

Belfast Student & Castaway Lover

Jaine

I. Sunday

She was tipsy in her single-bed dormitory the night she met him. A knock landed on her door around midnight, and the opened door revealed a man slightly taller than her. He had blue dyed hair, eye bags beyond visible, and a scent that was close to cigarettes. This was the beginning guide of things to resist in Belfast, Ireland.

“I’m Marque, your music is a...” He had a foreign accent and leaned against the doorframe that resembled a careless, free nature. “Too loud. Can you turn it down for me?” Ginny immediately apologized and lowered the speaker’s volume from her phone. Stepping back from the door of her room, she was able to get a better look at Marque.

It was her first night alone since her arrival to Ireland. She’d only be away from her home state of Oregon for a month, but homesickness already found its way to her heart; hence the beer and sad rolling blues that made her cry more than she already was. Coming to Ireland was at her own expense and volition, however. Camera equipment and delicate photo prints were scattered on the floor, they had yet to be taped to a wall again. Photography, the arts, that’s what Ginny was there for: a study abroad program that would make her closer to being a photographer, along with a traveling experience before completing her last year at university. Albeit far from home, the groggy weather of Ireland mimicked Oregon.

II. Monday

Ginny left her dorm room forty minutes before her first course of the day. She walked down the hall with a camera bag snugly resting across her back. Commotion could be heard out in the common area. Walking by a group of students she nervously kept her hands deep in her pockets. Out of the corner of her eye, she recognized the blue tuft of hair watching her; regardless, she continued walking down the hall, the stairs, and out into the cold.

She sat through an introductory class, titled Advanced Lighting and Film Experimentation. Ginny wrote minimal notes that she found most useful, spoke to a few peers at her four-chaired work table, and even introduced herself formally to the professor. Everyone had a different accent, and when asked to say “gobshite,” she earned a handful of chuckles that proved some friends were to be made.

III. Tuesday

“Commet vas tu?”

“Hm?” Ginny turned her head to look.

“How are you?” Marque had caught Ginny by surprise: at the shared kitchen on their dorm floor. Ignoring the whirr of the microwave, her eyes caught on to the paint stains of his pants and long-sleeved t-shirt.

“I’m okay, thanks,” Ginny pointed her spoon at the man’s shirt and circled the air, “What happened to your clothes?”

He laughed at the question, Ginny laughing along with him as well. This was the first moment in Belfast where an inside joke was made. Moving forward, their greeting was: “What happened to your clothes?” instead of: “How are you? I’m fine, thank you.”

Marque explained that he was an arts student and that Tuesdays were his oil painting studio days. Ginny returned the favor of sharing and explained that Tuesdays were her free study days for photography. In time, it was revealed through the small talk that Marque wasn’t as reckless as he seemed, and was actually a patron of the arts with an interest in the finer things in life. He wanted to travel the world, leave France, and maybe stay in Ireland or Spain so he could teach painting. She was in awe of his taste, or want, for more culture. It was charming and inspiring to Ginny.

She removed her bowl of soup from the microwave when the timer ended. Marque handed her a washcloth covered in old paint so she wouldn’t burn herself. Again, she was charmed.

VI. Wednesday, Night

She found her way to his dorm room with his washcloth hiding in the pocket of her hoodie. Ginny knocked on the door a few times and waited for a few seconds.

“Ginny, what happened to your cloth?” He grinned.

“Did I interrupt your sleep?” Marque’s appearance was on the groggier side, his blue hair sticking up and white tee wrinkled, and stained with paints.

“Just napping, I should be working though,” he looked down at her with a tilted head, almost as if he was trying to translate something. “What’s happening?”

“*Oh*,” Ginny pulled the cloth from her pocket and held it out for the other. It was spotless then, she had taken the courtesy to wash it clean for Marque after using it to wipe up her soup. “This is for you.”

He nodded as if he was impressed, “Brand new!” Marque smiled and gently nudged her shoulder, “Merci Ginny, so much. I like it, but I’ll miss the old paint.”

V. Thursday

The two caught each other by perfect timing. The first account occurred when they bumped shoulders heading to the communal bathroom in the morning. For some reason, Ginny was expecting to see Marque waiting for her when she

finished washing up. But he wasn't there, and her imagination was defeated.

On the second account, they caught each other again, this time on campus. Ginny left her class early with her coat buttoned all the way up to her chin. Ireland mimicked Oregon's weather until it was completely overcast. Shivering about the cobblestone path that reminded her of ancient times, Marque was exiting the main art building. Although his hood was covering the back of his head, Ginny knew it was him by the way he stomped along in his Doc Martens.

As much as she wanted to greet him, follow after him and tap on his shoulder, bump into his arm nonchalantly, walk quickly ahead of him, and have him call after her instead, she couldn't. Ginny felt nervous trying to approach him, it caught her by surprise and made her even more nervous trying to understand just why.

Marque walked ahead of her down the path, without looking over his shoulder to see if she was there watching. They didn't speak that day.

VI. Friday, Morning

Hopelessness filled Ginny's mind when she woke up in the early morning. Friday was another class-free, private study day; but she forgot to turn off her 8:30 AM alarm. A common mistake.

She wanted to be charmed again, by Marque. Ginny uncontrollably pictured scenarios of them together, out and about, and sometimes alone in the confinements of a dorm room. She rolled over to stiffen her groan into the pillow.

VII. Friday, Night

Ginny's door was knocked on unexpectedly. She paused the show playing on her laptop and folded away her blanket. She smoothed out the strays from her hair and ran, then walked to the door with a pounding heart. She hoped it was Marque, and it was not.

A familiar face greeted her, a girl with brown hair cut into a bob. "Hiya, I'm Vinuth. The girls and I are going out for some drinks and figured it'd be nice to invite everyone." Four other women revealed themselves from behind Vinuth, all smiling and inviting Ginny to come out. "We don't bite."

Ginny gave in to the invitation and asked for a moment to get ready. She wasn't sure what to expect from Belfast, but she packed a dress and a few nice blouses in case she needed to impress anyone. She pulled the spaghetti strap black garment over her arms and head, fixing the lines from the days of being folded.

Ears adorned with miniature gold hoops that complimented her complexion and square-based heels, Ginny found her way to the closest club near the university. Bumping past bodies in the late evening, Vinuth and the other girls showed her around the flashing lights. The first drink was free by compliment of Vinuth, then the second shot was free from a group of college boys across the bar area. Her head began to spin, her legs began to move to the music.

“Havin’ a savage time?” One of the girls shouted into Ginny’s ear over the music, they collapsed against each other and laughed. The girl laughed because of lost balance, while Ginny laughed because she could barely understand the other’s thick accent. They all found themselves hot with liquor and wrapped around in house music that stomped the floors. The rest of the evening was a blur until it became clear to Ginny that she was imagining Vinuth as Marque, who pulled her close to dance under a pink light.

“You like anyone yet?” Vinuth giggled in a drunken twist, her hands following the music above her head. Ginny shook her head at the question and laughed with the girl. “Good,” Vinuth shouted, “No boys in Belfast that are worth a dinger like you.”

She was sobered up by the time they were speaking in each other’s ears with searing breath. Lacking a drink in her hand, it felt more natural to press against Vinuth and notice every part of her face. Her lips, her enlarged pupils, the scent of honied whiskey and perfume; all of it was inviting.

“Dinger?”

“You, pretty girl.”

VIII. Saturday, Morning

They drank more and hailed a cab at two in the morning. The club closed and had to usher out the girls along with other students from the neighboring universities. Some of the girls exchanged numbers, or re-appeared from kissing around. Ginny was squished into the car with the other students, sitting in Vinuth’s lap with another girl crammed on top and others to the side. Regardless of the lack of space, all were laughing and re-telling their drunken tales. While the car pushed up the hill, Vinuth would play with Ginny’s hair and murmur words of admiration.

Ginny found her way back to her dorm room with Vinuth linked in her arms, both stumbling slightly in their heels. Her keys jingled, struggling to slip the laminated card into the slot. When she thought her door had beeped open, Marque appeared from next door.

“Bonjour,” her chest stirred at the sound of French.

“Bonjoor,” her words slurred and Vinuth laughed, still drunk.

Marque read the situation and held Ginny’s hand, helping her place the card in the door lock slot, whispering a quiet: “There.”

“Bon nut,” Ginny’s face flushed as she dragged along into her dorm room. Her French wasn’t perfect, but she wanted to charm the man just as he did to her. She shut the door behind Vinuth and herself, unaware and not particularly caring that Marque seemed to have words in his mouth.

IX. Saturday, Afternoon

She woke up later in the day, no alarm this time, but something else. Vinuth had left behind her rose quartz-beaded bracelet next to her head. And Marque, he had messaged her through the student housing messaging app.

Marque J.P.— 2:56 AM

“What happened to your clothes?”

“(Beer glass emoji)”

“Invite next time?”

They ran into each other in the communal kitchen once more. He watched Ginny walk to the microwave and make soup yet again. Beyond his blue hair and liking for painting, Marque was still a mystery that she wanted to lure in, yet he was the only tempting one between the two.

His body language was languid and naturally gravitated towards Ginny if they were holding a conversation. Ginny would step back and Marque would come closer, yet it wasn't enough for Ginny, even if she was the one seemingly prying away from his gaze and non-contact touch.

“Did you see my text?” He asked, leaning against the counter where the microwave whirred and the soup could be heard bubbling.

Ginny played with the spoon in her hand, “I forgot— it was girls only.”

“I can be a girl too,” they laughed together, her chest stirred.

“Sure,” she found it hard to continue the conversation, afraid to stutter or something else that revealed a growing appreciation for the other.

Marque settled in the silence and seemed uncomfortable for the first time. “You speak French, Ginny?”

The memory of her slurring the foreign words together came back to her, stamping her cheeks with red waxed embarrassment. Was he charmed?

“Just a little, most Americans know some French or Spanish,” Ginny replied.

“Show me more,” he paused, “Sometime, I want to hear.”

X. Sunday

They ended up in her dorm room on the carpeted floor, crisscrossed and parallel from one another. Marque invited himself over with the idea of doing a sketching practice with Ginny as the model. She stayed still, her face off to the side so he could become familiar with side profile of the human face.

Marque had complimented Ginny during the first minutes of the sketching process, stating how perfect and easy her jaw was to replicate. She blushed and was grateful that she wasn't being sketched facing forward. Secretly, Ginny wished she was. Maybe then he would see her orange-pink blossoms and compliment her beauty more directly, her imagination ran wild, her body had to refrain from shaking. The two rambled on through the process, they exchanged ages, birthdays, fun facts, interests, disinterests, life passions, social media, observations of the

world. Marque was becoming less of a mystery, but learning more about him only made it harder to look him in the eyes. Sometimes he would try to follow wherever she looked off to, only to understand it was an act of avoidance. He was charming her yet again, but this time, he was aware.

XI. Wednesday

Seeing each other became more frequent but at a higher stake. Ginny would style her curls in a way that would be impossible to not compliment or notice, and Marque would try to find anything to strike up a conversation with the other. The atmosphere between the two changed for the better and for the worse, considering a heightened tension where neither could speak confidently.

Marque J.P.— 4:42 PM

“They’re getting dinner...come with me?”

Ginny C.— 4:43 PM

“What time? I’ll go”

Marque J.P.— 4:43 PM

“Hurry please”

With her question unanswered, Ginny changed into a casual dinner outfit; a square-neck top that showed just enough skin to tell Marque that she liked him too much, but her legs remained covered in jeans that emphasized the casualty and self-restraint. The two met outside the dorm building, only it was just her and Marque standing around in the cold weather.

They rode in a taxi down to the town center, then walked into a bar and met with five other boys. It wasn’t her ideal dinner; no girls, or dancing, just football and jugs of beers with baskets of chips. Ginny kept her hand rested under her chin, aimlessly looking around— she had more fun with Vinuth, more freedom. But she didn’t have to pretend that Vinuth was Marque, especially with him sitting next to her. The boys spoke in a mixture of English and French, for the most part, she was excluded from the conversation. The others were kind enough to say hello at first, they appeared to be artists too, with punk and urban styles of dressing, but they all liked sports the same. Ginny became lost in translation, sitting at the crowded booth and playing with the paper straw of her beer that Marque bought for her; her imagination played on, she pictured them alone and falsely translated the other boy’s words as questions about Ginny being his girlfriend or crush. She wanted to be wanted.

As she played with the melting yellow ice, Marque bumped shoulders with her gently. The side of his head rested in his caloused hand. She felt cornered by him, sitting next to the wall with him on the other side, guarding her from the others. Ginny smiled at him without teeth.

“You’re not having fun?” He whispered, the others distracted with yelling at the televised match. She shrugged. “Let’s go then?” He mirrored her grin, “They won’t care.”

Before she could answer, Marque pushed the other two out of the booth row and spoke fervently with his hands. Ginny couldn’t remember his words to translate them in Google later, but she assumed it was: “get out of the way,” maybe.

“No fun!” His blonde friend yelled out at him, everyone laughing. They left the bar and walked around the town. Near dark and slightly windy, Ginny felt more inclined to walk closer to his side.

“Do you dance?”

“No,” she answered too quickly as they strolled aimlessly.

“No?” Marque kept his hands deep in his pocket, his sports jersey tee a bit too revealing for the weather. “You didn’t dance on the girls’ night?”

He brought it up again, Ginny began to think that he was possibly hurt by not being invited, or hurt by not being favored enough to be asked. She rolled her eyes and tried to cover her laugh by avoiding Marque’s face. “I did, just a little.”

“Dance with me then, party girl,” he pried at her shyness, nudging her shoulder again and trying to seek her affection.

“We have class tomorrow. I don’t want to,” she nudged his shoulder back and he stumbled, only to nudge her again in a game of shoulder war. “So what?” Marque replied, “I can be a party girl instead.”

XII. Friday

They kissed in between pink lighting at the same club Vinuth brought her to the week prior. Her hands were clasped on his shirt, while his hands held the corners of the wall and seemingly, all corners of the winds on Earth. Marque had a rancid and overly-masculine taste to him: strong liquor, minty gum, and nicotine. His scruffy skin irritated her smooth face. He was with Ginny for the entirety of the night, but she figured that the man had sneaked a smoke in the bathroom and tried to cover it up with chewing gum.

The music she found boring and the hidden darkness of the club brought them closer together. The game of charm ended, it was only them in a space that required neither of them to prove something. Albeit drunk, unlike she was with Vinuth while dancing, it was simpler to fall into Marque’s movements. He wasn’t much of a dancer, though. He awkwardly swayed side to side and kept his overly zealous hands in Ginny’s for most of the night.

They waited outside for the taxi to come, shivering next to one another with skin revealed a wee too much. Marque’s jacket was draped over her shoulders as they stood under the strings of light. The music was then behind them. The

masquerade returned and the lips before meant much of nothing with the silence that occurred. To Ginny, it felt as if the game ended.

“You can dance,” Marque joked and lit a cigarette. It stunk, Ginny wasn’t used to smoking as much. “I like it, I like you.”

Ginny smiled down at her boots, “I think I like you too.”

“Yeah?” He puffed the smoke away from her in the dark, his index finger tapping away the ashes into a gust of wind.

XIII. In Between

Throughout the rest of her stay in Belfast, the pink beaded bracelet stayed on her left wrist.

It was unspoken what they were, something along the lines of boyfriend and girlfriend but ambiguously unlabeled. They still slept in each other’s beds here and there since the Friday, though. They ate together, watched movies on laptop screens, and used each other as muses for their art.

Ginny found herself invited out with the girls of the dormitory again, purposely without Marque. He kept his distance from her friends but he waited for her to return. She danced with Vinuth under pink lights, not imagining her as Marque. They too kissed; Ginny preferred to think of it as an accident at first. She only wanted to show thanks to Vinuth for complimenting her again, it was an unspoken accident; a friend stated that gals made out sometimes, it was a kind kiss. Too kind to stop and prevent infatuation, even in the cab, outside the dorm hall, and in Vinuth’s bedroom.

She later returned to Marque’s room and fell into his bed sheets without a sober thought. She melted into his mellow skin and slept until the next day’s afternoon, pretending that the orange lipstick was her natural color.

XIV. End

Marque drove with her to the airport at night. He helped unload her luggage and rolled the two suitcases into the building with Ginny. They hugged at her gate, their differing nose bridges touching upon every empty kiss. Ginny boarded the plane as she looked back at the man with then faded blue hair. Marque blew her a kiss goodbye, and she waved.

Fourteen hours after, she landed in Oregon. Being reunited with the air similar to Ireland pained her heart, it was so close yet not the same. She didn’t have the time to say bye to Vinuth. Her boyfriend met her at the exit gate and loaded her

luggage into the back of his car. They rode in silence, and she slept in silence.

Ginny would receive messages from Marque occasionally, Vinuth as well. During a night together, Marque had promised he'd come find Ginny in America when he graduated from Belfast University. He said he'd learn how to paint like the American expressionists, and Ginny would have a gallery to herself. After months had passed since Belfast and her spring graduation, the messages stopped. Ginny resisted carrying on extensive conversations and anything that bordered on a shared intimacy, even if she would purposely post photos of herself just to see if either of them would text her.

@Vinuth.Venutian

Liked your story

"Gra mo chroi, the bracelet looks good on you"

"Miss you x"

@365.Ginny

Liked Vinuth's message

"Miss you too"

She thought about Marque whenever it rained and the clouds hid the sky. And when she saw women with short haircuts, she'd think about Vinuth's lost tenderness. Oregon was close enough to Ireland, just not the same. The gifted roses from her graduation wilted on her bedroom desk and began to erode over time. Rolling blues played in her room again; she wished she could return to Ireland, maybe fall in love again but slower, without masks and with a cleaner slate.