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Cereal for brekkie. I could of course tell them, I suppose. Dad with his noggin stuck in the paper, but Mum would listen. It was always me and Mum. Stands to reason with a couple of rugby meatheads in the family, the pair of them heading off to matches or training or else stuck in front of the box discussing the timing of the pass or some such waffle.

Hey, Mum? I could say.

Yes, love?

Only what then? *James came back last night? He comes every night*, I could tell them. *He's in my room right now if you want to nip up and say hello.*

And they'd have me carted off to the nuthouse.

Breakfast used to be pretty lively around here,

James full of guff like he always was, stuffing toast down his gob and looking for his rugby gear. Dad trying to read the paper from the day before. Mum and I always had things to talk about. School, for instance, or the characters she worked with, or *ER* or *Grey's Anatomy* or some film we'd watched together.

We still talk, of course. But it's different now. Her voice is different; there's a real deadness to it. Soon I won't be able to remember how she used to sound. That's one of the worst things, I'm afraid. Sometimes I wonder if she will ever manage to give herself fully to anything again.

Off to school. Nothing like a little education, after all. Three and a half grand a year to send your kid to a nice private school like this one, which in my case might be money well spent, but I don't think anything ever penetrated that thick skull of James's. Still, there was always the ruggah, wasn't there?

One good thing about this place; it's within walking

distance. And I can collect my friend Rhona on the way. There used to be more of us. There used to be Louisa and Amanda and Lizzie and Rhona and me and Jessica and Katelyn, and a couple of others who'd come and go. But this was the main gang. There's all sorts of groups within a school year. You have your nerds and your jocks. You have your goths and your rockers. You have your emos and your skateboarders. It's important to have your group. Find yourself without a group and people begin to wonder why. Once they begin to wonder why they don't want you in their group.

Yeah, like I say there used to be quite a gang of us. Now it's just me and Rhona together.

First thing she says is, 'Geography.'

I flip my copy out of the bag.

'Word for word?' she asks.

'Word for word. There's no way he's going to read it. You try the maths?'

'Why would I try it if I'm not able to do it?'

You have to admire the logic.

‘She’s likely to check that more closely. I’ll show you where to go wrong.’

And we continue on our way. Rhona is a talker and she’s just getting into her stride, how her parents are expecting her to put some order on that room of hers and not a word about payment, if I can believe that, when we hear someone call out,

‘Hi, girls!’

Not just ‘Hi, girls.’ More like ‘Hi, girls, I’m the new kid and am I not just the coolest thing you’ve ever seen?’ Only you can see he’s a dork straight away. Our age, but tall for it with his hair gelled up and the knot of his school tie halfway down his chest the way we all do. His blazer’s crumpled like he spent ten minutes jumping up and down on it once he got out of his mother’s sight.

‘I’m Alan,’ he says and then he gives us this look. ‘But you can call me Al. You girls in Third Year?’

‘Don’t worry what year we’re in,’ Rhona says.

‘What year are you in?’

‘Third.’

‘Then you can’t go into school like that. You got a hair brush?’ she asks me.

‘Use your own hair brush,’ I tell her.

‘All right, you do the tie.’

Alan, *Al*, wants to know what’s wrong with his tie and Rhona explains that it’s too low and the last thing he needs on his first day is a uniform infringement. Especially since the first thing any new kid does is report to his form teacher.

‘Don’t worry about our ties’, I explain, ‘we’re veterans of the system. We’re lost causes.’

And anyway, a form teacher comes across a new kid looking like he’s been here a year and he’s going to assume he’s trouble. To satisfy Rhona I grab his tie and give it a good yank, half choking the poor fella. And Rhona in no time has brushed his hair right over; she’s given him a terrific side part. In less than ten seconds we’ve transformed him from teenage rebel

wannabe to an eight-year-old making his First Communion.

‘That’s much better, Alan,’ Rhona says. ‘Now you’re ready for the school day.’

‘You girls want to walk in together?’

‘Not today we don’t,’ I tell him. ‘This girl here has yet to start her homework.’

Each day it’s the same. I wonder if James has finally hoofed off into the other world and then he appears.

Usually it’s when I’m on my way to the school gym.

Each morning I use the gym. It’s empty. It’s quiet. I can put on my music and dance.

Only today there’s no sign of the big lunkhead. Where is he? Maybe he’s gone for good. Wouldn’t that be something? Usually he’s here at this hour rattling on about how there should be a life-size sculpture of him in the main foyer. And another here maybe. Fitting reminders of his greatness, as he puts it. There’s no shortage of photos, mind you; as you

walk into the gym there's a whole series of them. James making a break. James dumping some poor chap on his back. James lifting the the Leinster Junior Cup. He thinks maybe it's the shame of only being a sub on the dance team that drives me on. Must be tough, he always says, following in the steps of a star, the finest sportsman the school has known.

Only today I'm spared the school's finest sportsman. What I get instead is the finest dancer in the history of our school.

'Don't worry,' Louisa Bennett says, 'we can wait.' I didn't hear them come in. Louisa Bennett, school captain, national champion, national captain, here today with my old chums Amanda and Lizzie. This time last year we were inseparable, but things change, don't they? They're welcome to the space, but, no, they won't hear of it. Happy to watch, they say. I was here first, after all; and we're all part of the same team, remember. Their voices are like syrup, their expressions like glass.

I want to leave. But I don't want to run from them. I have no choice but to continue.

Only it's hard to dance with them watching. This retro *Grease* piece Miss Smyth has us practising for the nationals is a tricky one, much trickier than it seemed last night in my room when the spins and steps seemed manageable and I know it's not right, my timing is wrong, the steps are wrong. If I keep going I'm likely to end up on my ear so I do the only sensible thing and stop.

'Lovely to see,' Louisa says. 'Such dedication to the craft. You know what my international coach says?'

'What?'

'He says a team's only as good as its weakest link.'

I sigh. 'And that's me?'

'No,' Louisa says. 'You're not even *on* the team. You're sub.'

Amanda makes this wincing noise, like that one really stung and she's feeling my pain. The same

Amanda who not so long ago was my closest friend.

‘The problem,’ Louisa explains, ‘is that there might be an injury and then the team would only be as good as its weakest link and, to be honest, that’s not very good, is it?’

I have some thinking to do, they reckon.

It’s not that they don’t want me or anything, they’re happy to assure me, it’s just that they worry.

National finals on the way and all, do I really want to be the one who mucks the whole thing up?

Not just for them.

For the whole school.

All the work that has gone into it. When will they have the chance again?

It’s not that I can’t dance, Louisa explains. I can dance ... a bit. It’s just, you know, like how her international coach always says, there’s some people who always, like, let you down. They just don’t have the right character to perform. Nothing against them or anything, it’s just the way they are.

She gives me the sweetest smile.

‘Why don’t you scoot along with yourself now?’

she says.

‘Tarrah now,’ says Amanda.

‘Cheerio,’ says Lizzie.

‘Think about what we said,’ says Louisa.