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Pornography

O'Byrne walked through Soho market to his brother's shop in Brewer Street. A handful of customers leafing through the magazines and Harold watching them through pebble-thick lenses from his raised platform in the corner. Harold was barely five foot and wore built-up shoes. Before becoming his employee O'Byrne used to call him Little Runt. At Harold's elbow a miniature radio rasped details of race meetings for the afternoon. 'So,' said Harold with thin contempt, 'the prodigal brother . . .' His magnified eyes fluttered at every consonant. He looked past O'Byrne's shoulder. 'All the magazines are for sale, gentlemen.' The readers stirred uneasily like troubled dreamers. One replaced a magazine and walked quickly from the shop. 'Where d'you get to?' Harold said in a quieter voice. He stepped from the dais, put on his coat and glared up at O'Byrne, waiting for an answer. Little Runt. O'Byrne was ten years younger than his brother, detested him and his success but now, strangely, wanted his approbation. 'I had an appointment, didn't I,' he said

quietly. 'I got the clap.' Harold was pleased. He reached up and punched O'Byrne's shoulder playfully. 'Serves you,' he said and cackled theatrically. Another customer edged out of the shop. From the doorway Harold called, 'I'll be back at five.' O'Byrne smiled as his brother left. He hooked his thumbs into his jeans and sauntered towards the tight knot of customers. 'Can I help you gentlemen, the magazines are all for sale.' They scattered before him like frightened fowl, and suddenly he was alone in the shop.

A plump woman of fifty or more stood in front of a plastic shower curtain, naked but for panties and gasmask. Her hands hung limply at her sides and in one of them a cigarette smouldered. Wife of the Month. Since gasmasks and a thick rubber sheet on the bed, wrote JN of Andover, we've never looked back. O'Byrne played with the radio for a while then switched it off. Rhythmically he turned the pages of the magazine, and stopped to read the letters. An uncircumcised male virgin, without hygiene, forty-two next May, dared not peel back his foreskin now for fear of what he might see. I get these nightmares of worms. O'Byrne laughed and crossed his legs. He replaced the magazine, returned to the radio, switched it on and off rapidly and caught the unintelligible middle of a word. He walked about the shop straightening the magazines in the racks. He stood by the door and stared at the wet street intersected by the coloured strips of the plastic walkthro. He whistled over and over a tune whose end immediately suggested its

beginning. Then he returned to Harold's raised platform and made two telephone calls, both to the hospital, the first to Lucy. But Sister Drew was busy in the ward and could not come to the phone. O'Byrne left a message that he would not be able to see her that evening after all and would phone again tomorrow. He dialled the hospital switchboard and this time asked for trainee Nurse Shepherd in the children's ward. 'Hi,' O'Byrne said when Pauline picked up the phone. 'It's me.' And he stretched and leaned against the wall. Pauline was a silent girl who once wept in a film about the effects of pesticides on butterflies, who wanted to redeem O'Byrne with her love. Now she laughed, 'I've been phoning you all morning,' she said. 'Didn't your brother tell you?'

'Listen,' said O'Byrne, 'I'll be at your place about eight,' and replaced the receiver.

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Harold did not return till after six, and O'Byrne was almost asleep, his head pillowed on his forearm. There were no customers. O'Byrne's only sale was *American Bitch*. 'Those American mags,' said Harold as he emptied the till of £15 and a handful of silver, 'are good.' Harold's new leather jacket. O'Byrne fingered it appreciatively. 'Seventy-eight quid,' said Harold and braced himself in front of the fish-eye mirror. His glasses flashed. 'It's all right,' said O'Byrne. 'Fucking right it is,' said Harold, and began to close up shop. 'Never

take much on Wednesdays,' he said wistfully as he reached up and switched on the burglar alarm. 'Wednesday's a cunt of a day.' Now O'Byrne was in front of the mirror, examining a small trail of acne that led from the corner of his mouth. 'You're not fucking kidding,' he agreed.

Harold's house lay at the foot of the Post Office Tower and O'Byrne rented a room from him. They walked along together without speaking. From time to time Harold glanced sideways into a dark shop window to catch the reflection of himself and his new leather jacket. Little Runt. O'Byrne said, 'Cold, innit?' and Harold said nothing. Minutes later, when they were passing a pub, Harold steered O'Byrne into the dank, deserted public saying, 'Since you got the clap I'll buy you a drink.' The publican heard the remark and regarded O'Byrne with interest. They drank three scotches apiece, and as O'Byrne was paying for the fourth round Harold said, 'Oh yeah, one of those two nurses you've been knocking around with phoned.' O'Byrne nodded and wiped his lips. After a pause Harold said, 'You're well in there . . .' O'Byrne nodded again. 'Yep.' Harold's jacket shone. When he reached for his drink it creaked. O'Byrne was not going to tell him anything. He banged his hands together. 'Yep,' he said once more, and stared over his brother's head at the empty bar. Harold tried again. 'She wanted to know where you'd been . . .' 'I bet she did,' O'Byrne muttered, and then smiled.

Pauline, short and untalkative, her face bloodlessly pale, intersected by a heavy black fringe, her eyes large, green and watchful, her flat small, damp and shared with a secretary who was never there. O'Byrne arrived after ten, a little drunk and in need of a bath to purge the faint purulent scent that lately had hung about his fingers. She sat on a small wooden stool to watch him luxuriate. Once she leaned forwards and touched his body where it broke the surface. O'Byrne's eyes were closed, his hands floating at his side, the only sound the diminishing hiss of the cistern. Pauline rose quietly to bring a clean white towel from her bedroom, and O'Byrne did not hear her leave or return. She sat down again and ruffled, as far as it was possible, O'Byrne's damp, matted hair. 'The food is ruined,' she said without accusation. Beads of perspiration collected in the corners of O'Byrne's eyes and rolled down the line of his nose like tears. Pauline rested her hand on O'Byrne's knee where it jutted through the grey water. Steam turned to water on the cold walls, senseless minutes passed. 'Never mind, love,' said O'Byrne, and stood up.

Pauline went out to buy beer and pizzas, and O'Byrne lay down in her tiny bedroom to wait. Ten minutes passed. He dressed after cursory examination of his clean but swelling meatus, and wandered listlessly about the sitting room. Nothing interested him in Pauline's small collection of books. There were no magazines. He entered the kitchen in search of a drink. There was nothing but an overcooked

meat pie. He picked round the burnt bits and as he ate turned the pages of a picture calendar. When he finished he remembered again he was waiting for Pauline. He looked at his watch. She had been gone now almost half an hour. He stood up quickly, tipping the kitchen chair behind him to the floor. He paused in the sitting room and then walked decisively out of the flat and slammed the front door on his way. He hurried down the stairs, anxious not to meet her now he had decided to get out. But she was there. Halfway up the second flight, a little out of breath, her arms full of bottles and tinfoil parcels. 'Where d'you get to?' said O'Byrne. Pauline stopped several steps down from him, her face tilted up awkwardly over her goods, the whites of her eyes and the tinfoil vivid in the dark. 'The usual place was closed. I had to walk miles . . . sorry.' They stood. O'Byrne was not hungry. He wanted to go. He hitched his thumbs into the waist of his jeans and cocked his head towards the invisible ceiling, then he looked down at Pauline who waited. 'Well,' he said at last, 'I was thinking of going.' Pauline came up, and as she pushed past whispered, 'Silly.' O'Byrne turned and followed her, obscurely cheated.

He leaned in the doorway, she righted the chair. With a movement of his head O'Byrne indicated that he wanted none of the food Pauline was setting out on plates. She poured him a beer and knelt to gather a few black pastry droppings from the floor. They sat in the sitting room. O'Byrne drank, Pauline ate slowly, neither spoke. O'Byrne