

This much I've known for some time:

A woman radiates her own, unique vibration. You can feel it; you can sense it, emanating from her skin like warmth. I knew this even way back, years ago when I was in college: there was a girl there, about the same age as me, who used to be in one of my classes and I would habitually play this game with myself while waiting for lectures to begin. I would sit at the front, near where the benches faced directly onto the podium where the lecturer would stand and bore us for an hour. From my standpoint I could see everyone as they came into the lecture hall; some late, some early as me. Some amidst a gaggle of noisy friends, others, again like me, alone. The game I would play with myself was to close my eyes and wait: I always knew the exact moment that she entered the room. I didn't know her name, and I didn't really want to: she was altogether much more socially astute than I was; trendy perhaps, and certainly well without my paltry circle of friends. She was louder than I, and laughed a lot as I recall. But that was not the reason I knew she was in the room as I played my game down there at the front of the lecture hall on my own. When she came in, the air changed. An energy entered the room that hadn't been present before, and it vibrated, oscillated. It hummed a dark tune in my ears and drowned out the hubbub of settling students. I was never wrong; I got her every time. I never spoke to her all that year we shared a class; I never even smiled at her, for that was not the point. It was the thrill of pinpointing her entrance once again: that was all. I never wondered why I did it, never questioned myself or my motives, for there were none other than that momentary kick of getting it right once more.

And then I forgot about her, she being nothing to me or I to her. But here's what I never forgot, not really: a young woman emits a signal, for those who care to listen. Her skin can hum; the cords of her sinews will orchestrate a symphony, the air around her shall ripple as the pebble of her self is dropped into the pool of one's awareness. This much I've known for some time, the way you know your own heart beats even when you can't hear it.

I've always known this.

1

The cat, curled on the hard wrought iron chair, washed itself methodically. It worked its way with determination down one back leg from the triangular thigh to the sinewy shin, smoothing the fur into damp furrows, a front paw wrapped around to keep it in place. When it got to the back paw, it spread out its pads, one tiny sharp claw at the end of each, and curled its tongue repeatedly, rhythmically, in between each toe.

Toe? Do cats have toes? Claire wondered this idly as she watched, distantly fascinated by the cat's cleaning rituals. She didn't like cats as a rule, and this one certainly wasn't any exception. Cats were creepy creatures that held the expression that they knew all of your dark secrets; and they might just tell. This cat didn't belong to her; she belonged to it. It had shown up one day about a year ago and hung about the place now, for reasons she couldn't even guess at. She didn't feed it, or pet it, she had only spoken to it on one occasion and then she had felt self-conscious at the sound of her own voice talking out loud to a cat, so she didn't do it again. Still, Claire had to admit that she might in fact miss it if it suddenly decided to up and leave; its presence was something. She imagined there would be a prolific amount of mice in the area, and water was readily available from any of the butts and troughs she kept about the place, and maybe this is what it stayed for, this cat. Still, to watch it washing itself was truly a marvel; hypnotic. From time to time it looked up, met her eyes with a cool disregard, and went back to its task with no more thought for Claire than if she'd been a passing cloud.

Part of Claire's antipathy toward this particular cat was the way in which it eerily reminded her of her ex husband. Claire could not exactly decide why this was; perhaps it was its grey, sinewy masculinity, or the way it regarded her with barely disguised disdain, she wasn't sure. But the reminder was there

nevertheless. The cat shifted itself to squat on the lower part of its back and assumed a position something like an eighties aerobics dancer; one leg pointing straight up in the air, whereupon it began to wash in between its back legs. This was too much for Claire, and she blinked a long blink while turning her head away, focussing instead on the gathering darkness beyond the little patio outside her back door. It was a mild evening, warm even, and Claire breathed it in; the smell of the plants and trees gathered in the seven or so acres of land given over to her nursery business that wrapped itself around the house reached her on the air. She kept catching tantalising drifts of the Clematis that was beginning to fill the air with wafts of sweetness; almost cloying, but addictive all the same. The Clematis she considered to be hers as it was grown this side of the half wall that cut off and marked the contrast between her own tidy little garden from the perfunctory neatness of the nursery beds beyond. Effectively, on one side of the wall she gardened for profit, and on this side of the wall where she now sat she could allow herself to garden for the pure joy of it. She liked to think of the wall as her commute; once this side of it she was off duty; a distinction she made herself create some years ago as it prevented late night office hours among the rows of plants and polytunnels beyond. She took another deep breath of the evening scents around her: this was her favourite time of the year; late May, summer still new enough to be a promise and yet established enough to bring a brisk business from the surrounding garden centres. There was endless potential in this setting.

A movement from the cat brought her attention back. She looked on with mild interest as it stood, turned once, twice on the spot, thought better of settling down, and dropped noiselessly from the chair, disappearing into the gloom as inexplicably as it had arrived. Aye; thought Claire to herself, that's exactly what puts me in mind of Daniel. He had exited her life with precisely that amount of fuss and fanfare.

It had been a cold November when he'd left one Monday night; Niamh, their daughter, had just turned two, making it now almost 22 years since he'd left. But Claire wasn't counting. His departure had been quiet. There had been no rows, no shrieking accusations or vows of vengefulness; only a slow release of tension, like gently leaving go a rubber band. A sense of peace and purposefulness had settled onto Claire directly afterwards, she recalled of that time. He'd had money, plenty of it, and he'd eased his conscience generously. It had been enough for her to return to her native Ireland from Scotland where they'd played at being a family for a while. She'd always dreamed of setting up and running her own nursery business, and she'd bought straight into one that had been floundering on the market for a while, even though she hadn't had a clue what to do with it back then. She'd struggled for the first couple of years, bringing up a child, studying horticulture at a local college, and trying to drum up business with the local garden centres, but the hard work had kept her moving, and little Niamh had kept her love flowing.

Suddenly and after an eternity of wondering if she'd made the right choices for her and her daughter, several things happened simultaneously: Niamh started school, bringing to an end that blissful era of utter dependency and glorious time wasting; Claire graduated from college with a burgeoning passion for plants and nature; the business began to tentatively push forward its first tendrils of success. Her life dropped the final pieces of jigsaw into place and she felt a deep sense of happiness inch its way into her being and take up permanent residence.

She'd always been a quiet woman, given to contemplative activities, so her work suited her perfectly. The bulk of what she accomplished she did so whilst in her own company, and then there was just the right amount of collusion with the outside world; buyers she encountered; centres she delivered to; the odd friend that Niamh made who would come to play bringing a politely curious mother with them. As

for friends of her own, she made few and they didn't endure. Claire had everything she needed with her daughter and her work, so she contentedly avoided invitations until they ceased entirely.

Her life took on the shape of the year and the transitions of the seasons. Her involvement in the business became so much more than her passion for the successful growing and selling of plants: it became a way of living, telling the time, growing, maturing and counting the years of Niamh's passing childhood.

It never failed to fill her with anticipation as one season of the year gave way to the next. It all seemed so exact, so full of truth that after the cold of the winter came the busy months of spring as everything woke up and the nursery was a frenzy of action. Even the clear-down at the end of autumn she always found strangely therapeutic; hacking down perennials to the bare earth; clearing away the spent annuals that hadn't sold; getting ready to begin harvesting the Douglas firs once again. Setting the seeds and bulbs for the following year was to Claire the greatest expression of faith on earth, bringing an unwavering hope and trust in nature and the promise of the following year.

Summer, though, had always been her favourite time of year right from when she had been a child. Of course it was partly to do with the more clement weather that arrived like a long-lost friend, but now that she was about to spend her 21st summer working on the nursery, it seemed to confirm what she had already believed: that this was the time of year that held all the magic. May made all the promises, June and July either kept them or broke them, but August and even September offered a reprieve of their own; bringing gentler weather and favour to farmer and nursery owner alike.

With a life this full of abundance Claire had never felt that anything was missing. If she thought of Daniel at all now it was with a distant, hazy kind of fondness, the way one might recall an inept but pleasant child from primary school class. She had never had another man after Daniel, and had questioned herself at times in the early years as her twenties turned to thirties as to whether she ought

to take more of an interest in that side of her life. But the effort, and the inconvenience of having another person to consider, and the unforgivable needs that would no doubt be squeezed upon her to share her time, her life, her daughter simply would not work for her. No, all things considered, she reassured herself over the years, she was far better off alone. And after a time the questions to herself stopped; that part of Claire that had once sought the physical closeness that accompanied a romantic relationship did so no longer: it sat down, curled itself up and slept quietly in a corner of her being. Claire had felt an echo of the relief and release that she'd experienced when Daniel had left; and then nothing more.

Claire drained her glass of juice and took a last look about the blackness surrounding her. It was only just starting to get a little chilly now, late into the evening, and she wondered what this summer would have in store for them. Today had been the first really warm day of the year so far, leaving a sense of anticipation with Claire for a good summer ahead. She could feel the sun from that day still on the skin of her cheeks and lips; almost tender, almost burnt. This, and the reports from local people in the business and on the radio that all spoke of a heat wave that was just around the corner and that was due to last for the month of June; but they said this every year. Claire tried to second guess the Irish summers, just like everyone else, and she rarely got it right, just like everyone else. Still, it was a thrill to her to play the game nevertheless; just to see if she could get it right. Sitting here right now it seemed to her entirely possible, probable even, that this summer could be a scorcher; the sense of anticipation filled her up, refusing to be ignored, from which Claire divined only good things.

The few clouds that had been dawdling about the moon moved to one side and Claire was momentarily captured by the bright orb hanging above her. There was a tiny slice shaved off the left hand side. Gibbous, thought Claire to herself. She'd always loved that word from when she'd first learnt it; somewhere in college she guessed. Gibbous; she repeated in her mind, savouring its odd syllables. But

The Barefoot Gardener

Alison McGuire

was it waxing or waning gibbous? She never could remember. Niamh would know, for sure, she would ask her when she got back. Just three days now, Claire told herself, and recalled with a wince the state of the spare rooms in the house. Resolving that that would be her task over the next couple of days, getting the house a little more ready for guests, Claire closed up the house for the night and led herself silently to bed.

Looking back down through the years Claire loved to trace Niamh's progress from baby to adult, savouring again the memories. Certain times stood out, becoming present and full of life once more as Claire summoned them to her. They were the off-key moments; the ones you never thought at the time would wander unbidden into your mind ten, twenty years later, drawing sights, sounds and smells in their path. Potting on in the shed together, Niamh in one of Claire's old headscarves, swapping stories and idle thoughts; cooking popcorn on a makeshift pan over a fire down by the stream that crossed their land; letting Claire go out to a local disco looking far too beautiful to be allowed anywhere without an escort. All these moments were as fresh still as the day they were made. Funnily, it occurred to Claire, the most poignant memories were those that depicted some kind of maturing in Niamh; a growing away from her mother; a budding development. Claire had often considered that with no marriage or other person in her life, Niamh was there for her to pour her love into; she wanted to make a perfect upbringing for her daughter as much as was humanly possible and she felt proud looking back at the memories they had made together.

Niamh had rarely asked about her father when she was a child, and when she did it was to gain seemingly innocuous details such as his hair colour, eyes, what he liked to eat. Then, out of the blue, when she was about thirteen she'd begun a conversation with Claire, serious faced, and asked her if she could contact her dad. Claire had been anticipating this moment, in greater and lesser degrees, for the whole of Niamh's life so far and was genuinely surprised that it had taken this long. They were sitting in front of the television which neither of them was watching, Claire being engrossed in a

supplier's catalogue and Niamh having her head in a book as usual. The conversation had begun apropos of nothing as far as Claire could recall, and started like this:

'Mum, can I ask you something?'

A tone alerted Claire and she flipped through a teenage girl's thought processes in her own mind in a hurried attempt to deduce what this might be, at the same time admitting to herself: this could be anything. She put down her magazine and Niamh peered at her over her book without laying it down; it remained resting upright on top of her drawn up knees.

'Of course you can.' Seemed like a safe enough response.

'If I wanted to contact my dad would I be able to?' Claire felt the words as well as heard them, each one a hot pin on her cheeks. She struggled to keep her face in an open expression of blank acceptance, she hoped, while inside her a war was declared by her ego against her sense of right-doing. Claire regarded Niamh quietly, steadily, swinging inside between wanting to save her daughter from the disappointment of an uninterested father, and not wanting to stand between her and her right to have at least a shot at a relationship with the man responsible for her being in the world. There was a connection between them, however tenuous, and Claire had no right to sever it. She wanted to slow down and tread carefully understanding intuitively that this was a pivotal moment; she couldn't allow herself to mess this up so early on.

'Do you want to contact him?' She asked in a tone of voice that gently said: Are you sure? Niamh now sat up crossed legged, and put her book to one side.

'Could I, if I wanted to?' The question suggested she didn't quite believe it could be as simple as all that.

'Yes.' Claire repeated. Then tempered this with: 'I haven't any idea where he is right now, but I'm sure there's a way.' Niamh waited quietly so Claire added more detail. 'I'm sure we could track him

through his family in Scotland.’ Well, thought Claire, I’ve nailed my colours to the mast now so I may as well carry it through. Defeat in a tiny sigh, she ended with: ‘I’d do everything in my power to help you to find him, if it’s what you want to do.’ Now Claire was ready for a full discussion as to where they might start, where he might be, what he might be like now. Niamh nodded gravely, her eyes to one side for a second or two. Then she looked back at her mum and pulled her pretty mouth into a line as though considering all things.

‘Ok, thanks mum.’ Niamh seemed to give this conversation a moment’s more thought, and then went back to her book. Claire watched her from the corner of her eyes for a little while, half expecting a return to the subject, but Niamh said nothing more: she seemed at ease and had moved on into the story she was reading. Eventually Claire went back to her magazine with a sense that they had left this exchange midway through, and it was a feeling that dogged her footsteps for the day or two following that evening. But Niamh said no more about it, and after spending a few days on tenterhooks Claire found that this feeling also receded under the surface of day to day distractions. Niamh had never asked about her dad since, and Claire came to understand that for her daughter perhaps it was enough for now to know that if she wanted to find her dad, she could, and her mum would help her. That’s not to say that this might not change in the future at some point, Claire would remind herself, but she would cross that burnt bridge as and when she came to it.

At some point in those teenage years, around the mid nineties as Ireland was really starting to get excited about the growing boom, Claire and Niamh were in the process of finding a new way to communicate with one another; a more adult way, involving tentative conversations about feelings, boys, vegetarianism and other teenage issues which spun the weight of the world upon them. Claire was keen to foster this new, open element of their relationship so she made sure that she was available,

concentrating her mind on remaining approachable when they were talking. She swiftly learned not to try and fix every issue that Niamh brought to her, as this seemed to irritate her and make her more prone to clam up. Instead Claire taught herself to listen without judgement; even though it was a struggle at times she tried not to let Niamh see this. Sometimes she would get impatient and want to tell Niamh to tell her friends to cop on to themselves, or the boy that was on the horizon that he was lucky Niamh had noticed him and demand that he step up now and treat her with respect. But she resisted and this paid dividends in the rare moments when they had a disagreement; Claire found Niamh much more inclined to listen to her point of view, almost as though she owed her a debt of air time. It made for a largely peaceful, if slightly frustrating, time; Claire often went to bed in the evening feeling as though she were the one being required to do all the learning when surely it should be the other way around?

Niamh had had a fairly progressive teacher for social studies around that time who had set what Claire described as some fairly ‘out there’ assignments. One particular evening Niamh sat with her head in her hands at the kitchen table while Claire busied about making their dinner. She noticed Niamh was frowning, going nowhere with her work, so when she had an opportunity she came and sat beside her. ‘What’s up, girleen?’ she asked lightly, using the pet term she had for Niamh in an attempt to lighten the mood.

‘I don’t *understand* this stupid assignment.’ She moaned melodramatically, a little petulantly.

‘Ok; want some help?’ Niamh looked up at her with a mixture of scepticism and hope, then pushed the paper over to her mum to read, explaining at the same time:

‘I have to describe my *personality*. Don’t ask me why; we’re doing this thing on tolerance, and apparently you have to understand yourself before you understand others.’ She pulled a face.

‘Sounds reasonable; what have you got so far?’

‘A big fat nothing.’ Said Niamh grumpily, chewing a fingernail. ‘She says it isn’t to do with what you like doing, or opinions or anything like that, because those things can change. *Apparently.*’ This was the new word. ‘The bits that make up your personality are the bits about you that don’t change, but I can’t come up with anything. It’s stupid.’ Another popular one in the vocabulary. Claire felt this was a bit beyond her capabilities as well, and hunted through her own mind for a start point for them to encourage Niamh along. She was drawing blanks so far.

‘Right, so, it’s not about what you think, or what makes you happy. I see.’ She began tentatively more to herself than Niamh who was regarding her intensely.

‘No.’

‘Did she give you anything else about what it isn’t?’

‘Well, it’s not being popular, and it’s not about feelings like happy or sad.’

‘Makes sense.’ Claire lied.

‘So what is it then?’ the question had an edge to it, like a challenge, which Claire ignored; there was no point in rising to tired irritation. She had an idea.

‘Ok, think of someone you know, anyone, it doesn’t matter who, a friend at school or something, and think about how you might describe them. We can make a list and then you can decide if the things we list match with you or not.’ She was please with her idea, and Niamh now looked more hopeful than sceptical. She sat up a little and thought.

‘Ummm. Kind.’

‘Good one.’ Claire nodded to the paper, which Niamh took back and began to make her list. ‘What else?’

‘Being a daydreamer?’ this one was put forward a little more tentatively.

‘Yes, I think that’s personality. What about if someone likes having lots of people around?’

‘Isn’t that being popular?’

‘No, I think it’s a more... basic thing than that; if someone likes to be around crowds or if they prefer their own company.’

‘Ok, yeah, cool: let me write it down – how do I put it?’

‘Gregarious, I think, or outgoing.’

‘Oh I’ve got a good one: someone that cares, you know, like taking care of things. Is there a one-word for that?’

‘Yes; I think the word is ‘nurturing’.’ Claire spelt it out for her daughter who was starting to look pleased.

‘Someone who likes studying, and books?’

‘Studious. Perfect. How many have you got now, and how many do you have to get?’

‘I don’t know, just a few I think; I’ve got five now, I think that’s enough. For each one I have to describe how it comes out in me, so for example, if I’m a daydreamer then I have to say when I daydream the most, or something, like at school in boring Social Science classes.’ She grinned, and it was good for Claire to see. Success.

‘Ok, well first we have to decide if each one of these is really you, so: Kind? Yes, I think we can safely say you’re kind. Daydreamer?’

‘Yes! I’m not outgoing though, I prefer to be in my room with a book; how do I say that?’

‘Shy, or introvert maybe?’ again, Claire spelt this out for Niamh.

‘Ok, so, I’m definitely studious, but I’m not sure about nurturing, what was that about again?’

‘That’s taking care of things or people. I’d say you are, wouldn’t you? You rescued those tiny birds last year, and you help me with the plants; that’s all nurturing.’

‘Cool! Done. Thanks mum.’ She was beaming now. Claire went to get up from the table to finish the dinner when Niamh started giggling, halting her midway from the chair.

‘What?’ she asked, amused. Claire had taken her hand and looked at Claire with so much fondness it had taken her breath away.

‘Mum, all these things that describe me, don’t you recognise any of them?’

‘Yes of course, darling, they’re all you.’ Said Claire, a little bemused and smiling back crookedly.

‘It’s you too, mum. We’re the same!’ she said with glee. Claire had looked down at the list and realised that she was right. It was one of those moments, a simple, tiny droplet of time that seemed to define who they were as a pair of people living together and sharing a life. Claire felt her eyes sting as though tears would come, and she kissed the top of Niamh’s warm hair-smelling head; breathing her in; trying to hold on and trying to let go.

It was true though, what Niamh had said: the two of them were very similar beasts. They did indeed prefer their own company to that of others, enjoyed the challenge of study (when it suited her, in Niamh’s case) and sought out ways to actively care for something or someone. Despite these quiet elements to their respective personalities they were neither of them given over to introspection; navel-gazing, Claire called it, with an iota of contempt. Despite the solitary nature of her work, Claire’s absorption in the task at hand was usually complete. If she was setting cuttings she had taken, in the potting shed, she thought purely about the cuttings she was setting, and nothing else. She liked to guess which ones might make it, and which ones even as a fresh cutting looked already too stretched, too frail to continue.

In an uncanny echo of her mother, Niamh even as a small child would become equally engrossed in drawing and, later, painting. Every given opportunity she would beg paper and pencils from her mum, or go on and on at her until she relinquished and got out the paint sets. Claire lovingly treasured pretty

much anything that Niamh churned out, from her early splodgy poster paint masterpieces to her detailed and quirky pictures of her and her mother surrounded by trees and birds outside their house. There were boxes stuffed with pictures up in the attic, and Claire had taken her favourites, framed them and hung them proudly on the walls all around the house, much to Niamh's embarrassment as she got older.

'Mum, can we *please* take this one down now? I did it when I was, like, *five*.' She would protest. Claire would smile, but behind it would hope that her daughter wouldn't insist, not wanting to take down any of her favourites. These pictures told a story of where and who they were at that time; they formed part of her memories. Instead, Claire would attempt to strike a deal with Niamh.

'Well, if I take that one down, you'd need to do another one to replace it. I can't have just a space on the wall where it used to be; I'd miss it too much.' She'd bluff, and off Niamh would go to produce something more contemporary for her mum.

Some days later, usually after Claire had forgotten entirely the conversation, Niamh would present her with another painting ready to frame, or a line drawing that would take Claire's breath away with its simplicity and elegance. Claire would admire it silently, wondering where her daughter got her growing talent from, and off she'd go to find a new spot on a wall somewhere to add it among the older ones, which of course remained untouched.

In her later teens, as she began to experiment and take her own ability more seriously Niamh progressed onto painting canvasses. This was when Claire first got the impression that perhaps her daughter would be able to make a living from her painting, and she gave her free rein to make choices about college, even though it was with bitter disappointment that she learned that Niamh had no intention of going to college yet; she had other plans. The mother of a friend of hers from school owned a gallery in Dublin and she'd offered Niamh an empty floor over the summer period, if she

could fill it. Niamh worked all hours of the day and night with a dedication that left Claire feeling tired just watching her. She worked together a superb collection of paintings that were not only vibrant and suggestive as each solitary piece, but they also came together somehow as a group of paintings, making the collection look professional and accomplished. Claire had burst with pride, and had overcome all her own inhibitions about Dublin and crowds to attend the opening evening alongside a hopeful Niamh. By the end of that season, every painting bar one had sold, making Niamh a tidy sum and leaving a much-admired souvenir of the collection to go on the wall in her mum's bedroom. She was offered a regular spot at the gallery, and within three years she had worked up enough money to spend a year in a school she had longed to attend in Aix-en-Provence. She also had enough to travel around Europe for a second year, and suddenly the simple life where Claire and Niamh coexisted in their quiet, separate solitudes, coming together over food and gentle conversation seemed to be drawing to a close. Claire had been determined not to mourn until her daughter was safely on her way, but she found it terribly difficult to part with such a massive part of herself. The one purpose of her life that had taken so much of her focus until now was almost over; where did that leave Claire? Something resembling panic gripped her for a few nights before and just after Niamh left; Claire soothed her fractured mind with her work; it had always been her salvation in the past and eventually the familiar rhythm came back through like quiet music that one must hush to hear.

The second year of Niamh's travels was the toughest for Claire. While she had been at the school Claire had rediscovered a sense of ease. She'd paid her a visit early on and had fallen in love with the region with the same fervour as her daughter, and she had somewhere to imagine her. But this past twelve months had been much harder. Travelling. It seemed such a vacuous, undefined phrase. Where's your daughter? Oh, travelling, you know, around Europe. It really said so much and so little. For the last year now she'd been unable to place Niamh; to picture her somewhere, and added to that

ran all the potential horrors of a young girl roaming through strange lands like a lurid filmstrip through her mind.

Claire came to the end finally of clearing out Niamh's old room, which had become something of a dumping ground during her absence, and was thinking back over the two years as she worked. Several trips out to the sheds had been required as she'd become lazy in Niamh's absence, using the room to house racks and racks of plant pots, cases of fertilizers that didn't fare so well outdoors, and various odds and ends that didn't have another place. Eventually the room resembled a bedroom once again, and Claire was exhausted by the heat inside the house; she longed to be outdoors. She stood in the doorway surveying her work, rubbing at a trickle of perspiration running between her breasts with a handful of the top she was wearing. She still felt disappointed that all the unopened boxes that had been mailed home from Niamh's travels remained stacked in a corner, giving the place a transient feel despite all her efforts. She sighed a little in dissatisfaction and eyed the boxes; they'd have to stay put until Niamh arrived home the day after tomorrow. She had never been clear about whether or not to open them. There had been parcels and boxes addressed to her, and these she had delved into, devouring any scribbled note enclosed, holding up the keepsakes to admire; scarves, perfume, olive oil or herbs. Every one had been chosen with care with her own tastes and fondnesses thoughtfully taken account of. She cherished everything Niamh sent home as though it carried something of her back home with it. Now she worried if Niamh would fit in the room at all with all these boxes that remained. Still, she would leave them for Niamh to open and share as she saw fit when she arrived home. Respecting the privacy of others: that was another characteristic that they could add to the list of shared personality traits.

As she closed the door, with a salad and a cold bottle of wine on her mind, Claire remembered with a jolt that Niamh was bringing a friend home with her: Cara, whom she'd met during her final few months in Aix-en-Provence, and who had been her travelling companion on and off during her journeys throughout Europe. The guest room would have to be cleared out as well, she realised with a sinking feeling. Claire felt old and sore from the day of shifting boxes and carrying out all the gardening debris to the sheds and for a moment she was tempted to put up the sofa bed in here and let them share. She asked herself if this was fair: no, probably not, on balance. Niamh made it sound like Cara would be staying for the summer and helping out for the busy period during June and July. There was no doubt about it; they were going to need their own space. She heaved a sigh and checked the clock: it was already six in the evening. Come on, Claire, she told herself, rallying; this shouldn't take more than an hour, then you'll really deserve that glass of wine.

3

Morning drifted in to Claire on the sounds of birds chirping frantically through the open window, and the smell of the sweet garden below. She turned in her sheets, shrugging them off: the day was already warm. Turning her old alarm clock towards her a quarter-turn, she yawned deeply. It was just gone eight in the morning and being a Sunday it was the one day of the week that Claire allowed herself to wake up without the alarm clock. It felt like luxury. She stretched her muscles and got up slowly, her limbs still complaining from her work the day before, and she picked at a nail she had torn, nibbling it in thoughtful silence.

She deferred her shower for later in the day, threw on soft jogging bottoms and a vest top and went down the stairs to make her breakfast. Living alone these last two years had been no excuse for not eating properly, or cooking flamboyantly. Sunday was fry-day, and she set about cooking it meticulously. She grilled her rashers to perfection, treating herself to black pudding, and fried two eggs, spooning the hot oil over their sunny side until it turned perfectly opaque, while the tea brewed in the old teapot on the side.

Breakfast she considered fundamental. If no food was to be had for the rest of the day, which in itself was unthinkable, she believed she could survive on a good breakfast. When Niamh had been in her late teens they had discussed this at some length over the course of a weekend, delighted at finding in each other a shared agreement as to the importance of this one meal. They began to develop a breakfast menu for the week, putting a lot of thought into it, and after some weeks of experimentation had finally landed upon what they believed to be the finest balance of breakfasts for the week. It was a routine that had established itself as part of their shared traditions. Cereal was for Mondays, and also Fridays when it was accompanied by toast. Tuesdays they would have fruit and toast with either marmalade or jam.

Wednesday was for pleasure, being the middle of the week, so a boiled egg with a bagel was on the menu. Thursdays were for fresh fruit salad and yogurt, and Saturdays Claire often went into the local village for supplies, so she had got into the habit of bringing back a Danish or croissants and changed her morning tea to coffee instead. Sunday, then, was for the fry. Claire felt shy and a bit silly about telling anyone else of their breakfast menu, but Niamh loved to share it around, describing in explicit detail to anyone whom she felt should convert, not just the ingredients required but also the underlying thinking about the balance of each meal in relation to the day it fell upon.

After enjoying her breakfast and a second cup of tea, Claire stepped out onto the patio for a few minutes, and the heat of the day even so early struck her. There was a mist that lay across the valley, and hung in the air muting the sun's brightness, but the promise of a hot day lay beyond it. She stood for a few moments, rocking slightly on her feet, half thinking about the week ahead and what needed doing in the nursery and half thinking about what she'd like to do with her own little garden this summer. With these thoughts still floating in her mind, she drifted back through the house grabbing a headscarf and her car keys on the way.

She was anxious to get to Ballymoney early today. During the winter months she could afford to go later for her walk, but this time of year her objective was to avoid the crowds that gathered on the tiny beach. As she pulled up the car park was already half full, the mist having cleared here to give way to the full pelt of the sunshine, so she shunned the nearest beach and followed instead the path across a low cliff to the second beach. Removing her shoes and tucking her car keys deep into one, she left them on the little wall at the end of the path and strode out across the sand. The heat was building and she felt it throb in her temples – the remnants of her half bottle of wine last night – and raise a sheen of sweat to her skin. The day was flawless now: clear blue sky, timid waves and crystal water. She wondered why anyone would go abroad when Ireland could be so beautiful when it was in the mood.

The sand was warm, hot even in places, and from time to time her pace wove its way down to the water's edge to wet her feet. At the end of the beach she turned abruptly and walked back at a slightly slower pace. The heat was thrilling, unexpected and welcome, making Claire feel more graceful in her gait, her limbs stretching out to welcome the warmth. As she got back to the wall where her shoes were Claire stopped and looked about her; apart from a couple of dog walkers, the beach was still almost deserted, so she made a quick decision to take a dip. Sliding her joggers off, still looking about herself covertly, she made a dash for the water, her need to be in the water before anyone came dragging her in against the breathtaking cold of the water. It was freezing, stinging her skin and snatching her breath away. Before she had time to baulk she made herself launch out into the water, strong strokes carrying her further and further from the beach; her shoes. She swam as far as she could before needing to stop to catch her breath, treading water and turning slowly in the sea to take in this marvellously altered perspective of her favourite beach and the adjoining coastline. It was the first swim of the year; unfailingly thrilling. She swam slowly and deliberately back to the beach, scouting around and pausing once to emerge between walkers. She dragged her joggers back on over her wet skin, but carried her shoes, stepping gingerly over the stones along the walk back to the car.

By the time she arrived back at the house Claire's mind was fully on her garden so she changed her joggers for shorts and headed straight out, swiping an apple from the bowl on the way. Today was her day, and in keeping with this it was time for her to focus on her own garden; she had a lot to do.

While she munched the rest of her apple thoughtfully she fiddled with a trellis that had come loose behind her Clematis, tying it back temporarily and making a note that it would need replacing at some point. She moved around, making a list of priorities in her mind. There was no way she'd get done all she wanted to do today, but that was the wonderful thing about gardens; they were terribly forgiving of even the most ardent neglect. Next she went to the tiny glass house where she kept her own potting

separate from that required in the nursery, propping open the vents to let in some air. She poked around at what she had potted up, watering, moving to larger pots and pinching out shoots as she went, her deft fingers moving in well-worn rhythms. Taking her fork and trowel and an old basket she started back out to the garden and began tending to her small vegetable patch, harvesting some of the salad which she tasted out of habit, spacing out new seedlings, and gently poking a finger under the soil near her carrots to see what she could feel. After this she deadheaded the rest of her bulbs, silently saying farewell to them for another year, then she cleared a new patch which was for all her cottage annuals, fetching buckets full of compost from her heap to dog in amongst the hardening earth. It was almost a week since they'd had any rain, and with none forecast she was careful to dig in more than usual, to help retain what moisture remained. As she dug the sweat poured, and she removed her vest top so that she just worked in her bra and shorts. When the digging was done and she only had lighter jobs left to do, her thoughts turned almost savagely to lunch, and she kicked off her shoes impatiently, longing to feel the ground beneath her hot feet; it was heaven. She wandered around the garden surveying her work and feeling deeply content. In the kitchen she turned on the radio and switched it up so she could hear it from the garden, then carried outside her sandwich and juice. The day was very hot now, uncharacteristically so; there wasn't a breath of wind and the sun beat down so that Claire had to winch up the weathered parasol that had stood unused for so long above her patio table. She lifted her tired feet, veins standing out against the heat, onto a chair next to hers and surveyed the landscape, squinting despite the shade. The cat drifted past her, slinking suspiciously, eyeing the remains of her sandwich but never faltering in its step, around the corner of the house and out of sight. Claire sighed. In just two days the quiet of this solitude would be broken by not only her daughter, who she looked forward to seeing as a child anticipates a birthday, but also a friend, unknown to Claire. No-one had ever stayed with them, here at the house. No-one had ever asked to. She wondered what it would do to

her routine, her uninterrupted thought processes, her peace. In one way she was excited, in another a tiny sense of dismay edged its way in, making her feel a little anxious. About what, she couldn't tell, and she shrugged away the feeling, clearing her plate away and starting once again to think about the garden. She potted mostly, for the afternoon, the heat making her languorous. She tidied here, potted out a few plants, pruned a little there. She visited her sweetpeas which were still sulking a little, and chided them gently under her breath.

A little after six, with the sun still hot and a soft haze gathering once more in the valley below the nursery beds, Claire was called into the house by the sound of the phone. She dashed, knowing it was Niamh, and was out of breath when she answered.

'Hello? Niamh?'

'Hi, Mam, it's me!'

Claire smiled, relieved.

'I know it's you, girleen, how are ya?'

'I'm great! Listen, I don't have long, this damn card is about to run out. I have an arrival time for you, you ready?'

'Yep, yep, fire away.' Claire didn't need a pen and paper; this was one time that she'd remember, no problem.

'Okay, we get in to Dublin airport at three-fifteen Tuesday afternoon. Is that cool with you?'

'Well, you know, I'll have to shuffle a couple of engagements, and move my meeting with the president, but I reckon I'll make it on time.' Claire grinned down the phone. There was a crackly pause.

'I can't wait to see you, mam. And come home. And see the place.'

Was there a slight catch in her voice? It was so hard to tell. Claire clutched the phone to her tighter, as though it were Niamh she were holding.

‘I can’t wait to see you either, my love.’

‘And Cara is so excited to meet you!’ Niamh’s tone brightened and the moment shifted, again that sweep of disquiet through Claire’s stomach.

‘I’m looking forward to meeting her.’ She opted, with finality. ‘I hope she’s not expecting the Ritz?’

‘Ha! Wait ‘til you meet her, you’ll know that she’s the furthest thing from the Ritz ever!’ Niamh reassured, which served only to heighten Claire’s nervousness.

‘Ok, ma, I really have to go, this thing’s gonna die. I love you, I love you, I can’t wait to see you – only two more sleeps now!’

Claire laughed out loud at this, and hurried her own goodbyes before the line went dead and the quiet of the kitchen, even with the babbling radio, enclosed around her once more. Claire felt unsatisfied, and knew she would have to wait her own two sleeps before she had her daughter back, and another, unknown person added into the mix. She took her jumbled feelings out once again to the patio with the salad she’d picked, some ham and a huge pot of tea to watch the evening float in around her, bringing what it may.

Claire spent Monday morning distractedly going through some of the paperwork that had accumulated on the side in the kitchen. She was in a slow motion mood, seemingly unable to settle at anything, and it was frustrating her. All she could think about was the next day, picking up Niamh and her friend from the airport and getting them back here. The time was dragging; she'd had a fleeting moment's excitement as she awoke, thinking it was already Tuesday, then her realisation that she was a day ahead of herself brought with it a fidgety, restless mood that was not conducive to getting anything done properly. This was heightened by the warmth in the house; even with windows and doors thrown open there was not a breath of cool air and Claire longed to be outside.

As she moved papers this way and that trying to gain some toehold on her organisation, she came across an order from a local landscaper that she'd forgotten. Cursing under her breath and gathering the details of the order with one eye she grabbed the phone; she was going to need Robbie. She dialled his number and drummed her fingers waiting for a response: if he didn't pick up it usually meant that he had work elsewhere, was out with friends or recovering from being out with friends, whereupon he would invariably ignore any attempt Claire made to contact him. Despite his unreliability in this respect Claire kept him on as a casual worker as he had a swift, intuitive hand with the plants and needed little or no instruction. He also had no interest in Claire's life, being so much younger; it would never have occurred to him to nose around in what was going on with her, and for this Claire valued his presence.

He picked up after the fourth or fifth ring.

'Claire.' Was all he said by way of greeting.

‘Robbie, I need you for a couple of hours, how soon can you be here? I’ve overlooked an order that’s being picked up today.’ There was audible breathing on the other end, and the kind of sound made by a person extricating themselves from their bed.

‘Yep, ok Claire, I’ll be there in half an hour.’

‘Thanks Rob, I’ll be down where the container plants are.’ And she hung up.

Pulling on the cut down wellies that she used to work in when it was too hot for boots, tucking the phone into her waistband, and grabbing a bottle of water, Claire carried the order slip outside and walked the half mile or so to the tunnel where the container plants were. She read the order in more detail as she went; it was bitty, probably enough for three or four jobs she reckoned, and plenty to keep her concentrating. It was shrubs mostly with a mixture of Camellias, Rhododendrons, Hollies, Bay, Fuchsias, Hydrangeas, a whole host of ornamental grasses and a few succulents, all to be collected as containers which meant the plants had all to be potted into permanent homes. Even these were varied, some terracottas, some dark glazed, others light, with the colour, shape and size specified for each plant type: Claire wasn’t even sure she’d have all the necessary pots, which meant she’d have to go out for more. Checking the time she calculated they had about three hours before collection. This was just what she needed; welcome, absorbing activity. Down at the tunnel she checked off all the plants, dragging them forwards from their rows to mark them out as needed, and giving them a drink to prepare them for being moved. Then she pulled all the pots over into a pile, satisfied to find she had everything she needed. Pausing for a breath before she began, Claire stepped out of the tunnel at the end that looked back up the incline towards the house where she spied Robbie striding down the hill towards her. The sun was scorching and it was not yet ten in the morning. The earth had hardened into the furrows made by trucks when it had been wet, and already cracks had appeared in the parched crust of the ground. Claire drank water and waited for Robbie to arrive.

‘Hot day.’ He said as he came level with her, taking the order from her outstretched hand to read. Claire nodded carefully, her lips still to the upturned water bottle, her eyes on Robbie’s face; she vaguely craved some assurance from him that they could do the whole job between the two of them in three hours, and with the heat building in the tunnel.

‘All this?’ asked Robbie tracing a compost-engrained fingertip down the page.

‘Yep.’ She waited; he looked around.

‘Why’s all this stuff still in a tunnel, anyway?’ he asked, his open tone setting Claire’s back up slightly even though she knew it was only curiosity.

‘Laziness.’ She justified. ‘Been kind of busy.’ He finished looking around then faced her with a half-cocked smile.

‘Right, I’ll do the Ericaceous, and you make a start on the grasses and stuff, then we can do the big ones together.’ Claire smiled; Robbie liked to practice giving commands, and it made her want to chuckle. Just to remind him who was boss, she added:

‘We can just bank them all out the other end of the tunnel, then Graham can reverse the flatbed down.’ Robbie nodded gravely and Claire’s eyes twinkled. Together they turned to drift into the tunnel, Claire showing Robbie where she’d stacked the pots.

Wordlessly they started, each with their own method and rhythm, each swift, sure and respectful of the living things under their care. Perfunctory questions and thoughts, all centred on the task in hand, went back and forth between long intervals of silent thoughtful toil.

The heat in the tunnel was stifling, dead, even with the ends wide open. Every time Claire lifted some of the finished pots out into the open she lingered a little longer, her breath coming fast as though she were trying to find more air. She was standing for long moments, squinting into the bright warmth of the sunshine when Robbie came out, struggling with two large Azaleas. He dragged them down to join

the others and then stood dusting his hands, panting a little himself, his face adopting the same pained expression as Claire's from working in the heat.

'Time for refreshments, I think.' Suggested Claire.

'Sounds good. I'll keep going though, if you want to bring something down?'

She thought about it, looking back over the distance between this tunnel and the house, and checking her watch for the time. Decision made.

'Ok, that would be great, I'll be as quick as I can. Any special requests?'

'A cold beer?' he chanced, grinning.

'Ha!' came his response and off Claire trudged up the incline across the hardened ground, having to watch not to turn her ankle among the stiff ridges of earth.

On her return some twenty minutes later, Claire was surprised to find all the smaller plants done and out in the open, and only the larger pots left to do, which Robbie was busy lining up, rechecking the list with a frown of concentration between his eyebrows.

'Wow, Robbie, you've been speeding! Come on, let's have a break.'

Together they sat on the north side of the tunnel, resting their backs against the stacks of bagged up compost which provided at least something resembling shade. Claire unpacked sandwiches and a flask of tea from the back pack she had carried down, a tub of salad and two apples. It was coming up for midday and Claire could not believe the heat.

'This is like being on holiday.' She exclaimed out loud as though Robbie had been following her train of thought. He turned a quarter turn towards her and regarded her oddly.

'Claire, only you could possibly imagine that a holiday might consist of potting up dozens of shrubs!' he said incredulously. They both laughed.

‘Well, maybe not that part, but this heat is unbelievable, isn’t it? They say it’s set to last, as well, at least a month. Do you think that’s possible?’ she pondered, chewing a sandwich. Robbie shrugged.

‘Global warming, you never know what the weather’s going to do.’

They ate in silence for a while, which was broken by Robbie some time later, as he poured tea for them both into plastic cups.

‘Is Niamh home soon?’

Claire smiled at the clumsiness of the question, and wondered what might be behind it that she’d never noticed before.

‘Tomorrow, in fact.’ Was all she gave him, and watched him carefully hold his expression in neutral while he handed her a cup.

‘Be nice for you to have her home, I bet.’

‘I can’t wait, Robbie, I’ve missed her and worried about her for so long, it’ll take me a while to get used to not having to do that anymore.’

‘Is she staying?’ came the next question; was the tone just a little too casual?

‘I honestly don’t know what her plans are.’ Claire sighed, looking away into the distance. ‘I’m not even sure if she does yet.’

‘Ha. Niamh without a plan? Not possible.’ Robbie laughed. Claire gazed sideways at him for a long moment.

‘Speaking of plans, Robbie, what would yours be now for the next year or so?’ she asked.

‘Ah, you know me, Claire.’ He gave her, then paused during which Claire thought: actually, I don’t really. ‘I’m not really one for making plans. Will there be much work here over the summer?’ again, that slight tone that Robbie had when asking a question too casually that he wanted an answer to.

‘I don’t know to be honest, with Niamh being home. And she’s bringing a friend to help as well.’ Claire felt naughty for leaving out the friend’s gender, and watched him closely as he tried not to wince. ‘I’m sure there’ll be plenty for us all though.’

Silence followed for a time, after which Robbie said:

‘If this summer is going to be like they say, have you thought about putting in a proper irrigation system?’

Claire balked silently; she didn’t have a clue where to start, but admitted to herself that she may have to consider it.

‘Robbie, I haven’t a clue about that, I’m not even sure I can afford it.’ She levelled.

‘Well, I could look into it for you if you like? I started designing one last year that’s suited for this place. I never said anything because the summer was a bloody washout. But this year... I could dig out my plans if ya like?’

Claire regarded him in mild surprise.

‘I like.’ She said finally. ‘Robbie, you’ve so many hidden talents, don’t you think it’s time you did something with them? I might be able to help you meet some of the cost of studying some of this stuff. Formalise it, you know?’

Robbie laughed out through his nose, and turned gleaming eyes to Claire.

‘Well, that’s one way to kill a passion dead! No thanks, I’m happy doing what I’m doing.’

Signalling the end of the conversation he got to his feet, Claire automatically following suit and checking her watch. Together they returned into the mounting heat of the tunnel in silence to resume their joint tasks of repotting the larger shrubs.

With only three pots left to do Claire picked up a call from Graham and gave him directions where to bring the truck. After the final three were done she and Robbie moved outside to help load up. Claire

hopped up onto the flat bed and took the plants from Robbie, ignoring Graham's look of surprise; he was a new customer, unfamiliar yet with Claire's ways.

'Hey, don't strain yourself there, love, let me go up and do that.' He bossed, with a grin. Claire visibly wiped her nose with her forearm, holding his gaze with what she hoped was an icy look.

'I'm fine, quicker we do this, quicker it's done.'

'Well, I prefer to take my time over some things, eh?' he nudged a wink in Robbie's direction, who ignored him, so he laughed loudly at his own ham-fisted joke.

'So, is it just you and your son working here then?' asked Graham jovially, persisting. Claire prickled, and sighed, not looking at him this time. She left an uncomfortably long pause, during which she would see Graham twitching his look in her direction between plants, trying to gauge if she'd heard him or not. As she took a plant from him, she said:

'Robbie's not my son.' Deliberately obtuse, trying to put him off.

'Oh! Just you then?' Graham deduced out loud. 'Or is there a Mr. Claire about?' Again the huge guffaw. He'd stood back for a breather, and was hands-on-hips gawking at Claire, a grin on his face, swinging his frame slightly in an unconsciously testosterone-filled stance. Claire caught Robbie's look as he was trying to swallow a smile, curious to see how Claire might handle this kind of attention.

'Well, that's the lot then.' Claire said with forced finality, jumping down from the truck. 'Is this to go on account?' She thought it best to opt for business-like. He looked disappointed, but not for long.

'Nope. I'll settle this now.' and with a swagger that Claire almost laughed out loud at, Graham drew a wad from his back pocket, licked his thumb unnecessarily, and started leafing through notes. Robbie disappeared discreetly into the tunnel, which annoyed Claire slightly. As she held out her hand to take the money, Graham drew it back a fraction.

'It's a real pleasure doing business with you. Claire. See you again very soon.'

Claire glowered openly at him, thanked him curtly and snatched her money, stomping back into the tunnel to look for Robbie to take out her annoyance on. The truck revved ridiculously and crunched off up the hill. Inside the tunnel, Robbie was tidying up and avoiding looking at Claire; she could see a hint of a smile on his face, which made her temper flare.

‘Robbie! You could have offered a bit more help seeing off that... that... sleazebag!’ she complained loudly.

‘Sorry, Claire, next time he comes, shall I explain to him that I’m your toy-boy?’ laughter cracked at Robbie’s voice. Claire shook her head.

‘I don’t understand this stupid sense of humour that men seem to share.’

‘Ah, that’s what makes us so unique.’ Said Robbie in a mock-wistful tone, and a friendly smile.

‘That’s what makes you a pack of fools!’ Claire retorted, crossly. ‘Here.’ She handed Robbie his money, which he thanked her for, offering one more laugh to see if she’d crack. She didn’t. Telling him she’d call him later in the week if she had anything for him, she turned on her heel to head back to the house. Robbie wisely resisted the urge to turn her comment into a double-entendre, smiling again at the look on Claire’s face as Graham had tried ineptly to pick her up.

For her part, Claire stomped up the hill towards the house, her crossness dissipating with each step. Still, she wondered, it might be nice to have a one line like ‘I’m married’ that would just stop someone like Graham in his tracks, turning his salaciousness to respect in one deft move. She doubted though that such a line existed, after all.

‘So, tell me about your mum then? Will I like her? Will she like me?’

Cara and Niamh were shoving their hand luggage into the overhead lockers and settling into their seats on the plane, excitement and nerves sparking their conversation, punctuating it with louder-than-usual laughter.

‘Of course she’ll like you, doesn’t everyone? Besides, mam’s really easy going.’ Said Niamh, glancing out of the window and back towards the settling passengers to see how long it might be before they took off; she was anxious to be in the air, eating up the miles between her and Ireland. She never imagined that it would feel so good to go home, and she was pleased to find it so.

‘Well, not everyone likes me. I had this boyfriend once whose mother *hated* me. I went to stay with him for a week in Germany, and she made my life hell for seven whole days.’ Cara rattled off the story nonchalantly as she unpacked her i-Pod and book for the plane, unaware of Niamh’s amused stare.

‘You had a *boyfriend* once?’ Niamh repeated back to her. Cara met her glance openly, then leaned over to see past Niamh out of the window. Niamh shoved her back: ‘There’s nothing to *see* yet. Now spill.’

‘There’s nothing to spill; so I had a boyfriend once, big deal. I was young.’ Cara said in an air that intimated that she didn’t know any better back then, making Niamh snort with laughter.

‘Anyway, stop fretting, will you? You guys will get on great.’

‘Should I call her Mrs. McClane, or Ms. McClane? Or ‘Ma’, like you? Ma McClane! How about that? Ma McClane’ Cara savoured, delighting in her word play.

‘No! Claire. Call her Claire, for God’s sake. She hates all that formal stuff. Anyway, if I were you I’d be more worried about how you’re going to entertain yourself in boring old Wicklow for the next month or so.’

‘Ah, that’s the part I’m most looking forward to.’ Said Cara, stretching luxuriously. ‘Boredom. I can’t wait!’

Niamh laughed: ‘Oh my God, you are *so* going to take that back! There’s boring and then there’s dead. You’ve just come from Barcelona; it’s going to seem like dulls-ville after that.’

‘Honestly, Niamh, I really need a break after the last couple of weeks. There was a different party every night, and loads to do in the day, I actually wished I didn’t have to sleep because I didn’t want to miss any of it. I will *welcome* quiet and boring.’

‘Put your music away, hon, I want to hear all about it.’ Said Niamh, shifting comfortably down into her seat as the plane taxied to its take-off position and they talked over the safety announcements.

‘Ok, I’ll tell you the lot, but then you have to tell me all about your fond farewells with Billy-boy.’

Niamh grimaced. ‘Well, that was a total washout in the end as it happens. He just seemed to lose interest in the last few days, like he’d said his goodbyes and it was time to move on.’ She’d been dating a guy from Stockholm called Wilhelm, and who Cara rather cruelly called ‘Billy-boy’, not hiding her disdain for him, or her belief that he wasn’t good enough for her friend.

‘Ah, honey, I’m sorry. What a twat. Doesn’t he know how lucky he was to have you for a while?’ asked Cara, cuddling Niamh to her for sympathy.

‘Apparently not.’ Sniffed Niamh. ‘So, tell me about Barcelona to take my mind off him, and to wear me out before we get to Wicklow!’

As the plane took off and then glasses of wine were brought around, Niamh and Cara caught up on their last two weeks apart. They’d parted company in Perpignon where they’d been staying with

friends of Cara's for the previous month. Cara had wanted to see Barcelona before their travels ended, and Niamh had wanted to go back to the school in Aix-en-Provence to pick up some of her belongings. So they'd agreed to meet up back in Nice to take the flight to Ireland together. Niamh had doubted that Cara would make it, being a little unreliable, so she had resigned herself to taking the flight alone and then picking Cara up at a later date. She'd been genuinely surprised and delighted to see Cara striding across the departures hall towards her. She was touched that Cara thought enough of their friendship to make it on time. Cara seemed eager to get to Ireland to chill out for a while, and Niamh was even amused by her anxiety about making a good impression on her mother. She felt a renewed fondness for Cara, and an anticipation for a great summer spent at home.

Cara had fascinated Niamh from the outset. They'd met at the school in Aix-en-Provence, where Cara paid little or no attention to the classes they'd to attend, or the pieces to be turned in. She was outgoing and easy to be around, and usually the one to suggest an excursion, usually under the guise of painting or studying, and invariably descending into a beach party or bar hop. Niamh had really just watched from the sidelines for the first couple of months, finding Cara's jokes funny, and admiring her lazy but effective style of painting, but being shy about approaching her. Then, one night Cara had wandered down to the local pizzeria by herself with a book for a quiet evening, and it seemed that Cara had had a similar idea. She was sitting out on the veranda, juggling a book, a glass of wine and a cigarette, and when she'd seen Niamh she'd called her over to join her. Niamh had hesitated, torn between wanting to get to know Cara a little better and her desire for the quiet evening she'd planned. Then, with a smile, she'd pulled up a chair. They fell into an easy conversation about their backgrounds, their painting loves and hates, their gossip about the other students and professors at the school. They seemed such similar people, although from diverse histories; Niamh's own quiet existence growing up on the nursery working alongside her mother was a far cry from Cara's city upbringing in London with

wealthy, exasperated parents and a series of ‘good’ schools. Cara had been packed off to France to try and get her focussed on something she was good at, but she had no real value for her talent, which gave Niamh to silently sympathise with her parents. Niamh loved her easy-going manner and chattiness, and Cara for her part seemed captured by Niamh’s gentleness, knowledge of plants and attention to detail in her paintings. At the end of the evening they wandered back to the dorms the two of them, weaving a little because of the wine, and giggling about some goings-on among their friends. As they paused to say goodnight outside Niamh’s room, Cara looked at her seriously, her head on one side. She’d asked Niamh if she was into boys, which Niamh replied that she was, not catching the relevance of the question immediately. Cara had pretended a wistful sigh, and then linked her arm through Niamh’s.

‘I’ll have to settle for best friend then.’ She mourned. ‘Come in for a night cap.’

Niamh had felt a shock jolt through her; she hadn’t even heard any of the gossip about Cara’s being gay, so it came as a surprise to her. She was too polite to question her any further, even though she was burning with naive curiosity, having never knowingly met anyone before who was gay. She carefully laid it to one side, glad that she had made Cara her friend that evening.

After that evening, their kinship grew month on month; Cara drawing Niamh out of her shell, Niamh helping Cara to focus sufficiently on her work to pass the course. Plans were made over the final semester to travel together on and off during the following year. They drew up elaborate routes which would criss-cross one another around Europe, allowing each of them to see the places they wanted alone, and then to hook up for the trips they both wanted to make together. These plans also served Niamh to dispense with her misgivings about travelling alone, which were almost putting her off altogether, and she realised that without Cara’s encouragement she would certainly have returned home long before her travel year was up. She wasn’t sure at which point they had first discussed Cara

coming back to Ireland with Niamh to spend the summer, or who had mentioned it first, but now they were both excited about it. For a start, it prolonged the time before they had to say goodbye to the time they spent together, and secondly Cara had shown such sweet interest in the workings of the nursery, claiming to always have had an interest in plants, that Niamh had decided that to return home at the start of the summer and offer her mother some help would be a great idea.

Cara's talk of Barcelona and all its happenings kept them amused for most of the way over France, and by the time they were over Paris Niamh felt as though she'd been there with her. She had just one last question.

'So, any romantic entanglements while you were there?' she asked a little shyly.

'Entanglements? God, Niamh, you make it sound like gymnastics! So, the answer is no. Nothing. Zip. I'm starting to despair.' Cara dipped her beautiful profile and Niamh wondered for a moment if she was alright; she seemed genuinely sad about being alone. 'Do you know what? I'm actually starting to wonder if maybe I'm just way, way, way too picky.' She seemed to falter with the question.

Niamh smiled warmly into her friend's sea-blue eyes.

'Cara; there's nothing wrong with being picky. I wish I'd been a bit more picky this year.'

Cara sniffed, and then grinned. 'Oh yeah, I suppose that's true. So; tell me about Billy-boy.' She demanded.

'It was so weird,' Niamh began, glad to offload this once and for all. 'We were supposed to meet up before I left, go out for dinner one last time, and I had all this stuff to give back to him. Suddenly he just became really unavailable, giving me odd excuses for not meeting up, and not returning my calls.'

Cara winced, and nodded, then asked. 'So, what did you do?'

'Well, what could I do? I went round to his apartment yesterday.'

'Oh *Niamh*, you didn't?'

‘I had to! I had this big box of stuff for him, I couldn’t just leave it, I’d have felt terrible. Anyway, I could hear him through the door, having a laugh with his other German buddies, for all the world as though life was fine.’ Niamh finished miserably.

‘Well, that settles it then, he’s a prick who never deserved you.’

‘I know, that’s true.’ Giggled Niamh. ‘And it’s not even like I was hung up on him or anything, I just expected a bit more, you know?’

‘I know sweetie; you expect everyone in the world to be as lovely as you are, and unfortunately that’s not the case.’

They both smiled and hugged awkwardly in the little space allowed.

‘Anyway, I always thought he was a bit too... stiff for you.’ Cara sniggered.

‘I know you did, you hardly made a secret of it!’

‘Oh come on, Niamh, how could you take him seriously when he was good at that himself?’ Niamh was laughing outright now, and she launched into an uncanny impression of Wilhelm. ‘Hallo, Niamh. I would like very much to take you for to drink in a bar this evening. Here is your invitation, I will pick you up at nineteen hundred hours, ok.’

The two girls cracked up laughing, and Niamh felt better already, having shared the situation with Cara and putting a little distance between herself and the sting of rejection. She laid back her head and gave herself over to the thrum of the plane’s engine. She was tired out from the excitement of returning home and meeting up with Cara again, and tiredness edged her away from consciousness into a delicious doze.

Next to her, Cara slipped in and out of a restless sleep. She was nervous. Travelling had been fine for her, it had suited her; backpacking, keeping on moving. Now she felt a desire to settle for a while, and

The Barefoot Gardener

Alison McGuire

hoped only that her friend's house in Wicklow, Ireland, would be the place where she could find some peace, and rest for her aching feet.