

Many's the slip

Réaltán Ní Leannáin



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Siubhán Ní Bhrádaigh examined the dainty red shoe in the shop window. Crimson rose more than red, made of Italian leather, so fine, with little beads and filigree details. A high heel you would die for, if you didn't die from a broken neck wearing it.

Siubhán. Shoe-on. Shoe-off. That was what they called her in school in Dublin. The Royal Institute was a fee-paying school, with both nice and not-so-nice teenagers all claiming territory and establishing pecking order. Some students had tried to put her down, calling her *Shoe-on*, or sometimes, *Shoe-off*. It worked. Shoe-on. Shoe-off. Seán and Ruth called her 'Shue', and she was okay with that. The three of them started calling themselves the 'Shue-Crew', taking away the bullies' power.

Moving on from the Institute to different universities in Dublin, they still met up regularly right through their college years. Ruth studied Music. Seán signed up for History. Both three year courses. Nearly a year now since graduating, Seán was still signing on the dole, at home in the two-up, two-down that he shared with his mother. Ruth was still in her childhood bedroom in the large Victorian redbrick on the banks of the River Dodder. Ruth's parents wouldn't hear of her signing on and gave her an allowance. Everybody else their age was on the dole, in an unpaid internship, or gone to Canada or Australia.

Shue had picked a four-year degree course, Law and Spanish. She spent a glorious third year studying in Valencia. Sun, sea, no living with parents - and a lifestyle to match. Studying, teaching an odd English class - and spending the money as soon as she got it in the bars of Benimaclet. She hadn't looked forward to coming back to spending her final year living off her parents in her own redbrick house further down the river from Ruth. But she had no money, so no other option.

It was coming to the end of the fourth year now, and graduation couldn't come quick enough. At least with a law degree she might get a place devilling for a barrister. One of her parents' friends might take her on. Or then again, she might find herself back in Valencia yet, teaching English. Or yoga.

She looked at the dainty piece of nonsense again. Nah, she'd break her neck in those heels. And besides, red was definitely not her colour. More Ruth's.

Ruth. Always falling foul of teachers for running when she should have been walking. Talking when she should have been listening. Poor Ruth. Pity she didn't run faster as Romeo walked into her life.

Romeo was a Greek 'bin-dipper', as Shue's older brother so elegantly put it. Running to avoid military service in Greece, he dipped into bins for food right across Europe – half-eaten burgers, out-of-date bread from supermarkets, remainders of sandwiches. Sleeping rough, he dipped into bins further and further away from Greece until he reached Ireland and could go no further. He sat down one day on a bench beside Ruth, on the wooden walkway that ran along the River Liffey. She had run out of CVs to hand in to shops and bars and was taking a break from her jobsearch.

They started to chat. Normal stranger-to-stranger stuff - weather, the price of takeaway americanos, weather again, politics ... two young people with no jobs and lots of time on their hands.

'So, are ye an item now, or what?' asked Shue.

They were in Shue's kitchen, mugs of tea in hand. Ruth sitting over beside the Aga, her favourite spot. Ruth loved her comfort. Summer it might be but warm it wasn't. She giggled.

'Yes, we are – my first proper boyfriend. Isn't Romeo fabulous?'

'Romeo? Aw, come on, Ruth, what's the deal with that name?'

‘He can’t tell anyone his real name, in case the Greek authorities come asking.’

‘Not even you?’

‘Not even me. It’s to protect me. But ‘Romeo’ does me just fine. It’s so romantic. Like him.’

Despite Seán and Shue’s warnings to take it slow, Ruth fell deeper in lust with Romeo. And who could blame her? Exotically accented English, olive skin framed by black curls and deep, deep, dark eyes, Romeo by name was Romeo by nature.

Shue called down to Ruth’s house one evening a few weeks ago. She hadn’t seen Ruth in a while. Too taken up with the Greek, probably. Ruth’s parents lived in a big detached house on the Dodder bank. The river ran past the bottom of their back garden. Fancy-schmancy-posh. But the voice that she heard coming from the closed front door and her only at the front gate wasn’t fancy-schmancy-posh at all.

‘Ruth! Have a bit of sense. He’s an eejit, a homeless nincompoop with no skills. What can he offer you?’

‘We’re in love, Dad, and that’s all there is to it.’

‘You can’t be in love with that waste of space. You don’t even know his proper name. I don’t know who’s worse – my sucker of a daughter or that Greek hobo.’

The door flew open before Shue had time to get away. Shue didn’t want to meet Ruth’s Dad in that mood. But it was Ruth, sobbing, her coat flying. She ran past Shue and disappeared round the corner. Shue followed and found her a little bit along the road.

‘Ruth, are you okay?’

‘Dad is so old-fashioned!’ she answered, between sobs. ‘I didn’t mean to sneak Romeo in, it just happened. We got drunk, and then they came back and, and-‘

It emerged that her parents were having dinner in the golf club, and arrived back near midnight to find an empty bottle of vodka and two empty glasses on the drinks cabinet - and Ruth's bedroom door locked. Her mother cried, her father threatened to break the door down. When there was no answer from the two inside, he then locked every door in the house, in case Romeo would come out while they were asleep and take a memento with him. Some of their Waterford Crystal, perhaps, or one of the laptops. Ruth's parents hardly slept until the early hours, when exhaustion finally kicked in.

When Ruth emerged from her bedroom the next morning, her parents were sound asleep. She got Romeo out the front door while they were still asleep. But she had to face them when they got up later that morning . . .

Her parents didn't hold back. The boy had no name and no money. He was a hobo who lived in hostels. He ate out of food bins. What had they put her through college for. Why couldn't she find a nice medical student, or a dentist, or an accountant. Words became roars, roars became tears, and they were shed on both sides. Ruth was ordered to give him up, and see sense. This was their home, and she had better remember that.

Shue sat on the bench by the Dodder, Ruth spluttering out the saga.

'Mam and Dad are so unfair, it's not his fault he can't work over here.'

'Whose fault is it, then?'

Ruth flashed angry eyes at Shue.

'Not you, too, Shue? He can't use his passport, so he can't get a tax number. It's all the fault of the military in Greece.'

Shue sat for a moment in silence. What to say without Ruth getting up and walking away? Ruth, ever-sensible, ever clear-eyed. Up until Romeo.

'Would he turn himself in-'

'No! He can't, they'd throw him in prison.'

‘But he won’t ever be able to get a job here without a tax number, I.D., all that stuff.’

‘We’ll just have to find a way. Some way. Somehow.’

Shue left Ruth on the bench, staring at the river, but not seeing it.

She didn’t meet up with Ruth until a week later, the night they arranged to go to *Captain America’s* for a burger. *Captain’s* was a regular meeting spot, cheap and cheery. They met at the top of Grafton Street. When Ruth and Romeo arrived, however, Ruth explained that they wouldn’t be going in to eat. Romeo stood with an arm slung round Ruth’s neck, watching Shue and Seán through his long, black eyelashes

‘Romeo and me are going down Grafton Street to get a takeaway burger and coffee. We’ll meet you after, at Stephen’s Green. We don’t have enough money for *Captain’s*.’ said Ruth.

Silence. For a few seconds.

‘But we have this night planned for ages, Ruth. We none of us have any money. You always came – before this.’ said Seán.

‘I know, but Romeo doesn’t have any money because he hasn’t any dole. I’m not going in without him.’ countered Ruth.

Seán’s eyebrows nearly climbed round his head to the back his neck at that. Seán had graduated to the dole after college, at the same time as Ruth graduated to living off her parents. He lived at home with the Mammy, too. But his Mammy’s was a two-up, two-down in Dún Laoghaire, not a five-bed detached with a conservatory backing onto the Dodder. He always made sure to keep some pennies under the pillow, however, to be able to meet up now and then with the old ‘Shue-crew’.

Unheeding of the expressions of her two friends, Ruth strolled down the street, trailing Romeo by the hand, to buy him takeaway coffee and a burger meal and head off to their bench in Stephen's Green. Shue and Seán watched them go. Seán shrugged his shoulders. Shue said,

‘C’mon. We might as well eat. I’m famished.’

Seán studiously avoided talking about ‘that guy’, as he called Romeo, and so did Shue. They ate quickly, mindful of the other two outside on the park bench.

They met up again on Grafton Street after *Captain’s*. Ruth was alone.

‘Where’s-’

‘Romeo had to leave. You have to get in the queue for the homeless hostel early.’ scowled Ruth.

‘Oh dear, such a shame.’ said Seán.

They wandered down through the evening crowds listening to the buskers.

‘Romeo really has more problems than you realise,’ said Ruth, ‘he has to find somewhere to sleep every night. It’s so stressful for me. I worry about him so much. And those hostels are horrible places.’

By the time they had wandered down to the town end of Grafton Street, they were well-informed on various aspects of homelessness. They were looking at the rings in *Weirs*, *the Jewellers*, and Ruth broke out –

‘Romeo would love to work, but he can’t even draw the dole here – and he should be able to, with Greece and us being in the E.U.’

‘So why doesn’t he? Work, I mean,’ said Seán, deadpan.

‘His status is ... irregular.’

‘He’s a draft dodger.’

‘He’s a pacifist.’

‘He needs to sort things out with Greece,’ responded Seán.

They were at the main gates of Trinity at this stage.

‘He has to get his clothes from charity,’ said Ruth, ‘at least, the ones I don’t buy for him – those nice loafers, and tops. You know, things you don’t want to get from those places, or if you want to have a bit of style.’

‘I get mine from the Vincent de Paul shop up beside me. They do discount when they get to know you.’ responded Seán, quickly. He smoothed his hoodie ostentatiously.

‘Well, you can speak the language. Romeo is still learning-’

‘From you?’

‘– and you need to speak slowly so that he can understand you better. You really need to make more of an effort. For my sake.’ Ruth scolded

At O’Connell Street Bridge they stood, still listening to Ruth.

‘My parents won’t have him in the house again. Daddy says he’ll call the Guards if I bring him back again. He calls Romeo a tramp. A tramp! They don’t understand him. They’re treating me like a little girl. I hate them, sometimes!’

Shue made as if to argue, but Seán put a warning hand on her arm.

‘Lust, my dear, the root of all stupidity’ he murmured into her ear, as Ruth continued to complain, this time about society and inequality. Shue looked at him, and nodded. Now was not the time. Trouble was, it was increasingly never the time to talk to Ruth.

When Ruth finally ran out of points about Romeo’s problems with life, her own problems with her parents, Western Europe’s problems with military service, homelessness and Greco-English linguistic problems, she subsided and wept a little. Seán was unsympathetic, still quietly seething that she couldn’t save a few euro out of her allowance to come out one night in God knows how long. Shue was suspicious that the guy still didn’t trust any of them – but especially the woman he was bedding – with his proper name.

Needless to say, that particular night didn't end in *Copper Faced Jack's*, as it should have. They split up at O'Connell Bridge. Seán got the Dart, the girls caught the bus together, sitting together in silence. When it came to Ruth's stop, Shue didn't say goodbye to her as Ruth rose to go. Shue was too annoyed at Ruth, annoyed at bloody Romeo and annoyed at herself and Seán for letting Ruth and Romeo ruin their night out in town. Ruth didn't speak either.

They didn't hear from Ruth for a while after that. No texts, no internet messaging, no comments on social media. To be honest, they needed a break from her. Seán was looking up work visas in Canada, Shue was sitting her finals.

A few weeks later, Shue was settled on the sofa at home with tea and telly. She called Seán – her Mam's landline, she had run out of credit on her mobile.

'So you haven't heard from her either? No? Weird!' he said.

'No. And she isn't answering any texts or calls.' said Shue.

'Well, we don't have a mobile number for himself, either. So we can't ring him to check what the story is. We don't even have his real name.'

'Yeah.' Shue snorted, 'C'mon, now, *Romeo*? What does that tell us about the guy? What odds he's married three times over with God only knows how many kids to boot?'

'Ah, it'll all end in tears' said Seán, dismissively.

'Oh, we so didn't cop that on!' Shue retorted.

They moved on to talking about other things – Seán's visa application. The newest boyfriend (his, not hers). Shue's exam. The pain of living with parents ...

Shue was asleep on the Friday night at three in the morning when her mobile rang. Bloody brother, she thought, he's lost his house keys again in some nightclub.

'Yeahhhh,' she breathed, eyes still shut.

'Shue, Ruth here, can you let me stay in your place tonight?'

‘Sure I can’, Shue mumbled, eyes still shut, hoping Ruth was still in town and three quarters of an hour of a nightbus away. Her bed was so warm. ‘Where are you?’

‘Outside, at your porch door.’

Damn.

‘Mmmmmm ... Okay. Gimme a minute.’ Shue muttered.

She slid out of bed and tiptoed quietly downstairs. She unlocked the front door quietly, taking in Ruth’s shivering and her smeared mascara.

‘Into the kitchen.’ Shue whispered.

‘Good God, Ruth, you look a total mess,’ Shue said, as she closed the kitchen door firmly. She guided Ruth over to a chair by the Aga and sat her down firmly. ‘what happened?’

‘R-R-Romeo’ Ruth spluttered, ‘he wanted to stay over in my parents’ again. He missed the curfew for the hostel. And my parents hate him. And I keep getting it from him *and* from my Mam and Dad, and I’m sick of it. So I told him no.’

She was hugging the warm Aga, head down, not looking at Shue.

‘Did he hit you?’ Shue demanded, one arm on hip, eyes hard, as she put the kettle on for tea.

‘H-he tried to, but I blocked him and pushed back at him.’

‘Then what?’

‘He slipped backwards in the muck outside my parents’ house, and fell into the Dodder!’ Ruth wailed.

‘Shh ... don’t wake the oldies,’ warned Shue, ‘and?’

‘I don’t know. It’s dark, I couldn’t see, I was scared. I ran all the way here.’

Shue sat down at the table with two mugs of tea and thought.

‘Okay, so,’ she said after a few minutes, ‘he’ll have to fend for himself. It’s half past three in the morning and you’re a wreck. We’ll sort this out tomorrow.’

Ruth snivelled a little, but didn’t complain. She sipped her tea at first, then finished it in large gulps.

‘Okay, now, come on. You can sleep in the spare room’ said Shue and put a warning finger to her lips. ‘Don’t wake Mam.’ she hissed, and up they went.

A rested, more intelligible Ruth emerged from the spare room the next morning. She admitted to Shue that the relationship had been going from bad to worse. Ruth wanted a job so as to be independent of her parents. Romeo wanted Ruth to try harder at getting a job so that she could move out of home too. But only so he could move in with her rent free. Lust waned and annoyance at each other swept in. Arguments, quarrels. Shue suspected an odd hand raised as well, but said nothing.

‘Oh, Shue, I feel so stupid. How could I have imagined I was ever in love with him?’

‘Stranger things,’ said Shue, ‘and if he comes back you’ll be ready for him. He crossed a line tonight, and he won’t do that a second time.’

Ruth burst out crying again.

‘He was so nice until last night,’ she said. ‘But last night, last night he followed me onto the bus. I didn’t even realise until he got off at my stop, behind me. He kept saying that he was going to stay over in my parents’ place with me again. I told him he couldn’t but he said he wasn’t going to take *No* for an answer.’

‘And he landed in the river.’

‘Yes.’

Ruth was actually smiling now, for the first time in months, realising that no way was she going to go back to him ever again. Watching Romeo slide down the mud and fall into the river with a splash had been an epiphany. No more arguments, no more tears.

She could feel herself walking taller even now, determining never to contact him again. Shue changed his contact details on Ruth's phone, laughing, altering his entry from *Romeo* to *Has-Been*.

Shue and Ruth passed the day in a leisurely fashion. They helped Shue's mother with chores. They walked in the park, and chatted, chatted, chatted. They talked about Seán's new boyfriend, emigration (for Ruth), the pros and cons of devilling and living at home for a few more years or teaching English in Valencia (for Shue). They talked about Romeo, now villain of the piece for Ruth. They laughed to think of him sitting in a shallow river bed up to his oxters in dirty Dublin water. At least, they did until they turned on the six o'clock news that evening.

'... and finally, the police in Dublin are looking for any information regarding a man aged in his mid-twenties found drowned in the River Dodder early this morning near Orwell Road. They believe that the man fell in and hit his head on the river-be, as he drowned in a few inches of water. Foul play is not suspected. There were no identifying documents on the man ...'

Turning to Ruth, Shue saw the look of horror on her face. Shue put a finger on her lips. After all, they didn't even know his name.