

## Onions

It's been a year, maybe, since I was last in here, and that was the first time in a few years. It has been even longer since I would have last been sat round this table. It is both just as familiar, and yet completely uncanny. The new man, whose name I canna mind, has put up cheap prints of New York taxi ranks and anonymous fields which seems like a waste to me. A state-of-the-art art department and no one can rustle together a couple canvasses for display?

The floor colour has changed, I'm sure. Much brighter: a ridiculous shade of orange. The chairs are the same, which is also quite ridiculous. They were pathetic, the hollow legs would splay if sat on too firmly. The pale grey colour of the plastic seat gave way to paranoia; I was always concerned that if I had sat on them too long sweat, or even blood, would seep through my trousers and on to the seat. Just in case, I would stand up at an angle to check and clean and tuck under the table. It never was blood but sometimes there was a little slug of sweat.

The round tables could sit maybe eight people around them but of course at fourteen you have both no friends and twenty friends all at once. So, when there was more than eight of us, we would sit in layers: the higher up the hierarchy you were, the closer you would be to the centre layer. Onions, we would say, were the people on the outer layers, not popular enough for others to shimmy round and make room for them in the middle.

"I was a right onion iday, bloody Kieran wouldn't move up"

In adulthood, we still remember the onions. I told Carmen yesterday about my last panic attack, when I had been an onion at someone else's party, and she knew what I meant when I said it. Being an onion means you are an outsider, unwelcome and hanging on, and you don't forget that feeling of separation. When I was an onion, sitting unpopular on the edges, I used to feel like my skin was separating from my body and that the room was blurring. Even in adulthood, when I couldn't make it through the layers at this party I had retreated and done the same as I did at school and went in to the toilets to hide.

I'm not sure I will ever find a reason to return to the toilets here, but I don't think I want to see them: I don't care about them as much as I care about seeing the canteen and assembly hall. The girls' toilets are etched in to a grim corner of my memory; the sink drains clogged with sodden toilet roll, the wet floors, the strange regularity with which used sanitary pads were stuck on to the cubicle walls. Some girls, and I'm not sure who or why, would wet toilet tissue, ball it up, and throw it at the ceiling where it would then hang down like a papier mâché stalactite.

I had discovered my first period in the science toilets, having earlier gone temporarily blind and dizzy in an affa dramatic fashion. I pawed along the walls until I found the door and then collapsed on the floor in

the first cubicle. I was found twenty minutes later by a sixth year who called for the nurse, unperturbed by this boring rite of passage.

Two years later, in the maths toilets directly beneath, I found another, younger, girl crying. I offered to sit with her to exercise my training in pupil support. Teachers had gathered a group of senior students to tell us about confidentiality, advice for victims of bullying, homework problems, loneliness, so that we could pass their tips on to more students. No one came to the drop-in sessions I volunteered at so this was my solo venture.

It was the same block of toilets in the maths corridor from which I phoned my mum (on my very trendy Blackberry curve) to ask if I could go to the funeral of my classmate who died when we were, I think, thirteen. I think she was the first person I knew who died. I didn't know her well but her death buzzed around in my head. I think I was envious of my friends who were able to do something about the death, when I was going to be stuck in maths. Not envious of the skive, envious of the closure, the activity, the active grief. So I pulled my classic 'get out of class' card ("can I go to the toilet? I don't feel well...") and snuck away. My mum said yes, my friend said her mum would drive us, and the school signed me out.

It turns out that I was of benefit, having gone, because as the one who had spent the least time with her, I was pushed to the front of the queue to shake hands with her family by the other girls who were too scared. As a result I took the brunt of her aunt's outburst at hearing we were from the school. She shook our hands aggressively and bubbled nonsense I didn't understand. The coffin had butterflies and cartoons on it.

This specific table, the one I am sat at now, or at least the one which sat in this spot 10 years ago, was where we sat the day we found pasta in my banana milkshake. I removed the plastic lid from the paper takeaway cup to check the last dregs of my shake, stir around the bubbles, and spotted, floating, a twist of dry noodle. It amused us as much as any other slightly unusual thing amuses you in your early teens. Even better was when Sean, ever chasing a deal, returned it to the 'Anyhin else?' lady (so named because she always said 'Anyhin else?' in a nasally, high pitched voice at the end of your order) who apologised profusely and, confused, offered me another fresh noodle-free cup. I accepted, a little guilty knowing I had almost finished the first cup anyway.

Since leaving I have been back for careers fairs, plays, the flu jab, to get my passport picture signed, and to talk to the children about my life post-school. *Take your own path to success, whatever that means to you* type stuff. My favourite bit is when I tell everyone that despite being

voted *most likely to go to prison* in our yearbook, I still have a pristine criminal record.