

Bad Boys

By Alannah Hopkin

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I met him on a train, the 7.30 am Dublin-Cork. Not my usual train, but these were not happy times. I had spent two weeks in Dublin on Claudia's sofa-bed, working in the National Library by day and putting up with Claudia's older man in the evenings. He paid for the apartment and God knows what else. Claudia was a social worker retraining as a barrister; not cheap. She was not only using Maurice, which I almost would have preferred; she genuinely seemed fond of him. A heavy grey-haired man in a shiny blue suit who liked to act helpless so that Claudia would look after him. One of his favourite tricks was to get paralytic drunk on his way back from the races and ask one of his cronies to ring Claudia from some desperate echoing roadhouse to come and collect him. 'Mossy's been a bad boy,' would be his greeting. He slobbered when drunk. All those years of social work had given Claudia a ridiculously high tolerance of bad behaviour.

Maurice must have been a professional gambler or else retired. Race-going, pubbing and hanging around Claudia's place acting like a child were his only activities. He had been a married man when they'd met, then his wife died, but still he wouldn't marry Claudia. Maurice said his children, already in their thirties, would be too upset. He was so pathetic. There was always a fusty smell of unchanged bed linen about the apartment which seemed to come from the staleness of their affair. Claudia didn't seem to care, as long as he paid the bills and took her away for the occasional hotel weekend.

And wasn't I nearly as bad, to smile at him across the dinner table while eating the food he was paying for, and pretend to be amused when he pinched my bottom, instead of telling him to piss off? There were other places I could have stayed, but none quite as convenient as Claudia's in a mews off Leeson Street, and

none quite as economic because Maurice kept picking up the tab. I stuck it out, pretending it was for the sake of my work, whereas it was as much for the novelty of not having to worry about money, of being taken out by someone who automatically paid the bill. And in a way I was also practising, testing myself, seeing how much I could tolerate from a man in return for a subsidy. I was learning, broadening my experience or something, not just sponging.

When Claudia said that next day she had to be somewhere that took her past Heuston Station at seven in the morning, I said I'd like to go home, suddenly realising how agreeable home would be.

I was amazed at how many people there were on the early train. It was Monday, I shouldn't have been surprised, but as a student I was living so far from the nine-to-five Monday to Friday world that I had forgotten it still went compulsively on. I got the very last empty two-seater and sat in near the window, facing the engine. Seconds later a Dublin accent asked if the seat beside me, on which I'd left my hand baggage and my coat, was taken, and I had to admit it was not.

I was aware of the fact that he was good-looking before he sat down because we had to do all that stuff with my bag, me getting what I really wanted for the journey out of it, him putting it up on the rack along with his suit jacket and his raincoat and then getting what he wanted for the journey out of a very battered brown leather briefcase. He was fortyish, with a boyish haircut that left a wavy fringe falling over his eyes. He was what the French call *châtain* – chestnut – something I find irresistible in a man. It's not just the chestnut or auburn hair colour; a true *châtain* also has this amazing skin, pale gold like sun-bleached tobacco. We probably don't have a word for it because the colouring hardly ever occurs in English-speaking countries. Mainly France and Italy, sometimes among Spanish and Latinos – obviously a Mediterranean thing.

What my *châtain* wanted on the journey included a copy of the *Irish*

Independent, at which point I lost interest. I was an *Irish Times* reader, a twenty eight year old eternal student working on a PhD in the English department of University College Cork, and I could not imagine having anything in common with a businessman who read the *Irish Independent*. He would be gullible with a taste for trivia, conservative but believing himself liberal-minded, and passionately interested in Irish politics, cars and Gaelic games. I'd had enough of humouring men after two weeks of Maurice. No more yea-saying for a while. I turned to the Letters page of *The Irish Times* which is as far in as I ever go, and began reading back towards the front page.

My mind was on higher things, but I couldn't help being aware that he was peeping at me around the corner of his newspaper every now and then. He was only going to read his paper as long as I was reading mine. As a regular on the Cork-Dublin train, I knew the routine. He wanted someone to chat to, and at coffee time there would be no escaping him. When the trolley arrived, just before Ballybrophy, we both folded our papers at the same time and dropped them on to our laps. I was digging in my handbag for my purse, but he was too quick for me. He had the coffees and two Danish pastries paid for before I could object.

He had brown eyes with long black lashes. I can't stand film star good looks, so obvious, but he was saved from perfection by a weak chin and his two front teeth which were slightly crooked and leant against each other. The effect was most appealing. He had a habit of pushing his hair back from his forehead with the back of his right hand. And a really strong Dublin accent that seemed at odds with his expensive-looking candy-striped shirt, the sober dark red silk tie and the well-cut charcoal grey suit jacket that he had stowed above our heads.

He introduced himself as Gerry Nolan, and said he was a management consultant working for various companies, including several in Cork and Limerick. Self-employed, with an office at home in Killiney, where his wife held the fort when

he was on the road. Married with three sons aged between twenty and nine – 'our after-thought'. Always got home for the weekend, whatever went on at work. Took the lads to a soccer match most Saturdays, supported Shamrock Rovers and Liverpool, went swimming every Sunday morning. He had almost become a professional footballer himself. He'd had a trial for Liverpool as a youngster (he used these lovely old-fashioned words and had a fondness for clichés), but went to college instead and then into management consulting: a steadier job in the long run.

He had left his car at Mallow station the previous Friday rather than drive home, knowing he had to be back in Mallow on Monday morning for a meeting. He spent about three days a week on the road, but whenever possible he preferred to use the train because you could get a bit of work done. He patted a heap of papers with a calculator sitting on top of them, then pushed his hair off his forehead with the back of his hand and smiled.

Now it was my turn. Never, I think, has anyone been so enthralled at the idea of a PhD on 'Ideological Shifts in the Anglo-Irish Novel, 1800-1960'. He kept on pumping me, and by Charleville knew all about my living arrangements – sharing a house with two men platonically! – 'platonically' sounds so exotic with a South Dublin accent. He knew that the house we shared was known as The Shambles and that I drove a clapped-out Mazda that dripped rust every time I slammed the driver's door. He knew that for part of every term I taught six hours a week in the English Department and in the summer I marked exam papers and worked behind a bar. He knew that one of my house mates, Lawrence was a journalist who spent about three weeks out of four in London. For some reason I decided to lie about Carl; I must have been enjoying myself. I said Carl was a rock musician.

Between Charleville and Mallow he made his move. Instead of spending the night on his own in Cork city, he'd prefer to come down to Kinsale and take me out to dinner. Would that be all right? Where would I like to go? Where could we meet? I

suggested the Pink Shark at seven o'clock. I'd be down there anyway catching up on the news. If he didn't turn up it wouldn't matter one way or the other.

He was half an hour late. I'd nearly given up. Too good to be true, I'd been thinking as I bought myself a second drink. It was so good to be home.

He'd changed out of his nice grey suit and was wearing dark blue corduroys, a pink open necked shirt, a maroon sweater and a soft suede blouson jacket. I preferred the suit.

I could see Noreen's eyes goggling behind the bar. She was trying to catch my attention, aching to know who he was. I was damned if I was going to tell her anything. 'Noreen, I'd like to introduce you to the man I met on a train...' – not likely!

He suggested Chez Bruno. One of the best and most expensive restaurants in town. Serious stuff. I'd only been to Chez Bruno once, a couple of years before when Lawrence got a meal on expenses because he was writing a travel piece about Kinsale. It was fabulous. Noreen lent Gerry a phone to book a table. While he did that I deliberately went to the Ladies so that Noreen couldn't cross-examine me. The pleasures of small town life.

As soon as he'd booked the table, I led him out of the bar to get away from Noreen and we had another one across the road where it was more anonymous. I had wondered, after our exchange of information on the train, what else we would find to talk about, but there was no problem. I even forgot how recently I'd met him. Those inscrutable brown eyes, the honey-coloured skin, the crossed-tooth smile, the back of the hand pushing the chestnut-coloured hair off his forehead all seemed intensely familiar.

We ate well and drank two different wines and he had a brandy and in the stupid way one does in that sort of state I couldn't resist taking him down to the late-night drinking place, the Bad End of Town as we called it. Noreen was there, with

Amanda and Roxy and Sharons One and Two and Angela and Jane.

'Rachel, where did you get him?' Roxy, an Australian, who was always the noisiest shouted as we came in. 'Anymore like him at home? Did you ever see anything so cute, girls? I want one too! Everyone should have one!'

He took it well, and bought them a bottle of wine though I noticed he didn't drink any himself. We left within ten minutes of arriving.

Next thing I knew he had his arms around me and I was hugging his soft suede jacket. A kiss followed that would have had the girls applauding and shouting for more. Then he said, 'I don't usually do this sort of thing.'

'Nor do I.'

'But I think we have to, don't you?'

I led him up the hill to my ramshackle shared house.

You don't often get it right the first time. Not the way we got it right. It was almost mystically perfect, totally joyful. Amazing. We laughed a lot during and after as if neither of us could quite believe our luck. It doesn't happen that often in a lifetime, no matter how many men you go with. What had I done to deserve this?

The man I'd met on a train.

Correction. The married man I'd met on a train.

I could go on in some detail but I don't think it would be in the best of taste. Either you know what I'm talking about or you don't. His physique was more like a man in his twenties than his forties. All that soccer training as a youngster maybe, or the weekly swim, I don't know, but girls, wow... You were right. Every woman should have one.

When I woke for the second time, he was already up, picking at a heap of clothes on the floor, disentangling his from mine. I jumped up too. He was late for an appointment and he'd left all his stuff in the hotel in Cork. I could hear coffee

percolating in the kitchen. Carl.

'My house mate Carl. He's not a rock musician. He's a music teacher. I was trying to impress you.'

'I'm impressed.'

He came back the next night and we ate at the Seafood Kitchen and went straight back up to The Shambles. He came down every week for the next six weeks, and then it was Christmas. I asked him what he did for Christmas.

'We keep it very quiet. Just family. The wife has a couple of elderly aunts who live on their own up in Mayo and they come and stay and we play a lot of canasta.'

'Canasta! I used to have an aunt who played canasta. I didn't know anybody still did.'

'Well, these two do. Like demons, as the fellow said. That's about it really. A few films on the telly, a turkey and all the trimmings, a game of soccer on Stephen's Day and then I like to get back to work. The holiday is dragged out too long in Ireland, if you ask me. What about you? Do you go home?'

'This is home. It'll be our third Christmas in the house. The lads organise it. Carl cooks the turkey and the pudding, I peel the vegetables and Lawrence buys the booze. We have open house for people who don't have anywhere else to go. There's usually about a dozen of us. Last year we had three men from the Cape Verde Islands off a tanker that came into the harbour on Christmas Eve. Portuguese speakers, but one of them had some French so we got along. Lovely people. You never know who you'll be sitting down with until the last minute.'

'I wish I could be here.'

'No you don't.'

We never pretended. There were unspoken rules. He could talk about his family, but I did not want to hear too much about his wife. I didn't even know her

name. For my part I never mentioned other boyfriends, past or present, and I never asked the impossible. I never said, for example, 'I wish you could stay for a weekend, just one weekend'. Never. Most of the time he couldn't even say which day of the week he would arrive. Because of this he always phoned before he came to the house, the idea being, I supposed, that I should know I was a free agent and I could put him off if it was not convenient.

As the evenings grew longer, we took to doing more ordinary things. He would turn up at the house after the phone call, run up to my bedroom and change out of his suit, then we'd get into his shiny black BMW (I'd been wrong about that as well; he didn't have the slightest interest in cars) and head out for a walk on Garrylucas Strand. Sometimes I'd invite him back to the house to eat. I can cook spaghetti Bolognese or steak. He preferred steak.

Going into the summer, his visits became less and less frequent. 'Nothing personal, God knows. It's just gone very quiet in this part of Munster.' Business, he meant. I guessed it was one of his rules not to invent excuses for seeing me, but only to drop by when he really was in the area on business.

I didn't exactly pine – I was too busy marking exams – but I missed him. I used to look up his name and address in the Dublin phone book and just stare at it, trying to imagine what he was doing at that moment. It was not a good habit to get into. Sometimes the temptation to dial his number, on the off-chance that the wife might be out, and he might answer, was very strong. But I knew that would be a disaster. Against the unwritten rules. He trusted me. Good behaviour was essential.

In August he took the family to Majorca for two weeks, somewhere on the coast near Deyá. I got a postcard. He came back with a wonderful suntan, looking better than ever.

He turned up at lunchtime on the day before my birthday with a case of wine, a contribution to the party we were having at The Shambles. He couldn't stay for the

party because it was on a Saturday. I thought it was noble of him to make a contribution if he couldn't be there. I suspected that for once he had gone out of his way to see me. For the first time ever, he didn't stay the night, but pushed on to a five o'clock meeting in Tipperary. Before he left, he went to the BMW and produced another large box with the name of a computer company on it.

'Happy birthday.'

'You didn't!'

'I did. And a printer. You said you'd always wanted one. Now you can finish your thesis.'

His generosity only made me feel worse. Tears poured down my face as I watched the BMW heading down the road to Tipperary. Presents often have this effect on me. It is much easier to give than to receive.

I did finish the thesis, but not until the following December. My fourth Christmas in The Shambles.

He didn't ring again until mid-January. It was two months since I'd seen him. He was in Tralee, on his way to Cork. He paused. As usual, I was given a gap through which to escape.

'I've met someone.'

Another pause, a very slight one.

'I'm very happy for you. I wish you all the best.'

'I never asked, but it didn't look as if we had anywhere to go.'

'You're bang on! Bang on!'