large tracts of time in her bath. Usually with Steve, she tells me. I buy myself a pair of trousers that the shop assistant insists make my bottom look smaller. Which is just another way of telling me that I have a large bottom. And while this is true, who needs to be told that? "You're a stalker with a big arse. That'll be 70 Euros, please."

Things weren't always like this. I mean, I've always had a bottom whose size is in direct proportion to my intake of mint Aero. And I've been eating a lot of mint Aero recently. Since Maurice left, I suppose. With my savings. My investment in his company. "We'll make a fortune, Cath," he said. He called me Cath even though my name is Catherine. He was Australian; he shortened everything.

"Everyone needs security, don't they?" I nodded, not only because I thought I was in love with him, but also because I agreed with him. Everybody does need security. And his personal panic button system sounded perfect, hitting just the right note between paranoia and common sense. I couldn't get the money out of my bank account quick enough. Except there wasn't any company, was there? Just me with my savings, my big arse and my mint Aeros.

I'M SITTING on the bus now, on the way home. You're probably wondering why I don't have a car? No, you've already guessed, haven't you? Yes, I sold it. My savings weren't enough, Maurice told me. He had a way of saying things like that, that made me feel special. "You're the only one who believes in me, baby," he said, whispering with his breath hot in my ear, his tongue running a trail up my neck, biting the lower lip of my mouth. Kissing me the way they do in the movies. With his hands cupping my face. Making me feel so... precious. "Nobody gets me like you do, baby."

I'm lying in the bath now. The water's getting cold, and in the gloaming the bathroom looks shabby. I close my eyes. The man on the street today looked like the kind of man who might give you his life's savings if you asked him to. Not stupid, I mean. Just kind. Considerate. Maybe Maurice stalked me before he picked me. Maybe he stalked a few of us and decided I was the most gullible-looking. I do have a weak chin. My drama teacher told me that in second year.

The trousers don't look the way they did in the shop. The material puckers at the hip. Without the soft lighting of the changing room, the colour loses its shimmer. Now they're just grey. Cement grey. At the bottom of the laundry basket I find the top

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I was going to wear. It would have been perfect because (a) it's a lovely slimming black and (b) it has the decency to cover my bum. I struggle into a halter-neck that fitted perfectly before I asked Maurice to tell me his business idea. I had insisted at the time, I confess, and he was cagey at first. Said he didn't want to jinx himself by telling anyone.

Now the halter-neck strains against my body and I curse my dollops of comforting ice-cream. On a positive note, the top is riddled with sparkles and sequins that might distract people from the puckering and the straining. I pull my hair into a knot at the back of my neck. Mum always said my neck was my best feature. "Long and white," she said. "Like a swan's." "Don't be mental," I'd replied, which is what I used to say until I said it to a man with bipolar disorder. Obviously, I didn't know he had bipolar disorder at the time. I think about Mum when I wear my hair up. I'm glad I never had to tell her about Maurice. She would have called me an idiot. And she would have been right.

The phone rings and I jump. It sounds so loud in the flat's emptiness. I think the thought I always think when the phone rings: *Maybe it's him. With an explanation. Something plausible. Reasonable.* I can't think of what such an explanation might be.

It's Charlie. "All set?"

"Yes" I say, in the chirpy tones of a dawn chorus. "I tried to phone you earlier."

"I went into town." I don't tell her about stalking a man with Maurice's shoulders and his dirty-blond hair. Maybe I've finally become a person who keeps things to herself. Especially things like this.

The phone rings. I think what I always do when the phone rings: *Maybe it's him. With an explanation. Something plausible*

"I've got someone perfect for you," she says and I can almost hear the punch of her dimples in her peach-coloured cheeks. I sigh silently. She means well. Have I told you that already? She and Steve could be pin-ups in the utopia section of *Perfect Life* magazine. Their apartment could never be called a flat. It even smells lovely, with candles and pot-pourri and lavender waving at you from tall vases, their scent like a lilting melody you can't get out of your head. I covet it, this life of theirs. Even though that's a horrible thing to say about your friends.

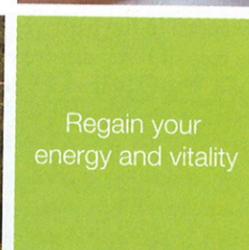
And it's not like I fancy Steve. God, no. Although he is a beautiful specimen, with high cheekbones, sharp



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suits and a falling-down-with-trendiness haircut. He's an intimidating ten; I'm looking for more of a seven. Eight, tops. Anything higher and I wouldn't be able to think of a thing to say.

Maurice was a high-end eight. Before he fleeced me of everything I own, that is. And the things he said to me. I'm cringing just thinking about them. "Did anyone ever tell you that you're a dead ringer for Catherine Zeta-Jones?" And I loved it. Even though I'm nothing like her. Well, I might be, if she had wider hips and shorter legs and a bottom with a love-hate relationship with mint Aeros.

The party is like the pullout section of a glossy magazine: just the right number of beautiful people, a lovely hum of conversation and no awkward silences. I stuff a prawn wrapped in filo pastry into my mouth as artists on the cusp of being discovered warble in the background. Fairy lights on the balcony frame a view that looks like a Monet.

I press myself against the wall in the darkest corner of the room and concentrate on sucking in my belly – tricky with a mouthful of prawn. I usually love parties, but this is the first gathering since the Maurice debacle. It was all right when it was just me who knew I was stupid. Now everyone does and I'm like a hermit crab between shells. Exposed.

I'm about to reach for a mini-éclair, when I see him. Again. At first I think he's Maurice. Again. Then I realise he's the man from today. The one I followed. OK, stalked if you want to be pedantic. Charlie reaches up to peck his cheek. Now she's scanning the room and when she clocks me, she

smiles and points. I realise that he's the "perfect someone" she has lined up for me. I slide my back down the wall until I look like I'm sitting on a chair. I stay like that, even though it's not the most comfortable of positions. My trousers strain across my arse, the material as taut as a drum skin.

Then Muriel, Charlie's sister, steps on my toe with a heel as sharp as a knitting needle. "Oh sorry, Catherine – didn't see you there." The pain releases the hinge of my knees and I land on my bum, which doesn't hurt as much as it should, thanks to the mint Aeros. It's lucky that Muriel is even shorter than me, because I crouch while talking to her and spend the evening ducking and diving.

In this way I manage to make it to the end of the night with only one near-disaster – when the crowd parts like curtains, and there he is, with his Maurice shoulders and his dirty-blond hair. I drop onto all fours, craftily pretending to hunt for a contact lens and crawl sideways, like a crab, away from the danger.

BY THE time I reach Charlie and Steve's bedroom to retrieve my coat, I'm tired – what with the crouching, ducking, diving, crawling and my general state of high-alertness throughout the evening. Their bed – a gigantic four-poster hung with rose-patterned tulle and covered with an eiderdown as soft as marshmallows – calls to me. I ease myself back against the sea of coats and close my eyes, just for a moment.

"Oh, sorry, I didn't realise ..." I know who it is even before I open my eyes. It's him. The stranger. How could I have thought I'd gotten away with it? I never get away with anything. I reef myself into a more respectable sitting position. The fella grins. He looks nothing like Maurice when he grins. Then again, Maurice wasn't much of a grinner.

"Mark," he tells me, extending his hand. His shake is warm and firm. He studies my face like it's a map. One of those ordinance survey maps that men love. I see his mouth opening. The question is forming. Here it comes.

"You know," he says, tilting his head to one side. "This is going to sound corny, but you look very familiar to me. Have we met before?"

I decide to brazen it out. I arrange my features into an expression I don't normally use. I go for haughty. "No," I say, deciding against "certainly not", which really would be haughtiness overkill. He believes me. In fact, he apologises for what must seem like a lame pick-up line. "You probably get that all the time," he says, shaking his head as if berating himself for his limpness.

Instead of leaving, however, he sits beside me on the edge of the bed and offers me a slug of his

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mojito and a mini-éclair from his stash of four. I surprise myself by accepting both. We end up talking about books. When he laughs – which he does a lot – his body shakes. It's a laugh that makes me laugh. Infectious, I suppose.

"You don't happen to have any relatives in Australia, do you?" "No," he says, offering me the last éclair. I refuse, even though I want it. He eats it whole, just like I do. No small bites. I like that. I give myself a shake – stop that – and ask him another question.

"And have you ever thought about setting up your own business?"

"Ah, no. I'm not much of an entrepreneur, I'm afraid. I'm a teacher." He looks apologetic at this.

"Not a drama teacher by any chance?" I cover my chin with my hand.

"Eh, no, an English teacher, as a matter of fact."

"And, ah, how do you feel about personal panic button systems?"

"I've never really given them much thought, to be honest."

"Good."

"Good?"

"I mean, neither have I."

His smile travels across his face, like the sun

coming up. "How about I get us another drink?"

"I was just about to leave," I tell him.

"So was I." He looks at me with a charming grin and I steel myself.

"OK, maybe just one for the ditch," I say. Dammit, I'd meant to say, "No, I have to be up early for my yoga class."

"Great," he says getting off the bed. Oh no. He's got one of those gorgeous men-in-jeans bums. And he made me laugh. Three times.

And I've been curling a piece of my hair around my finger, which is the thing I do when I'm flirting. I'm done for. I close my eyes so I can't see his denim-covered bottom. I tell myself to calm down. It's just a drink. One. Then I'll make my excuses and leave, right?

He turns back to me when he reaches the door of the bedroom. I notice that his hair isn't really dirty blond at all. It's lighter than that. More of a golden blond I would say. Yes. Definitely golden. No doubt about it. None whatsoever. +

Ciara Geraghty is also the author of *Becoming Scarlett* (Hodder & Stoughton, \$32.99). She lives in Dublin with her husband and three children.



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