

The storm came in late summer. It swept in off the Atlantic, bringing high seas and gale force winds that battered the whole of the west coast. It was severe enough to earn itself a name, a red warning, a lead slot on the news. People were told to stay away from the sea, but even so some ventured out to observe the spectacle. There were surfers seen riding the waves in Sligo, the occasional swimmer at Salthill. They were endangering the lives of others as well as their own, according to the spokesperson for Water Safety Ireland who went on the radio to warn of the risks. As it happened, there was nobody drowned, leading some to say the dangers had been exaggerated. The storm had not been so dramatic after all. Bearing in mind what was happening in the rest of the world, it seemed blessedly tame.

The TV was at that time broadcasting pictures on a nightly basis of forest fires in Catalonia. Vast tracts of the Amazon were in flames, while in Mexico there were reports of snow. A hellish heatwave raged across Europe, with record-breaking temperatures in France, Germany and Poland. City dwellers took to the fountains to cool down. Ice pops were handed out to the zoo animals.

In North America there was rain, so much of it that in New York City the subway stations flooded. Dive teams had to be called in to evacuate people from their homes in Illinois. There was hail the size of baseballs in Montana, a landslide in Ohio, cyclones over the Atlantic. It was the tail end of one of those storms that had swept across Ireland,

ripping the roofs off schools and football stadiums. Trees were uprooted, weather buoys unmoored. But still, we were lucky, people said. It could have been worse.

In the days that followed, the army was called in to help clear the debris from the roads. Electricity repair crews worked night and day to restore power to thousands of homes. Loss adjustors inspected the damage to property, while scientists lined up to blame global warming. Amid all this activity, one thing went unnoticed. It was happened upon purely by chance, by a man out walking his dog on the beach. The man wasn't quite sure what it was that he had found, but he at least had the wit to tell someone about it. Thus was the enormity of his discovery understood and eventually made public. What the storm had exposed was an ancient drowned forest.

The first newspaper to cover the story was the *Connacht Tribune*. A regional paper of long and distinguished standing, the *Tribune's* newsroom was located in the city of Galway, and it was there that a young reporter took a call about the strange find. Glad of a chance to escape the office, the reporter drove the dozen miles out the coast road to the location described. The dog walker was waiting for him there, with barely contained excitement. It might have been a mutilated body he'd found and not some dead trees. The reporter changed into his wellies, which he kept in the boot of his car, and together they trudged across a muddy field to the beach.

At first it wasn't much to see. The trees were no more than stumps, barely a foot high. The stumps stood knee-deep in the wet sand like a ghostly, decapitated army. It was only when you hunkered down close to the sand that you were taken by the beauty of them. The grain of the wood was clearly visible, tiger-striped in some places, rounding into whorls in others. The reporter had no knowledge of natural

history, but he knew that he was in the presence of something marvellous.

Back in the office, he made a few calls and gleaned some facts. His article was filed later that day, in plenty of time for the paper's weekly deadline. The lead story was about a delay to the start of a building project at the local hospital. The second lead was a court case involving a solicitor who'd defrauded his clients of their money. The story about the drowned trees featured prominently on page 3. Occupying more space than the article itself was the photograph the picture editor had commissioned from a local freelance. The photograph showed the dog owner in the background, with his head bent down to look at the ground as he walked. The drowned trees were in the foreground, in all their magnificence.

The ink on the *Tribune* was barely dry before the *Irish Times* picked up on the story. They posted it on their website and from there it travelled far and wide. It was a rare 'good' weather story and, as such, gratefully received by newspapers all over the world. Among those to feature it was the venerable *Guardian* newspaper in Britain. The *Guardian* also ran the story on page 3, under the headline 'Summer storm lays bare ancient forest'. They used the same photograph, diligently credited and paid for. It was a picture story if ever there was one. A quiet miracle, in a world full of noise.

PART ONE

I

Christo might so easily have missed it. He was not in the habit of buying a daily newspaper, although he would sometimes browse the leftovers scattered on a sofa table in the fellows' drawing room after dinner. He liked to start the day with a clear head, cycling into college without listening to the news on the radio. Without speaking to a soul.

This particular day was a Saturday, the last of the summer. It wasn't even ten in the morning, but already the punts were out on the river. The tourists reclined with self-conscious indolence in the dank bellies of the boats, as scruffy youths poled them inexpertly under the low bridges. Among them was one of Christo's more feckless students.

'Hello,' the student called out to him, straightening up from the knees as his punt emerged on the far side of the bridge.

Leaving one hand in sole charge of the handlebars, Christo raised the other hand in the air and gave a hearty wave. The student paused to wave back, rocking his boat as he did so and causing his passengers to collapse into each other in a heap of giggles. Christo cycled on, feeling inordinately pleased to have been greeted in such a manner. A pleasure that had a whoosh to it, it sent him flying along the final stretch of his journey, with his tweed jacket flapping behind him. For a moment, he had the sense that he belonged in the world. A feeling as rare to him as it was precious, he rode it as far as it would go.

Approaching the college, he hopped down off his bicycle without stopping it and ended up running alongside it, as if it

were a horse he was trying to restrain. He managed somehow to bring it to heel without catching his ankle on the pedal. Without getting his trouser leg caught in the chain. Master of his environment, he locked the bicycle deftly to the rack and, draping the strap of his satchel across his chest, swung through the college gates. Under the arch and out of the yellow light into the stony gloom of the porter's lodge, where he stopped to peek into his pigeonhole, which was empty as usual.

'Dr Jones,' said the porter, pausing at his tasks. He looked out of his hatch, glaring at Christo over his reading glasses, as if he were the don and Christo the porter. The buoyancy of the bicycle journey was lost, and Christo was reduced to being an impostor again.

'Good morning, Mr King,' said Christo, struggling not to be cowed.

Mr King raised a finger, as if he had just remembered something.

'I have something for you,' he said, looking down at his desk. His tone suggested a rebuke.

'Oh?' said Christo. Aware of some transgression, though what it was that he'd done wrong he could not have said. So many rules here, he was walking on eggshells. Walking on grass that should not be walked on. Wearing a robe he should not have been wearing.

Christo had first come to Cambridge as an undergraduate, but he'd never acquired the ease of the place. Just as he'd never stopped being a new boy at his boarding school, even though he'd spent nearly five years there. He'd been a late arrival, landing like a poor, bruised windfall midway through the autumn term. The headmaster had ushered him into the classroom and the lesson had fallen silent, the boys all turning in their chairs to stare at him with open hostility. Christo felt like he'd been trapped in that moment ever since.

‘Dr Singh asked me to pass this on to you,’ said Mr King, handing Christo the previous day’s copy of the *Guardian*. It had a yellow Post-it on the front with Christo’s name on it. A page reference to an article Dr Singh wanted to bring to his attention. ‘It wouldn’t fit in your pigeonhole.’

‘How kind,’ said Christo, feeling foolish and relieved in equal measure. ‘I’m much obliged.’

He tucked the newspaper under his arm and plunged into the stairwell. Breathing in the smell of dry old wood, he took the narrow, creaking stairs two at a time. Only when he was alone in his study, with the door closed behind him, did he become aware of his own breathing, fast and shallow. The feeling, a familiar one, of having escaped from a barrage of gunfire. It was only when he was alone that Christo ever felt truly safe.

He sat down at his desk. The college buildings were silent around him, but for the summer-weekend sound of tourists wandering in awe through the Old Court. The absence of students was a sorrow to Christo. He missed the youthful shouts that filled the air outside in term time. The rumble of their giddy feet on the staircase as they arrived for supervision. Those were the times when Christo was happiest, with the chairs drawn into a loose circle in his rooms and a pot of tea on the desk. A pack of Walker’s shortbread fingers spread out on a plate – Christo liked to think the biscuits would be remembered with fondness long after the mathematics had been forgotten. In the discussions that followed, there was the beauty of a shared interest. An illusion of comradeship that dissolved as soon as the students traipsed back down the stairs. When Christo saw them in the dining hall it was from the high table where he sat with the other fellows, and they seemed so far removed from him as to be not so much the product of a different generation as a different species altogether. Every

summer they disappeared, only to be replaced in the autumn by a younger batch, while Christo grew measurably older, year upon year. The effect of this was to make him feel like a rock in the middle of a river, with the water flowing endlessly by him.

The sun fought its way through the wobbly old window-pane, casting dust motes in a stage light as Christo settled down to work. He spent the next hour making notes for a lecture he was preparing on the logarithmic spiral. *Spira mirabilis*, it was also known as, for its miraculous ingenuity. As proof of this miracle, Christo had prepared a slide show depicting the many manifestations of the spiral in the natural world. The images he had chosen were: a cross section of a nautilus shell, the arms of the Milky Way, a cyclone over Cuba and a head of Romanesco broccoli. A final slide showed a photograph of a Danish pastry, which Christo planned to flash up as a joke. He hoped people would laugh. He worried they wouldn't.

'Of course they'll laugh,' he told himself. 'It's funny!'

He stood up and crossed the room to fill the kettle from the tap in the corner. As he waited for it to boil, he took out the day-old copy of the *Guardian* and studied the front-page photograph of forest fires raging in the Amazon. There was a teaser on the masthead for an interview with someone called Taylor Swift. A travel feature on the 'Top 10 breaks in Britain for nature lovers'.

Sitting back down at the desk with his mug of tea, Christo turned the page. It was the headline that caught his attention first, rather than the photograph, although afterwards it would be the photograph that most absorbed him. According to the short, three-column article below the headline, the drowned forest was seven and a half thousand years old, but its existence had only been revealed by the recent storm. The

picture showed the trunks rising out of the shallows. The severed stumps had been worn smooth by the water until they were as round as ankle bones. The oily grain of the wood was clearly visible in the picture. Also visible was the figure of a man in the background, walking over a beach of grey stones. Christo checked the caption, but there was no indication of where exactly the beach was located, or what it was called, only the name of the nearest village.

Christo looked up at the clock on the wall to check the time before picking up the phone to call his sister. His blood was bubbling with nerves as he started rehearsing what he would say, but she answered before he'd thought it through.

'Christo?'

Her voice, as rich and deep as a hollow brass instrument. It never failed to sound a long, echoing note in his heart.

'Cassie, did I wake you?'

Like a kidnap victim who's been blindfolded and taken to an unknown location, he leaned his ear into the spaces created by the lag on the line and heard music from what he deduced to be a dance studio near her house. He detected the sound of light traffic and men's laughter, stationary and unhurried. Christo pictured three of them sitting on plastic chairs at a nearby corner. Then came the sound of a street vendor's bicycle horn, *parp, parp, parp*. A radio pumping out pop music, punctuated by the presenter's voice speaking rapid-fire, excitable Spanish.

'Christo, is everything okay?'

He could hear her breath coming fast and shallow in the expectation of bad news.

'Everything's fine,' he said. 'I just wanted to tell you. They've found Margo's trees.'

That was where it all started for Christo. He'd just turned thirteen when Margo took them up the knobbly old mountain beyond the village and told them about the trees. Cassie was with them, and Seamus was there too, but not Jim. In Christo's memory, his mother was also absent, which didn't mean she wasn't there, only that he had no memory of her, and there was nobody he could ask. It was a problem he and Cassie regularly encountered.

'Where did you live in London?'

She was a teenager when she first asked him this, seizing on the sliver of life he'd had before she was born. She was jealous that he'd had their mother all to himself before she arrived.

'I don't know,' he would say.

He'd been a baby then. He had no memory of it.

'How old were you when you moved to the States?'

'I've no idea,' Christo would say. 'One? Maybe two?'

'Where did you live?'

There was no end to her capacity for asking questions. As a child she'd had an endless supply of them. It was exhausting.

'*Cassie Koenig*,' their mother used to say. '*Never in my whole life have I met anyone who asks so many questions. It's enough to drive a person stark-raving mad.*'

Christo was two and a half when she was born, a lone entity until her arrival introduced the concept of relativity. 'You're a big brother now,' he was told. It was only when he was measured against her that he was found to be so. 'Big

brother,' he repeated, like a mantra, as if by doing so he could convince himself that this was the case, when the truth was that she took up more space in the world than he did, with her big head and her big eyes and her big demands on everyone's attention. His first memory of her was of a crib that occupied the centre of the living room. Someone must have picked him up and shown her to him. Someone must have explained to him what she was, but he had no memory of it. She was no more than an alien presence, unseen by him and unwanted. Christo couldn't understand why everyone was so pleased by her arrival.

He was three when he discovered he could make her laugh. Up until then Christo had never imagined that he had it within himself to be funny, but that raucous baby laughter of hers cast a bright stage light over him, and he woke up to the comedian inside himself. All he had to do was look at her and she laughed. She laughed until her belly wobbled and her head collapsed on her shoulders. Sometimes she brought on a fit of hiccups from laughing so much. One time she laughed so much that she fell over, right where she was sitting on her play mat. Ever since then, there had been inside Christo a person who could make his sister laugh so hard that she'd fall over. Anytime she was in need of cheering up, he would remind her of it.

'Sometimes you laughed so much the snot came out your nose.'

Cassie would squirm with pleasure. She loved to hear stories about herself.

'Tell me about the time I ate all your Hallowe'en candy,' she might say.

'Well, that wasn't just the one time.'

'Tell me, anyway.'

As a child, Cassie had a great lust for life. Any treat that

was going, any opportunity for adventure, she was the girl with her hand up to say, 'Me! Me! Me!' A queue-jumper par excellence, Cassie saw no harm in putting herself to the fore of things. This monstrous capacity for self-advancement was so natural to her that it was somehow endearing. Christo had been saddened in recent years to see it fade, a more subdued sister coming to live in the skin of the old one. This sister was increasingly preoccupied by all the pieces she was missing from the past.

'Do you remember living in the beach house?' she'd asked him recently.

'Not really,' he'd said, which wasn't quite true. He remembered the sandy porch steps that were painted a cheery shade of seaside blue. He remembered the sound of the sea outside the window and the sweet smell of watermelon inside the house. There was no single incident he remembered, only a sense of doors opening and closing. Windows in the walls like square paintings of sea and sky. Voices on the verge of laughter.

By the time he was in elementary school they'd moved to the house in the hills. Christo remembered his first Christmas at the new house – he got a Lego Galaxy Commander – but he couldn't have said how old he was then. He had a memory of losing a tooth at that house – he had a distinct memory of holding the bloody tooth in his hand – but he couldn't pin an age on it. He remembered standing in line for a ride at SeaWorld – '*He's twelve,*' his mother had assured the attendant, but he wasn't. He was only ten. The next date he was sure of was his thirteenth birthday, the summer they were in Ireland.

'A baker's dozen,' he remembered Jim saying, as his mother counted out the candles. Christo had never heard the expression before, but every time he'd heard it since he found himself back in that kitchen in the west of Ireland, with his

mother leaning over the big square table, lighter poised to fire up his birthday candles. Cassie kept blowing them out before he had a chance to.

‘I wish I could remember where the house was,’ he asked her when he called her. ‘Do you happen to know?’

He couldn’t for the life of him remember the name of the village, only the particulars of it. There was a shop and a pub at the crossroads with some petrol pumps out front. A fork in the road led to a wide white beach, and beyond the beach was the house and beyond the house the pier. That was the route they walked back and forth all summer.

‘No clue,’ said Cassie. ‘Jesus, Christo. I was only ten years old.’

It was early summer when they arrived. This much Christo had been able to calculate from the memory of the yellow flag irises they saw blooming in the ditches. The days were long, light lingering in the westernmost reaches of the sky until nearly midnight as they played down on the pier. By the end of their time there, the berries were ripening to black in the hedgerows. Using empty margarine cartons – or in Cassie’s case a blue plastic bucket in the shape of an inverted castle – they combed the back roads trying to find enough of them to make a crumble.

‘Always walk on the right-hand side of the road,’ Jim had told them. ‘That way you can see the cars that are coming to run you down.’

‘You’d be amazed how many berries you need to make a crumble,’ said Margo, as their enthusiasm for the project began to wane. The ripest blackberries all seemed to grow just out of reach, so you had to battle through brambles to get to them. Cassie and Seamus were both wearing long sleeves, but Christo was in a t-shirt. By the time they got back to the house, his bare arms were torn to shreds.

‘*Oh, Christo,*’ said his mother, putting a hand over her mouth as a stopper for her laughter. ‘*You look like you’ve been mauled by a lion.*’

‘That’s one brave lad you’ve got,’ said Jim. ‘Not a whisper out of him.’

Christo had never forgotten that, just as he had not forgotten the way Margo called him ‘love’. The way the woman in the shop said, ‘You poor crayturs,’ as she held the jar of cola bottles out so they could pick one ‘on the house’. A note of pity in her voice that, even as a child, Christo was quick to detect. He heard it without understanding it.

‘There’s money coming to her from her father.’ That was another thing Christo remembered hearing. There was a trip to a lawyer’s office in the city. She left them sitting in the car for what seemed like hours. They scrambled into the front, where Cassie sat in the passenger seat and took control of the tape deck. Christo sat in the driver’s seat, grabbing the wheel with both hands as he pretended to drive away.

‘*Here,*’ said their mother, returning to the car with a bag of iced buns that she tossed into the back seat. ‘*Feeding time at the zoo.*’

She might almost have been a normal mother that summer, getting up in the mornings to make them pancakes, which they ate with lemon and sugar. On sunny days she made Tayto crisp sandwiches that they wrapped in tinfoil and brought down to the beach. She sat on a plaid rug with her book, while they played in the sand dunes, devising ever more elaborate games of make-believe. On rainy days, she made them hot chocolate and let them strip the blankets off the beds to make a den. She would pull the rocking chair up to the kitchen window and sit staring out at the rain, a mug of tea in her hands and the sea on the other side of the glass feeding some need in her. Other times she sat hunched over

the kitchen table, humming as she worked away patiently at a huge jigsaw. One of the corner pieces was missing, much to her annoyance. She pulled the dresser away from the wall and searched behind it. Got down on her hands and knees and looked under the chairs, the stove, the radiator.

'There's a fiver in it for anyone who finds that fucking corner,' she announced, in that voice of hers that came unsummoned at times. There was no part of her that remained – not her face, nor her smell – so much as her voice. Like a gold filling or a steel pin that's found among the ashes after a body is cremated, her voice was made of some substance that would not be destroyed.

'Count me out,' she would have said, the day they set off for the mountain. *'Mountain climbing is for mugs.'*

Christo had no recollection of the actual climb, only the view from the standing stone at the top. He remembered the feeling of being up there. He'd felt like he was standing on top of the world.

'Once upon a time,' Margo told them. *'This whole place would have been covered by trees.'*

She produced some wine gums from the pocket of her raincoat. Cassie had to have a red one and Seamus wanted black. Christo wasn't fussy, so he took a green one. The flavour of it was watery and tantalizingly familiar, but he couldn't have said what fruit it was supposed to be.

'Look,' said Margo, hunching down behind him. She wrapped an arm around his shoulders, so the finger she used to point was positioned for his eyeline as well as her own.

'That way is south. That's County Clare.'

Slowly, she turned him from the waist, so they were looking down at the hammerhead formation of the beaches below them. The sea was an impossible shade of turquoise. The sand an unearthly white.

‘Now,’ she said, continuing the sweep of her arm to the right. ‘Out there you have County Mayo.’

He could see a dark headland against the sky.

‘Beyond that is Sligo, then Donegal.’

Turning inland, Christo saw great tracts of bog, broken only by the presence of a still, dark lake. In the foreground, nothing but rocks and gorse and tufts of straw-coloured reeds rising out of the soggy ground. He let his eyes roam back and forth, as if he was looking for something, but what that thing might be he did not know.

‘Now imagine,’ she told him, in that voice of hers that ran clear with wonder. ‘A very long time ago, all of this would have been covered in trees. Only the very tops of the mountains would have been visible above the treeline.’

‘What happened to them?’

‘We did,’ she said. ‘Human beings. We came along and chopped them all down.’

Christo saw it then, as clear as anything. How the landscape bore the absence of those trees like an old scar.

‘The only ones that are left are out there,’ said Margo, raising her finger to point at the flat expanse of sea. ‘There’s a whole forest out there, under the sea. An ancient drowned forest.’

Christo couldn’t sleep that night for thinking about those drowned trees. The next day he badgered his mother to drive him to the local library, where he combed the encyclopedias for any mention of them, but there was none. That was before the internet, when the work of finding information was arduous and time-consuming and perhaps even impossible. Christo was forced to abandon his quest, but he never looked at the sea again without wondering was there an ancient forest under the waves? Once you’d heard something like that, you couldn’t ever forget it.

He was a postgraduate at Cambridge when he heard that a drowned forest had been exposed on the coast of Wales. He took a series of trains and buses, arriving finally in the village of Borth, where he barely stopped long enough to dump his backpack in the guesthouse before heading to the beach. He walked among hundreds, maybe even thousands, of tree stumps that rose up out of the shallows like shark fins. He could hardly breathe, he was so excited.

Back in the library at Cambridge, Christo found a fifteenth-century travelogue, written in Latin, that attested to the existence of a vast forest stretching all the way from Mont-Saint-Michel to the Scilly Isles. Legend had it that the bells of the city of Is could be heard ringing out from under the waves. He learned there were reports as far back as the late 1700s of a submerged forest near Youghal in County Cork. The Youghal forest was periodically exposed by extreme weather events, only to be covered again by water and sand within a few short months. Tree stumps had also been observed from time to time in south Mayo and Clare, but the forest off the south coast of Connemara had remained submerged, until now.

‘I need to go there,’ he told Cassie. Nothing would do him but to see it for himself. ‘I’ve a few weeks before term starts.’

Already, he was imagining the tides coming in and out, sand deposits building up around the tree stumps. Before long they would be submerged again. Christo couldn’t get there soon enough.

‘You could come with me,’ he said. Gently, gently, gently. He didn’t want to scare her off.

‘Oh, Christo.’

He could hear her voice falling away from the phone. He imagined her tipping her head back to look up at the ceiling. Deep breath in. Slowly out.

‘Wouldn’t you like to go back?’

More than a quarter of a century since they’d been there, Christo could still see the low, grey mountains in his mind. He could picture the black slicks of seaweed that littered the coral beach by the road, and the cows that grazed incongruously on its fringes. He could feel the bone shape of the sand when you scooped it up in your hand. He could almost touch the shells of the tiny snails that nestled in the razor-sharp grass of the dunes. The desire in him to go back there was so strong that he felt high on it.

‘I’ll think about it,’ she said. ‘That’s all I’m promising you. I’ll give it some thought.’

After she hung up, Christo closed his eyes and heard the sound of an old cassette deck cranking out the Beatles. He heard the playground calls of seagulls, whirling overhead, and the hiss and suck of the sea. He heard his sister’s voice, rippling like a kite through the air of a long-ago summer night, and – in his mind – alongside all of those things, was a feeling of happiness that he had never quite experienced since.

Of Ireland, Cassie remembered nothing of any substance. There was no town name that she recalled, no street address, no local landmark. She could not tell you where in the country they'd been, only that they were beside the sea and within a short drive of the school her mother had attended as a girl. The friends they had there were like a family from a picture book. The father was Jim. The mother was Margo. Seamus was the child.

Of the three of them, it was Jim who was clearest in Cassie's mind. 'How's the button?' he used to say to her, and Cassie would clam up, shoulders to her ears and no idea of what to say. 'Is it yourself, Christy?' he would ask, giving Christo a featherweight punch to the shoulder. He was like a wild wind, sweeping them all up with him. Up to the top of the back field at dawn to see a newborn foal, or out on a row-boat in the black of night in search of phosphorescence in the water. He seemed always to be bundling them off on some adventure or other. When they were going to the beach, he let them all ride on the roof rack like monkeys, with their hair blowing across their faces and their legs drawn up to their chests. Their knuckles white from holding on for dear life as the car barrelled along the bumpy country road. The sound of their mother's voice billowed out the open passenger window, ribboned by the wind. They all joined in, singing along with great enthusiasm to 'Penny Lane' and 'Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds' and Cassie's personal favourite, 'Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da'.

Margo she remembered as a windblown person, always crumpling into a smile. Always gathering wildflowers from the hedgerow or bending down to pick a shell up off the sand. 'I have no little girl,' she said to Cassie once, as they were setting the table together. 'I'm the only woman in a household of men.' All these years later, Cassie remembered the loneliness with which it was said, and it seemed to her a very adult thing to have told a child. It insisted on being remembered.

In Cassie's memory she and Margo were bent over the kitchen table, where a scattering of wildflowers had been laid out to dry on a sheet of newspaper. Cassie was trying to identify the flowers they'd picked, with the help of Margo's guidebook.

'Look,' Margo said, using the nail of her little finger to spread out the tiny petals of a sea pink. 'See how delicate he is.' Cassie leaned in to see. Her hair, brushing against Margo's hair. Her breath, slow and loud. She felt like a fumbly giant stumbling into a miniature world. 'Now,' said Margo, lifting the flower carefully and setting it onto a sheet of white paper. 'Let's press him.' With extreme care, Cassie laid a second sheet of paper over the first and placed the sandwich they'd made of the flower into the phone book, which was open to F: Foyle to Funcheon.

'Funcheon!' she said. 'That's a funny name.'

The things you remember.

'Don't forget to make him a label,' said Margo.

Cassie chose a purple marker from the jam jar on the table, and in her most meticulous handwriting she wrote out the name of the flower, drawing a curlicue underneath it. She slipped the label into the phone book with the flower and closed the book carefully, replacing the lid on the marker and putting it back into the jar. The markers belonged to Seamus,

and she was afraid he'd be angry if he knew she was using them. Even then, she was aware they were trespassing on his life.

Shay-muss, was how they said his name. When Cassie first saw it written down, she wondered why they'd chosen to leave the sea out of it. It seemed a better name to her with the sea in it. Sea-muss the sea monster, with his fishing net in one hand and a plastic bucket in the other, water slopping over the sides and sea creatures in it. In Cassie's memory he was always carrying that bucket around with him, like some kind of trophy. Whatever it was that resided inside the bucket bestowed great importance. A heroic quality to him as he scooped a jellyfish out of the shallows with his net or cleared nettles from his path using a broken branch as a sword. He once licked the palm of his hand and wiped a smear of manure from Cassie's leg. In the pub, he climbed onto a bar stool with a five-pound note in his hand and ordered a red lemonade for himself, 'and one for the lady'. It was the first romantic episode of Cassie's life.

'Who was that on the phone?' Eduardo asked her, sitting up in the bed. She knew he'd been woken by Cristo's call, but he'd played at still being asleep. He'd only stirred when she'd finished her conversation.

'Mi hermano,' she said, playing their usual cat-and-mouse game. Eduardo liked to converse with Cassie in his impeccable, graduate-school English. Cassie responded by hiding behind her flawed, self-taught Spanish. When Eduardo told her he loved her, which he had started to do with alarming frequency, she said, 'Yo también.' When he called her 'my love', Cassie reciprocated by calling him 'mi amor'. Spoken in a language other than her own, it seemed to her to mean somehow less.

'Is everything okay?'

‘Sure,’ said Cassie, pulling her robe from the hook on the back of the bedroom door, while Eduardo watched her from where he was sitting in the bed. ‘Why wouldn’t it be?’

‘It’s six in the morning.’

‘Not in England it’s not,’ she said, feeling defensive on behalf of her brother. ‘In England it’s nearly lunchtime.’

She wrapped herself in the tissue-thin gown, hugging it to her for comfort.

‘So, when do I get to meet him?’ asked Eduardo. ‘This mysterious brother of yours.’

‘Yeah, well, it’s not like he lives down the road.’

‘Maybe he hasn’t heard. There’s a thing called an airplane?’

Cassie still hadn’t figured out whether Eduardo’s jokes sounded lame in Spanish too, or was it just in English?

‘Time for coffee,’ she said, heading for the kitchen. She immersed herself in the task, filling the bottom chamber with water and spooning the ground beans into the top chamber. Tamping it down hard, she screwed the pot tightly shut and set it on the hob. She held a lit match to the burner, savouring the brief, tantalizing smell of gas before the flame took. It was only when she stood waiting for the coffee to percolate that she felt the sadness rising in her. A feeling as familiar to her as breathing, she closed her eyes and clenched her jaw as she tried to force it back down into her gut.

‘Are you okay?’

He had come into the room without her noticing, slipping up behind her and making a life ring of his arms. Instead of being grateful that she’d been rescued, Cassie felt like slipping the ring and dipping her head under the waves.

‘Wait,’ she said, hearing the sound of the pot on the hob geysering. ‘The coffee’s ready.’

‘Forget the damn coffee. Come back to bed.’

‘You know the rules,’ said Cassie, breaking free of him. ‘You go back to bed. I’ll bring the coffee.’

The rules were of Cassie’s making, established early on and observed without complaint by Eduardo, until recently. They only saw each other at the weekends, alternating between her little house in the city and his holiday home in the mountains. On the nights that she stayed at his house, he would bring her coffee in bed. When he stayed at hers, she returned the favour, pointedly using the old tin coffee pot she’d bought when she first moved to Mexico over the fancy machine Eduardo had given her for Christmas. It sat gathering dust on the counter, a reminder to him not to cross the line she’d drawn around her life, a line that needed constant reinforcing.

‘What’s this?’ she’d asked him recently, holding up an item of clothing she’d found hanging in her closet.

‘That’s my shirt. I don’t want it to get crumpled.’

‘No unpacking,’ she told him, taking the shirt off the hanger and settling it over the back of a chair.

‘Hombre,’ said Eduardo, shaking his head in disbelief.

He had insisted on giving Cassie a key to his apartment in the city, on the basis that she might get there before him some day, but she’d only ever used it once, to open the door to a plumber when Eduardo was out of town. She had not given him a key to her place, but she allowed him to leave a toothbrush in the jar by the sink and some shaving foam and a razor in the bathroom cupboard, along with his Clarins-Men Fluido Superhidratante. They did not meet up midweek, except occasionally to attend an exhibition opening or to see a movie. Cassie insisted on sleeping in her own bed, alone, on weeknights.

‘Come on,’ he might say, leaving the cinema with her on a Tuesday night. ‘Let’s make an exception for Tuesdays.’

‘Tengo que trabajar,’ she’d say, which was at least a half-truth. Her work was important to her, no question, but it was the solitude that was sacrosanct. The days spent alone, carving fine lines into stone. Monday to Friday, she survived on a diet of avocados that she plucked from the tree in her garden and ate with oil and salt. She dined on street tacos that she fetched from the stall on the corner. Letting the masonry dust build up day by day under her fingernails until Friday afternoon, when she scrubbed herself clean and washed her hair with her favourite almond-oil shampoo. With her weekend bag waiting at the door, she dressed as she listened for the expensive purr of Eduardo’s car pulling up to the kerb outside.

‘There must be something wrong with him if she won’t introduce him to us,’ said the girlfriends she met up with on Thursday nights at a bookstore near her house to drink herbal tea and laugh about life’s little absurdities.

‘Honestly,’ Cassie told them. ‘There’s nothing wrong with him, I swear.’

‘Maybe he doesn’t exist. Maybe he’s a figment of her imagination.’

Cassie promised to produce him but never did.

‘Where did you meet this guy, anyway?’

‘Oh, at a work thing.’

A drinks reception hosted by her gallery to bring sculptors into the orbit of architects who might commission their work. Cassie had been led over to him by the gallery owner, and she’d flirted with him, as she was expected to do, in the hope that he might commission her to install a large and expensive piece of stone in front of one of his buildings. Instead, it was Eduardo who had installed himself in her life with what was beginning to take on a feeling of monumental permanence.

‘We should move in together,’ he’d announced, in the manner of a declaration, on Christmas morning.