

Punch

Amy McDonald

‘Will the priest be there?’ I push earrings through stubborn holes.

Sarah’s head appears around the wardrobe door. She looks like someone else when she wears mascara. ‘Clare, it’s ex-priest. Okay? And because it’s a family thing, yes, he’ll be there.’ She says ‘he’ll’ like she’s commanding a dog. Coat hangers squeal as they are evaluated and dismissed.

Flick, flick, flick.

Sarah searches.

I hold a skirt—still attached to its special hanger—to my hips. ‘What do you think about plaid?’

No response.

‘Do you think they’ll like me?’

Sarah’s head pops back. ‘Of course. Just be yourself.’

I rummage through the top drawer for a pair of black opaque tights. My hand pushes through one leg and then the other, searching for ladders. They smell like drawer liners. I check the clock. ‘It’s almost five.’

‘Hmm,’ from the wardrobe. A discarded shirt flutters down to our bed. Tugging at her collar, she appears. Her face says ‘Well?’

I move to hold her and say ‘Perfect. You look amazing!’ Instead I pick up the gold crucifix at her neck. ‘What’s this?’

But she says, ‘Shit, Clare. Not now, Okay?’ Then she’s out the door, downstairs and collecting keys.

‘Hey!’

‘Hey yourself!’ We’ve arrived. Sarah is pushing through the front door into a hot, full family room.

‘Long time no see, stranger.’ An older man—an uncle?—pulls her into an embrace. Across the room someone says, ‘Sarah, what’s happened to all your hair?’ The man releases her and thumps her back.

She coughs. ‘Hey, Uncle Kevin.’ She holds my hand tightly and drags me across the threshold. My cheeks burn. I’m smiling but it’s forced.

At least twenty people watch with happy, curious eyes. And I know I wasn’t expected. Sarah coughs again and drops my hand. I search for something that’s nothing to look at. The tights are crawling up my legs, itching.

Uncle Kevin says, ‘So, who’s this you’ve brought?’

Sarah manoeuvres me to stand in front of her. ‘Uncle Kevin, this is Clare.’ She leaves off the second part.

We both wait for it, but instead she moves deeper into the room calling back something about drinks.

‘Well, anyway,’—the big man takes my sweating hand, pumps it and beats my shoulder—‘good to meet you, Clare.’

‘You too.’ I smile more and bob slightly to take up less space.

Still holding my hand, Kevin says, ‘Come on, love. I’ll introduce you.’

‘Well, I told her not to bother in the end.’ Sarah’s grandmother shakes her head and clicks her tongue. Another uncle, Ollie, nods sympathetically. Stuck between them I sip warm punch. Under my skirt, sweat is running between my skin and its synthetic wrapping. I press my legs together to blot.

‘So, Clare,’—Uncle Ollie fishes a strawberry from his punch and looks to me—‘where did you and Sarah meet?’

‘At a recital in town.’ Another mouthful of punch.

‘You play?’

‘Cello.’

A break in the crowd shows Sarah bending to take a sandwich from a plate on a coffee table. She has her back to me.

‘Wonderful,’ Ollie is saying, but I’m watching Sarah’s ass, the bony curve of it showing through her trousers. It’s such a different ass to the one that was pressed warmly against my belly only hours ago.

The tights tighten.

Ollie is asking, ‘So you live in town, too?’

My mouth makes a noise like it’s waiting for a tongue depressor.

I focus on the bobbing cherry in my drink. ‘I live with Sarah.’ Quiet.

‘Housemates,’ he replies without a question mark.

The flush on my cheeks feels like hives.

It’s Grandma’s turn. ‘Do you have a boyfriend, too, Clare?’ She doesn’t wait for an answer, but scans the crowd. ‘Where is Sarah’s boyfriend? He sounds like such a nice fellow.’

My wrist slackens as my mouth opens. The cup tips, punch splashes over my exposed knees. I stand and splutter, ‘Where is the bathroom?’ But I turn sideways on my ankle, lurch and hit another occasional table. A cloud of peanuts rains out over the carpet.

‘Ooh, steady there.’ Kevin is back, behind me, hands on my hips, righting me like a mannequin. He spins me, winks, and says, ‘Not too sure on those heels, eh?’

Whatever I think to say comes out as empty mouthfuls of air.

The flush on my cheeks spreads down my neck and out to my ears. I squat and start scavenging for the peanuts, returning them to their plastic dish.

I’m shaking.

‘What the hell are you doing?’ Sarah is hissing at my ear. She pulls me to my feet and confiscates the half-refilled dish. ‘Everyone is looking at you.’

The flush spreads to my throat and breasts. It burns. I claw the skirt back down my thighs. My eyes are hot.

Sarah pushes another plastic cup of punch at me. ‘Just try to be normal, Clare. Okay?’
Pineapple bobs.

Blink.

Nod.

Blink.

Just please don’t leave me here.

But she is reabsorbed into the family mass.

Sarah reaches to turn down the car radio. ‘Did I tell you about St Anthony’s on Wednesday? I was just lying there, on a pew, listening to the organ, and someone draped a coat over me. Must have thought I was homeless. Didn’t have the heart to tell them.’

Sarah’s words have worked their way through the heat of my ears. They hang like mist in the emptiness of my skull.

‘Clare?’ Sarah, at the wheel, glances at me.

My cheeks are deflating. The hairs on my legs, released, are righting themselves.

‘Clare, are you listening to me?’

The mist solidifies and settles. ‘That was him, wasn’t it?’

‘Who?’ The lights up ahead change and Sarah eases on the brakes. She turns to me. Her face is finally my girlfriend’s.

‘Him. Ollie. That was your former priest uncle, right?’

‘Yes, that was him.’ Her last word is all exhaustion.

‘So these’—I squeeze the tights—‘were for him?’

The lights change and Sarah accelerates. ‘Shit, Clare. Can you just drop it?’

We reach the driveway and I say it. ‘None of them know, do they?’

Sarah slows and pulls into the carport. She looks straight ahead and I watch the muscles in her jaw pump. 'I love you, Clare.' As she says it she is turning her head slowly, so slowly, to face me. 'But you just don't know what they're like.'

The gold crucifix catches the light.

I remember the warm room, the laughing. I look at my lap. A drop lands on the ridiculous plaid skirt. I bat another drop away with the back of my hand. My breath, lurching, smells like ginger beer and tinned fruit cocktail.

Sarah wipes her hand over her wet face and inhales. 'I'll see you inside, okay?' she says.

As she gathers her things from the back seat I look up. 'Did you tell them your boyfriend looks like me?' I say it softly and hide the grimace that shows I know I shouldn't have said it.

'Fuck you, Clare.' She slams the car door.

The balled-up tights are wet from tears and snot. I throw them at the windscreen.

Sarah is across the garden, opening the door and turning on the lights to our house.

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