

NORMAL PEOPLE



SALLY
ROONEY

Author of CONVERSATIONS WITH FRIENDS

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FABER & FABER

It is one of the secrets in that change of mental poise which has been fitly named conversion, that to many among us neither heaven nor earth has any revelation till some personality touches theirs with a peculiar influence, subduing them into receptiveness.

George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*

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January 2011

Marianne answers the door when Connell rings the bell. She's still wearing her school uniform, but she's taken off the sweater, so it's just the blouse and skirt, and she has no shoes on, only tights.

Oh, hey, he says.

Come on in.

She turns and walks down the hall. He follows her, closing the door behind him. Down a few steps in the kitchen, his mother Lorraine is peeling off a pair of rubber gloves. Marianne hops onto the countertop and picks up an open jar of chocolate spread, in which she has left a teaspoon.

Marianne was telling me you got your mock results today, Lorraine says.

We got English back, he says. They come back separately. Do you want to head on?

Lorraine folds the rubber gloves up neatly and replaces them below the sink. Then she starts unclipping her hair. To Connell this seems like something she could accomplish in the car.

And I hear you did very well, she says.

He was top of the class, says Marianne.

Right, Connell says. Marianne did pretty good too. Can we go?

Lorraine pauses in the untying of her apron.

I didn't realise we were in a rush, she says.

He puts his hands in his pockets and suppresses an irritable sigh, but suppresses it with an audible intake of breath, so that it still sounds like a sigh.

I just have to pop up and take a load out of the dryer, says Lorraine. And then we'll be off. Okay?

He says nothing, merely hanging his head while Lorraine leaves the room.

Do you want some of this? Marianne says.

She's holding out the jar of chocolate spread. He presses his hands down slightly further into his pockets, as if trying to store his entire body in his pockets all at once.

No, thanks, he says.

Did you get your French results today?

Yesterday.

He puts his back against the fridge and watches her lick the spoon. In school he and Marianne affect not to know each other. People know that Marianne lives in the white mansion with the driveway and that Connell's mother is a cleaner, but no one knows of the special relationship between these facts.

I got an A1, he says. What did you get in German?

An A1, she says. Are you bragging?

You're going to get six hundred, are you?

She shrugs. You probably will, she says.

Well, you're smarter than me.

Don't feel bad. I'm smarter than everyone.

Marianne is grinning now. She exercises an open contempt for people in school. She has no friends and spends her lunchtimes alone reading novels. A lot of people really hate her. Her father died when she was thirteen and Connell has heard she has a mental illness now or something. It's true she is the smartest person in school. He dreads being left alone with her like this, but he also finds himself fantasising about things he could say to impress her.

You're not top of the class in English, he points out.

She licks her teeth, unconcerned.

Maybe you should give me grinds, Connell, she says.

He feels his ears get hot. She's probably just being glib and not suggestive, but if she is being suggestive it's only to degrade him by association, since she is considered an object of disgust. She wears ugly thick-soled flat shoes and doesn't put make-up on her face. People have said she doesn't shave her legs or anything. Connell once heard that she spilled chocolate ice cream on herself in the school lunchroom, and she went to the girls' bathrooms and took her blouse off to wash it in the sink. That's a popular story about her, everyone has heard it. If she wanted, she could make a big show of saying hello to Connell in school. See you this afternoon, she could say, in front of everyone. Undoubtedly it would put him in an awkward position, which is the kind of thing she usually seems to enjoy. But she has never done it.

What were you talking to Miss Neary about today? says Marianne.

Oh. Nothing. I don't know. Exams.

Marianne twists the spoon around inside the jar.

Does she fancy you or something? Marianne says.

Connell watches her moving the spoon. His ears still feel very hot.

Why do you say that? he says.

God, you're not having an affair with her, are you?

Obviously not. Do you think it's funny joking about that?

Sorry, says Marianne.

She has a focused expression, like she's looking through his eyes into the back of his head.

You're right, it's not funny, she says. I'm sorry.

He nods, looks around the room for a bit, digs the toe of his shoe into a groove between the tiles.

Sometimes I feel like she does act kind of weird around me, he says. But I wouldn't say that to people or anything.

Even in class I think she's very flirtatious towards you.

Do you really think that?

Marianne nods. He rubs at his neck. Miss Neary teaches Economics. His supposed feelings for her are widely discussed in school. Some people are even saying that he tried to add her on Facebook, which he didn't and would never do. Actually he doesn't do or say anything to her, he just sits there quietly while she does and says things to him. She keeps him back after class sometimes to talk about his life direction, and once she actually touched the knot of his school tie. He can't tell people about the way she acts because they'll think he's trying to brag about it. In class he feels too embarrassed and annoyed to concentrate on the lesson, he just sits there staring at the textbook until the bar graphs start to blur.

People are always going on at me that I fancy her or whatever, he says. But I actually don't, at all. I mean, you don't think I'm playing into it when she acts like that, do you?

Not that I've seen.

He wipes his palms down on his school shirt unthinkingly. Everyone is so convinced of his attraction to Miss Neary that sometimes he starts to

doubt his own instincts about it. What if, at some level above or below his own perception, he does actually desire her? He doesn't even really know what desire is supposed to feel like. Any time he has had sex in real life, he has found it so stressful as to be largely unpleasant, leading him to suspect that there's something wrong with him, that he's unable to be intimate with women, that he's somehow developmentally impaired. He lies there afterwards and thinks: I hated that so much that I feel sick. Is that just the way he is? Is the nausea he feels when Miss Neary leans over his desk actually his way of experiencing a sexual thrill? How would he know?

I could go to Mr Lyons for you if you want, says Marianne. I won't say you told me anything, I'll just say I noticed it myself.

Jesus, no. Definitely not. Don't say anything about it to anyone, okay?

Okay, alright.

He looks at her to confirm she's being serious, and then nods.

It's not your fault she acts like that with you, says Marianne. You're not doing anything wrong.

Quietly he says: Why does everyone else think I fancy her, then?

Maybe because you blush a lot when she talks to you. But you know, you blush at everything, you just have that complexion.

He gives a short, unhappy laugh. Thanks, he says.

Well, you do.

Yeah, I'm aware.

You're blushing now actually, says Marianne.

He closes his eyes, pushes his tongue against the roof of his mouth. He can hear Marianne laughing.

Why do you have to be so harsh on people? he says.

I'm not being harsh. I don't care if you're blushing, I won't tell anyone.

Just because you won't tell people doesn't mean you can say whatever you want.

Okay, she says. Sorry.

He turns and looks out the window at the garden. Really the garden is more like 'grounds'. It includes a tennis court and a large stone statue in the shape of a woman. He looks out at the 'grounds' and moves his face close to the cool breath of the glass. When people tell that story about Marianne

washing her blouse in the sink, they act like it's just funny, but Connell thinks the real purpose of the story is something else. Marianne has never been with anyone in school, no one has ever seen her undressed, no one even knows if she likes boys or girls, she won't tell anyone. People resent that about her, and Connell thinks that's why they tell the story, as a way of gawking at something they're not allowed to see.

I don't want to get into a fight with you, she says.

We're not fighting.

I know you probably hate me, but you're the only person who actually talks to me.

I never said I hated you, he says.

That gets her attention, and she looks up. Confused, he continues looking away from her, but in the corner of his eye he still sees her watching. When he talks to Marianne he has a sense of total privacy between them. He could tell her anything about himself, even weird things, and she would never repeat them, he knows that. Being alone with her is like opening a door away from normal life and then closing it behind him. He's not frightened of her, actually she's a pretty relaxed person, but he fears being around her, because of the confusing way he finds himself behaving, the things he says that he would never ordinarily say.

A few weeks ago when he was waiting for Lorraine in the hall, Marianne came downstairs in a bathrobe. It was just a plain white bathrobe, tied in the normal way. Her hair was wet, and her skin had that glistening look like she had just been applying face cream. When she saw Connell, she hesitated on the stairs and said: I didn't know you were here, sorry. Maybe she seemed flustered, but not really badly or anything. Then she went back up to her room. After she left he stood there in the hall waiting. He knew she was probably getting dressed in her room, and whatever clothes she was wearing when she came back down would be the clothes she had chosen to put on after she saw him in the hall. Anyway Lorraine was ready to go before Marianne reappeared so he never did get to see what clothes she had put on. It wasn't like he deeply cared to know. He certainly didn't tell anyone in school about it, that he had seen her in a bathrobe, or that she looked flustered, it wasn't anyone's business to know.

Well, I like you, Marianne says.

For a few seconds he says nothing, and the intensity of the privacy between them is very severe, pressing in on him with an almost physical pressure on his face and body. Then Lorraine comes back into the kitchen,

tying her scarf around her neck. She does a little knock on the door even though it's already open.

Good to go? she says.

Yeah, says Connell.

Thanks for everything, Lorraine, says Marianne. See you next week.

Connell is already heading out the kitchen door when his mother says: You can say goodbye, can't you? He turns to look over his shoulder but finds he cannot actually look Marianne in the eye, so he addresses himself to the floor instead. Right, bye, he says. He doesn't wait to hear her reply.

In the car his mother puts on her seatbelt and shakes her head. You could be a bit nicer to her, she says. She doesn't exactly have an easy time of it in school.

He puts the keys in the ignition, glances in the rear-view. I'm nice to her, he says.

She's actually a very sensitive person, says Lorraine.

Can we talk about something else?

Lorraine makes a face. He stares out the windshield and pretends not to see.

Three Weeks Later

(FEBRUARY 2011)

She sits at her dressing table looking at her face in the mirror. Her face lacks definition around the cheeks and jaw. It's a face like a piece of technology, and her two eyes are cursors blinking. Or it's reminiscent of the moon reflected in something, wobbly and oblique. It expresses everything all at once, which is the same as expressing nothing. To wear make-up for this occasion would be, she concludes, embarrassing. Without breaking eye contact with herself, she dips her finger in an open pot of clear lip balm and applies it.

Downstairs, when she takes her coat off the hook, her brother Alan comes out from the living room.

Where are you going? he says.

Out.

Where's out?

She puts her arms through the sleeves of her coat and adjusts the collar. She's beginning to feel nervous now and hopes her silence is communicating insolence rather than uncertainty.

Just out for a walk, she says.

Alan moves to stand in front of the door.

Well, I know you're not going out to meet friends, he says. Because you don't have any friends, do you?

No, I don't.

She smiles now, a placid smile, hoping that this gesture of submission will placate him and he'll move away from the door. Instead he says: What are you doing that for?

What? she says.

This weird smile you're doing.

He mimics her face, contorted into an ugly grin, teeth bared. Though he's grinning, the force and extremity of this impersonation make him look angry.

Are you happy that you don't have friends? he says.

No.

Still smiling, she takes two small steps backwards, and then turns and walks towards the kitchen, where there's a patio door onto the garden. Alan walks after her. He grabs her by the upper arm and tugs her back from the door. She feels her jaw tighten. His fingers compress her arm through her jacket.

If you go crying to Mam about this, says Alan.

No, says Marianne, no. I'm just going out for a walk now. Thank you.

He releases her and she slips out through the patio door, closing it behind her. Outside the air feels very cold and her teeth start to chatter. She walks around the side of the house, down the driveway and out into the street. Her arm is throbbing where he grabbed it. She takes her phone from a pocket and composes a text, repeatedly hitting the wrong key, deleting and retyping. Finally she sends it: On my way. Before she puts the phone back, she receives a reply: cool see you soon.

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At the end of last term, the school soccer team reached the final of some competition and everyone in the year had to take the last three classes off to go and watch them. Marianne had never seen them play before. She had no interest in sport and suffered anxiety related to physical education. In the bus on the way to the match she just listened to her headphones, no one spoke to her. Out the window: black cattle, green meadows, white houses with brown roof tiles. The football team were all together at the top of the bus, drinking water and slapping each other on the shoulders to raise morale. Marianne had the sense that her real life was happening somewhere very far away, happening without her, and she didn't know if she would ever find out where it was and become part of it. She had that feeling in school often, but it wasn't accompanied by any specific images of what the real life might look or feel like. All she knew was that when it started, she wouldn't need to imagine it anymore.

It stayed dry for the match. They had been brought there for the purpose of standing at the sidelines and cheering. Marianne was near the goalposts, with Karen and some of the other girls. Everyone other than Marianne seemed to know the school chants off by heart somehow, with lyrics she had never heard before. By half-time it was still nil-all, and Miss Keaney handed around boxes of juice and energy bars. For the second half, the ends changed around, and the school forwards were playing near where Marianne was standing. Connell Waldron was the centre forward. She could see him standing there in his football kit, the shiny white shorts, the school jersey with number nine on the back. He had very good posture,

more so than any of the other players. His figure was like a long elegant line drawn with a brush. When the ball moved towards their end of the pitch he tended to run around and maybe throw one of his hands in the air, and then he went back to standing still. It was pleasurable to watch him, and she didn't think he knew or cared where she was standing. After school some day she could tell him she had been watching him, and he'd laugh at her and call her weird.

At seventy minutes Aidan Kennedy brought the ball up the left side of the pitch and crossed it over to Connell, who took a shot from the corner of the penalty area, over the heads of the defenders, and it spun into the back of the net. Everyone screamed, even Marianne, and Karen threw her arm around Marianne's waist and squeezed it. They were cheering together, they had seen something magical which dissolved the ordinary social relations between them. Miss Keaney was whistling and stamping her feet. On the pitch Connell and Aidan embraced like reunited brothers. Connell was so beautiful. It occurred to Marianne how much she wanted to see him having sex with someone; it didn't have to be her, it could be anybody. It would be beautiful just to watch him. She knew these were the kind of thoughts that made her different from other people in school, and weirder.

Marianne's classmates all seem to like school so much and find it normal. To dress in the same uniform every day, to comply at all times with arbitrary rules, to be scrutinised and monitored for misbehaviour, this is normal to them. They have no sense of the school as an oppressive environment. Marianne had a row with the History teacher, Mr Kerrigan, last year because he caught her looking out a window during class, and no one in the class took her side. It seemed so obviously insane to her then that she should have to dress up in a costume every morning and be herded around a huge building all day, and that she wasn't even allowed to move her eyes where she wanted, even her eye movements fell under the jurisdiction of school rules. You're not learning if you're staring out the window daydreaming, Mr Kerrigan said. Marianne, who had lost her temper by then, snapped back: Don't delude yourself, I have nothing to learn from you.

Connell said recently that he remembered that incident, and that at the time he'd felt she was being harsh on Mr Kerrigan, who was actually one of the more reasonable teachers. But I see what you're saying, Connell added. About feeling a bit imprisoned in the school, I do see that. He should have let you look out the window, I would agree there. You weren't doing any harm.

After their conversation in the kitchen, when she told him she liked him,

Connell started coming over to her house more often. He would arrive early to pick his mother up from work and hang around in the living room not saying much, or stand by the fireplace with his hands in his pockets. Marianne never asked why he came over. They talked a little bit, or she talked and he nodded. He told her she should try reading *The Communist Manifesto*, he thought she would like it, and he offered to write down the title for her so she wouldn't forget. I know what *The Communist Manifesto* is called, she said. He shrugged, okay. After a moment he added, smiling: You're trying to act superior, but like, you haven't even read it. She had to laugh then, and he laughed because she did. They couldn't look at each other when they were laughing, they had to look into corners of the room, or at their feet.

Connell seemed to understand how she felt about school; he said he liked hearing her opinions. You hear enough of them in class, she said. Matter-of-factly he replied: You act different in class, you're not really like that. He seemed to think Marianne had access to a range of different identities, between which she slipped effortlessly. This surprised her, because she usually felt confined inside one single personality, which was always the same regardless of what she did or said. She had tried to be different in the past, as a kind of experiment, but it had never worked. If she was different with Connell, the difference was not happening inside herself, in her personhood, but in between them, in the dynamic. Sometimes she made him laugh, but other days he was taciturn, inscrutable, and after he left she would feel high, nervous, at once energetic and terribly drained.

He followed her into the study last week while she was looking for a copy of *The Fire Next Time* to lend him. He stood there inspecting the bookshelves, with his top shirt button undone and school tie loosened. She found the book and handed it to him, and he sat down on the window seat looking at the back cover. She sat beside him and asked him if his friends Eric and Rob knew that he read so much outside school.

They wouldn't be interested in that stuff, he said.

You mean they're not interested in the world around them.

Connell made the face he always made when she criticised his friends, an inexpressive frown. Not in the same way, he said. They have their own interests. I don't think they'd be reading books about racism and all that.

Right, they're too busy bragging about who they're having sex with, she said.

He paused for a second, like his ears had pricked up at this remark but

he didn't know exactly how to respond. Yeah, they do a bit of that, he said. I'm not defending it, I know they can be annoying.

Doesn't it bother you?

He paused again. Most of it wouldn't, he said. They do some stuff that goes a bit over the line and that would annoy me obviously. But at the end of the day they're my friends, you know. It's different for you.

She looked at him, but he was examining the spine of the book.

Why is it different? she said.

He shrugged, bending the book cover back and forth. She felt frustrated. Her face and hands were hot. He kept on looking at the book although he'd certainly read all the text on the back by then. She was attuned to the presence of his body in a microscopic way, as if the ordinary motion of his breathing was powerful enough to make her ill.

You know you were saying the other day that you like me, he said. In the kitchen you said it, when we were talking about school.

Yeah.

Did you mean like as a friend, or what?

She stared down into her lap. She was wearing a corduroy skirt and in the light from the window she could see it was flecked with pieces of lint.

No, not just as a friend, she said.

Oh, okay. I was wondering.

He sat there, nodding to himself.

I'm kind of confused about what I feel, he added. I think it would be awkward in school if anything happened with us.

No one would have to know.

He looked up at her, directly, with total attention. She knew he was going to kiss her, and he did. His lips were soft. His tongue moved into her mouth slightly. Then it was over and he was drawing away. He seemed to remember he was holding the book, and began to look at it again.

That was nice, she said.

He nodded, swallowed, glanced down at the book once more. His attitude was so sheepish, as if it had been rude of her even to make reference to the kiss, that Marianne started to laugh. He looked flustered then.

Alright, he said. What are you laughing for?

Nothing.

You're acting like you've never kissed anyone before.

Well, I haven't, she said.

He put his hand over his face. She laughed again, she couldn't stop herself, and then he was laughing too. His ears were very red and he was shaking his head. After a few seconds he stood up, holding the book in his hand.

Don't go telling people in school about this, okay? he said.

Like I would talk to anyone in school.

He left the room. Weakly she crumpled off the seat, down onto the floor, with her legs stretched out in front of her like a rag doll. While she sat there she felt as if Connell had been visiting her house only to test her, and she had passed the test, and the kiss was a communication that said: You passed. She thought of the way he'd laughed when she said she'd never kissed anyone before. For another person to laugh that way might have been cruel, but it wasn't like that with him. They'd been laughing together, at a shared situation they'd found themselves in, though how to describe the situation or what was funny about it Marianne didn't know exactly.

The next morning before German class she sat watching her classmates shove each other off the storage heaters, shrieking and giggling. When the lesson began they listened quietly to an audio tape of a German woman speaking about a party she had missed. *Es tut mir sehr leid*. In the afternoon it started snowing, thick grey flakes that fluttered past the windows and melted on the gravel. Everything looked and felt sensuous: the stale smell of classrooms, the tinny intercom bell that sounded between lessons, the dark austere trees that stood like apparitions around the basketball court. The slow routine work of copying out notes in different-coloured pens on fresh blue-and-white lined paper. Connell, as usual, did not speak to Marianne in school or even look at her. She watched him across classrooms as he conjugated verbs, chewing on the end of his pen. On the other side of the cafeteria at lunchtime, smiling about something with his friends. Their secret weighed inside her body pleurably, pressing down on her pelvic bone when she moved.

She didn't see him after school that day, or the next. On Thursday afternoon his mother was working again and he arrived early to pick her up. Marianne had to answer the door because no one else was home. He had changed out of his school uniform, he was wearing black jeans and a

sweatshirt. When she saw him she had an instinct to run away and hide her face. Lorraine's in the kitchen, she said. Then she turned and went upstairs to her room and closed the door. She lay face down on the bed breathing into the pillow. Who was this person Connell anyway? She felt she knew him very intimately, but what reason did she have to feel that? Just because he had kissed her once, with no explanation, and then warned her not to tell anyone? After a minute or two she heard a knock on her bedroom door and she sat up. Come in, she said. He opened the door and, giving her an enquiring look as if to see whether he was welcome, entered the room and closed the door behind him.

Are you pissed off with me? he said.

No. Why would I be?

He shrugged. Idly he wandered over to the bed and sat down. She was sitting cross-legged, holding her ankles. They sat there in silence for a few moments. Then he got onto the bed with her. He touched her leg and she lay back against the pillow. Boldly she asked if he was going to kiss her again. He said: What do you think? This struck her as a highly cryptic and sophisticated thing to say. Anyway he did start to kiss her. She told him that it was nice and he just said nothing. She felt she would do anything to make him like her, to make him say out loud that he liked her. He put his hand under her school blouse. In his ear, she said: Can we take our clothes off? He had his hand inside her bra. Definitely not, he said. This is stupid anyway, Lorraine is right downstairs. He called his mother by her first name like that. Marianne said: She never comes up here. He shook his head and said: No, we should stop. He sat up and looked down at her.

You were tempted for a second there, she said.

Not really.

I tempted you.

He was shaking his head, smiling. You're such a strange person, he said.

*

Now she's standing in his driveway, where his car is parked. He texted her the address, it's number 33: a terraced house with pebble-dash walls, net curtains, a tiny concrete yard. She can see a light switched on in the upstairs window. It's hard to believe he really lives in there, a house she has never been inside or even seen before. She's wearing a black sweater, grey skirt, cheap black underwear. Her legs are shaved meticulously, her underarms are smooth and chalky with deodorant, and her nose is running a little. She rings the doorbell and hears his footsteps coming down the stairs.