

“Robbie Brady’s astonishing late goal takes its place in our personal histories” | Sally Rooney

Conor calls her from an alleyway, near a plastic skip. It’s going to eat his phone credit if she picks up, and he expects himself, in light of this, to hope belatedly that she won’t pick up, but he finds himself, regardless, hoping that she does. And she does. She says hello in a crisp, amused voice, as if this phone call is already part of an ongoing joke between them.

Were you watching that? he says.

Oh, I was watching. The atmosphere in the stadium looked like fun.

It was good, yeah.

I envied you slightly, says Helen. I’ve been here looking at the memes for the last hour.

Memes about the match? he says. Are there ones already?

Oh yeah, it’s like simultaneous. It’s actually very interesting in the sense – well, do you want to hear my opinions about memes or are you busy?

No, go on.

Are there roaming charges?

I have free calls, he lies, implausibly and without really deciding to.

On the other end of the line, Helen doesn’t question the plausibility of Conor having free calls while in France, mainly because she doesn’t really register what he’s said, beyond the sense that he has given her permission to talk about what she was already thinking about before. She’s sitting on her bed, her back against the headboard. She sat this way for the duration of the Ireland-Italy match, which she streamed online and watched alone, eating a bowl of instant ramen noodles with disposable chopsticks while the light in her window faded from a bluish-white to a whitish-grey and finally to dark.

It’s interesting to watch an event being recycled as culture in real time, she says. You know, you’re watching the process of cultural production while it takes place, rather than in retrospect. I don’t know if that’s unique.

Yeah, I get you. And, uh. Well, I’m drunk so I’m not going to be at my sharpest here, but I want to say, you know, the disintegration of the idea of authorship.

Totally. That’s sharp, you’re very sharp. You don’t even sound drunk.

I think about memes a lot, he says.

Helen lifts her laptop off her lap and on to the empty part of the bed, as a gesture of commitment to the conversation.

But what’s tricky about the point you’re making, she says, is that it becomes very difficult to locate power. And to analyse operations of power, culturally. I guess we’re used to doing that through the hegemonic figure of the author, or at least through some identifiable power structure like a movie studio or an ad company.

Yeah, and now it’s just happening through like, spontaneous mass participation.

I guess you could argue online spaces are gendered and classed in particular ways but like, are they even?

Let’s never forget gender, says Conor. Gender everywhere, I would suggest. Are you hearing a lot of noise on the line?

A group of fans have just vacated the bar next to him and flooded on to the street cheering. In the lights over the bar their jerseys have that cheap-looking nylon sheen. They’re singing something to the tune of the 1979 Village People hit “Go West”. Almost all the chants, for some reason, are sung to the tune of “Go West”, making the individual lyrics difficult to decipher in many cases, creative and redolent of spontaneous mass participation though they are.

A little bit now, she says. Are you somewhere busy? It was quiet before so I assumed you were back in the hostel.

No, still at the bar. With the, yeah – the legendary Irish fans.

That’s you, you’re a legendary Irish fan now. Are you wearing a jersey?

No, I’m kind of keeping my distance, he says. I’m trying not to sing too much or like, suck up to any cops or anything.

The sucking up to cops I must say is a global embarrassment.

French cops as well. The policemen of a country literally renowned for racism. But anyway, look, here we are.

Having said this, Conor realises that it sounded like an attempt to move the conversation on to some new destination. He can practically hear their sudden mutual awareness that he hasn’t yet explained why he’s calling her, that he has hollowed out a little well in the conversation now where this explanation should go, and yet he doesn’t have one, or indeed anything further to say at all. He even considers hanging up, and emailing later to say the signal cut out.

He last saw Helen six weeks ago, at the beginning of May. He was visiting her in Cambridge for the weekend. After a long and tiresome day of travel and vague anxiety about currency, he arrived on Friday night. All day he’d been mentally converting sterling to euro in an attempt to keep track of how much money he was wasting on bus tickets

and cups of coffee, and this minor but persistent cognitive effort had drained him and made him feel miserly and self-conscious. It was dark when he got off the bus. He remembers now the flat blue surface of the park beside the bus stop, picked out by streetlights, and the strange flavour of weather, the crisp quality of air, the cool winding-down of a day that might earlier have been warm. He saw Helen then, waiting in her little jacket and scarf, he was amused somehow by the sight of her, and he laughed and felt better.

They walked back to her apartment together, chatting about nothing really. He remembers the yellowish stone facade of her building while she rooted in her bag for the keys. Upstairs she made tea and laid out a little food. They talked until very late. Eventually, in her room, she undressed for bed. He sat on the sofa, where he had put his sleeping bag, and she was talking about something to do with her thesis, how much reading she had glanced at before and now had to do in earnest, and that it made her feel slightly fraudulent, and while she was saying this, she was standing at the wardrobe putting on her nightdress. She was partially, but it seemed not consciously, hidden by the wardrobe's open door. Still he could see her bare left shoulder, her slim white upper arm. She hung her blouse on a wire hanger, replaced it in the wardrobe, and without looking up said: are you watching me?

I'm looking in your direction generally, he said, but not "watching" as such.

She laughed then and closed the wardrobe door. It was a black nightdress, longish, with shoulder straps.

I was listening to what you were saying, he said.

Oh, I know. I'm very sensitive to losing someone's attention.

He found this remark pleasantly cryptic at the time. Now on the phone he waits for Helen to say something, though it is by the unspoken rules of ordinary conversation obviously his "turn" to speak, having just signalled that he has something to say.

Good match anyway, he says.

I wish I'd been there. Were you swept away on a tide of emotion?

I was swept a bit, yeah. I shed a tear.

She laughs. That's very sweet, she says. Did you really?

A tear came to my eye, I don't know if it was shed or not.

I was watching alone so I couldn't really experience the full range of emotions, she says. It's like when you go to see a film in the cinema, you laugh in places you wouldn't laugh if you were watching on your own. But it doesn't make the laughing false, you know. Being alone is just less enjoyable.

Are you lonely?

She pauses at this question, which is unusual to hear from Conor, and for the first time in the conversation, including the time when he earlier claimed to be drunk, she's struck by the possibility that he might actually be drunk.

I have to say, I don't like most English people very much, she says. So yeah, living in England, that becomes lonely.

Maybe I'm just getting a bad impression of them with the referendum coming up.

Yeah, that looks rough. I think they will stay in, though.

I hope so. Either way it's brought out a lot of very ugly things.

I do feel for you having to live there, he says.

She, too, is thinking of the weekend he visited, the beautiful weather they had. On Saturday they woke up late, to a radiant blue sky powdered with tiny clouds. She made a pot of coffee, they ate toast and oranges. She tidied up the breakfast dishes while he showered, and she was comforted by the noise of the hot water tank and the rush of the taps. When he reappeared in the kitchen he was dressed, and she was still wearing her nightgown, with a cardigan wrapped over it. There was this moment of abrupt eye contact between them, which made her feel as if they hadn't really looked at one another since he arrived. Their eyes stilled the whole room. She thought about satirising this moment lightly to deprive it of its seriousness, maybe by doing something mock-flirtatious, but she couldn't rely on her flirting to seem comic to him rather than grotesque. Instead she turned away, flustered, and he just hovered there not saying anything.

It was a warm day out and Helen remembers what she wore: a flimsy white blouse, a pale ballet skirt, her flat shoes. She wasn't concerned, or doesn't remember being concerned, about her appearance in any real way, but she registered dimly that she would rather look bad than look as if she were trying to look good. They wandered around the Fitzwilliam Museum together in the afternoon, talking. After that they had lunch, and after lunch more coffee. Conor was telling some funny story about work and Helen laughed so much that she spilled coffee on her skirt, which pleased him. She knew that he relished her laughter. It seemed to give him some private, almost sheepish satisfaction, and while she laughed he would avert his eyes slightly, as if to look at her directly would be too much. She's met a lot of very intelligent people in Cambridge, people who take a brittle pride in demonstrating how clever they are. She somewhat enjoys engaging them in conversation, little jousting exchanges, until the other party

becomes defensive and irritable. But the enjoyment is ultimately feline, as if she's idly batting her interlocutor back and forth between her paws. There's something about their kind of intelligence which isn't lively or curious. Conor, who works in a call centre for a mobile service provider, is her ideal conversational partner, the person around whom she feels most clear-minded and least remote. They keep up with one another effortlessly in conversation, and maybe for this reason, or maybe out of a sincere and long-standing mutual affection, their discussions don't become competitive. Helen finds it philosophically sustaining that two people who agree on everything can still find so much to say to one another.

Most people are pretty liberal here, she says, and they're self-congratulatory about that. You can see they have a lot of contempt for normal people, who didn't go to Cambridge or don't have college degrees. And I think the contempt is actually part of what they congratulate themselves on.

Am I a normal person, to you?

Is that... you're objecting to my use of the phrase "normal people", or we're talking about our relationship?

He smiles. His eyes are tired and he closes them. The lids feel wet somehow. Well, I like to think I'm very special to you in some ways, he says. He can hear her laughing.

I am curious why you've called, she says. But I'm happy to be talking to you so I don't mind if there's no reason.

I'll be honest with you, I got carried away watching that match. The tide of emotion you were speaking about. And I felt an impulse to give you a ring. I wanted to tell you I love you, and all that.

For a few seconds he hears nothing at all. He can't tell what she's doing on the other end of the line. Then there's a faint noise like a laugh, and he realises it is a laugh.

I love you, too, she says. I was trying to think of something intelligent to say there about how we feel and express love through these communal cultural experiences like football, but then I thought, oh my god, shut up. I love you, too, I miss you.

He wipes at his eyes with the hand that isn't holding the phone. Her voice has a soft, wet quality to him, associated with the deepest consolation he has ever felt.

The weekend I stayed with you, I kind of thought something might happen, he says. But I don't know. Maybe it's good that it didn't. He swallows. I lied about having free calls, he adds. So I probably shouldn't stay on that long.

Oh, she says. Well, that's alright. Go and celebrate.

There's a final silence, in which they both feel the same nameless feeling, the same stirring impulse toward an unknown act, each in fact wanting the other to say again: I love you, I love you very much, but unable to say it again themselves. Despite this unexpected sense of irresolution, of something unfinished, they are each pleased at having managed to extract this new confession from the other, Helen thinking herself the more pleased because Conor said it first, and he thinking himself the more pleased because she didn't have the excuse of drunkenness. They say their goodbyes, distracted now. Conor slips his phone back into his pocket, stands up from the alleyway wall. On the main road a police car drives by, its siren revolving silently, and the fans cheer, for the police or for some other unrelated reason. Helen puts her phone on her bedside table with a soft clicking sound, glass on wood, and then pauses for a moment in stillness. She looks at the opposite wall as if a certain thought has only just now occurred to her.

Absently she touches her hair, unwashed today. Then in one seemingly natural, thoughtless motion, she lifts her laptop back on to her crossed legs and taps the trackpad with two outstretched fingers to light the screen.