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Written by Cecelia Ahern

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THE MARBLE COLLECTOR



A forgotten childhood.

A discovered life.

THE MARBLE COLLECTOR

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I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free.

Michelangelo

PROLOGUE

When it comes to my memory there are three categories: things I want to forget, things I can't forget, and things I forgot I'd forgotten until I remember them.

My earliest memory is of my mum when I was three years old. We are in the kitchen, she picks up the teapot and launches it up at the ceiling. She holds it with two hands, one on the handle, one on the spout, and lobs it as though in a sheaf-toss competition, sending it up in the air where it cracks against the ceiling, and then falls straight back down to the table where it shatters in pieces, murky brown water and burst soggy teabags everywhere. I don't know what preceded this act, or what came after, but I do know it was anger-motivated, and the anger was my-dad-motivated. This memory is not a good representation of my mum's character; it doesn't show her in a good light. To my knowledge she never behaved like that again, which I imagine is precisely the reason that I remember it.

As a six-year-old, I see my Aunt Anna being stopped at

the door by Switzer's security as we exit. The hairy-handed security guard goes through her shopping bag and retrieves a scarf with its price tags and a security tag still on it. I can't remember what happened after that, Aunt Anna plied me with ice-cream sundaes in the Ilac Centre and watched with hope that every memory of the incident would die with each mouthful of sugar. The memory is vivid despite even to this day everyone believing I made it up.

I currently go to a dentist who I grew up with. We were never friends but we hung out in the same circles. He's now a very serious man, a sensible man, a stern man. When he hovers above my open mouth, I see him as a fifteen-year-old pissing against the living room walls at a house party, shouting about Jesus being the original anarchist.

When I see my aged primary school teacher who was so softly spoken we almost couldn't hear her, I see her throwing a banana at the class clown and shouting at him to *leave me alone for God's sake, just leave me alone*, before bursting into tears and running from the classroom. I bumped into an old classmate recently and brought the incident up, but she didn't remember.

It seems to me that when summoning up a person in my mind it is not the everyday person I think of, it is the more dramatic moments or the moments they showed a part of themselves that is usually hidden.

My mother says that I have a knack for remembering what others forget. Sometimes it's a curse; nobody likes it when there's somebody to remember what they've tried so hard to bury. I'm like the person who remembers everything after a drunken night out, who everyone wishes would keep their memories to themself.

I can only assume I remember these episodes because I have never behaved this way myself. I can't think of a

moment when I have broken form, become another version of myself that I want and need to forget. I am always the same. If you've met me you know me, there's not much more to me. I follow the rules of who I know myself to be and can't seem to be anything else, not even in moments of great stress when surely a meltdown would be acceptable. I think this is why I admire it so much in others and I remember what they choose to forget.

Out of character? No. I fully believe that even a sudden change in a person's behaviour is within the confines of their nature. That part of us is present the whole time, lying dormant, just waiting for its moment to be revealed. Including me.

1

PLAYING WITH MARBLES

Allies

'*Fergus Boggs!*'

These are the only two words I can understand through Father Murphy's rage-filled rant at me, and that's because those words are my name, the rest of what he says is in Irish. I'm five years old and I've been in the country for one month. I moved from Scotland with Mammy and my brothers, after Daddy died. It all happened so quickly, Daddy dying, us moving, and even though I'd been to Ireland before, on holidays during the summer to see Grandma, Granddad, Uncle, Aunty and all my cousins, it's not the same now. I've never been here when it's not the summer. It feels like a different place. It has rained every day we've been here. The ice-cream shop isn't even open now, all boarded up like it never even existed, like I made it up in my head. The beach that we used to go to most days doesn't look like the same place and the chip van is gone. The people look different too. They're all wrapped up and dark.

Father Murphy stands over my desk and is tall and grey and wide. He spits as he shouts at me; I feel the spit land on my cheek but I'm afraid to wipe it away in case that makes him angrier. I try looking around at the other boys to see their reactions but he lashes out at me. A backhanded slap. It hurts. He is wearing a ring, a big one; I think it has cut my face but I daren't reach up to feel it in case he hits me again. I need to go to the toilet all of a sudden. I have been hit before, but never by a priest.

He is shouting angry Irish words. He is angry that I don't understand. In between the Irish words he says I should understand him by now but I just can't. I don't get to practise at home. Mammy is sad and I don't like to bother her. She likes to sit and cuddle. I like when she does that. I don't want to ruin the cuddles by talking. And anyway I don't think she remembers the Irish words either. She moved away from Ireland a long time ago to be a nanny to a family in Scotland and she met Daddy. They never spoke the Irish words there.

The priest wants me to repeat the words after him but I can barely breathe. I can barely get the words out of my mouth.

'*Tá mé, tá tú, tá sé, tá sí . . .*'

LOUDER!

'*Tá muid, tá sibh, tá siad.*'

When he's not shouting at me, the room is so quiet it reminds me it's filled with boys my age, all listening. As I stammer through the words he is telling everybody how stupid I am. My whole body is shaking. I feel sick. I need to go to the toilet. I tell him so. His face goes a purple colour and that is when the leather strap comes out. He lashes my hand with leather, which I later learn has pennies sewn into the layers. He tells me he is going to give me

'six of the best' on each hand. I can't take the pain. I need to go to the toilet. I go right there and then. I expect the boys to laugh but nobody does. They keep their heads down. Maybe they'll laugh later, or maybe they'll understand. Maybe they're just happy it's not happening to them. I'm embarrassed, and ashamed, as he tells me I should be. Then he pulls me out of the room, by my ear, and that hurts too, away from everyone, down the corridor, and he pushes me into a dark room. The door bangs closed behind me and he leaves me alone.

I don't like the dark, I have never liked the dark, and I start to cry. My pants are wet, my wee has run down into my socks and shoes but I don't know what to do. Mammy usually changes them for me. What do I do here? There is no window in the room and I can't see anything. I hope he won't keep me in here long. My eyes adjust to the darkness and the light that comes from under the door helps me to see. I'm in a storage room. I see a ladder, and a bucket and a mop with no stick, just the head. It smells rank. An old bicycle is hanging upside down, the chain missing. There's two wellington boots but they don't match and they're both for the same foot. Nothing in here fits together. I don't know why he put me in here and I don't know how long I'll be. Will Mammy be looking for me?

It feels like forever has passed. I close my eyes and sing to myself. The songs that Mammy sings with me. I don't sing them too loud in case he hears me and thinks I'm having fun in here. That would make him angrier. In this place, fun and laughing makes them angry. We are not here to be leaders, we are here to serve. This is not what my daddy taught me, he said that I was a natural leader, that I can be anything I want to be. I used to go hunting with him, he taught me everything, he even let me walk first, he said I

was the leader. He sang a song about it. 'Following the leader, the leader, the leader, Fergus is the leader, da da da da da.' I hum it to myself but I don't say the words. The priest won't like me saying I'm the leader. In this place we're not allowed to be anybody we want to be, we have to be who they tell us to be. I sing the songs my daddy used to sing when I was allowed to stay up late and listen to the sing-songs. Daddy had a soft voice for a strong man, and he sometimes cried when he sang. My daddy never said crying was only for babies, not like the priest said, crying is for people who are sad. I sing it to myself now and try not to cry.

Suddenly the door opens and I move away, afraid that it will be him again, with that leather strap. It's not him but it's the younger one, the one who teaches the music class with the kind eyes. He closes the door behind him and crouches down.

'Hi, Fergus.'

I try to say hi but nothing comes out of my mouth.

'I brought you something. A box of bloodies.'

I flinch and he puts a hand out. 'Don't look so scared now, they're marbles. Have you ever played with marbles?'

I shake my head. He opens his hand and I see them shining in his palm like treasures, four red rubies.

'I used to love these as a boy,' he says quietly. 'My granddad gave them to me. "A box of bloodies," he said, "just for you." I don't have the box now. Wish I had, could be worth something. Always remember to keep the packaging, Fergus, that's one bit of advice I'll give you. But I've kept the marbles.'

Somebody walks by the door, we can feel their boots as the floor shakes and creaks beneath us and he looks at the door. When the footsteps have passed he turns back to me, his voice quieter. 'You have to shoot them. Or fulk them.'

I watch as he puts his knuckle on the ground and balances the marble in his bent forefinger. He puts his thumb behind and then gently pushes the marble; it rolls along the wooden floor at speed. A red bloodie, bold as anything, catching the light, shining and glistening. It stops at my foot. I'm afraid to pick it up. And my raw hands are paining me still, it's hard to close them. He sees this and winces.

'Go on, you try,' he says.

I try it. I'm not very good at first because it's hard to close my hands like he showed me, but I get the hang of it. Then he shows me other ways to shoot them. Another way called 'knuckling down'. I prefer it that way and even though he says that's more advanced I'm best at that one. He tells me so and I have to bite my lip to stop the smile.

'Names given to marbles vary from place to place,' he says, getting down and showing me again. 'Some people call them a taw, or a shooter, or tolley, but me and my brothers called them allies.'

Allies. I like that. Even with me locked in this room on my own, I have allies. It makes me feel like a soldier. A prisoner of war.

He fixes me with a serious look. 'When aiming, remember to look at the target with a steady eye. The eye directs the brain, the brain directs the hand. Don't forget that. Always keep an eye on the target, Fergus, and your brain will make it happen.'

I nod.

The bell rings, class over.

'Okay,' he stands up, wipes down his dusty robe. 'I've a class now. You sit tight here. It shouldn't be much longer.'

I nod.

He's right. It shouldn't be much longer – but it is. Father Murphy doesn't come to get me soon. He leaves me there

all day. I even do another wee in my pants because I'm afraid to knock on the door to get someone, but I don't care. I am a soldier, a prisoner of war, and I have my allies. I practise and practise in the small room, in my own little world, wanting my skill and accuracy to be the best in the school. I'm going to show the other boys and I'm going to be better than them all the time.

The next time Father Murphy puts me in here I have the marbles hidden in my pocket and I spend the day practising again. I also have an archboard in the dark room. I put it there myself between classes, just in case. It's a piece of cardboard with seven arches cut in it. I made it myself from Mrs Lynch's empty cornflakes box that I found in her bin after I saw some other boys with a fancy shop-bought one. The middle arch is number 0, the arches either side are 1, 2, 3. I put the archboard at the far wall and I shoot from a distance, close to the door. I don't really know how to play it properly yet and I can't play it on my own but I can practise my shooting. I will be better than my big brothers at something.

The nice priest doesn't stay in the school long. They say that he kisses women and that he's going to hell, but I don't care. I like him. He gave me my first marbles, my bloodies. In a dark time in my life, he gave me my allies.

2

POOL RULES



No Running

Breathe.

Sometimes I have to remind myself to breathe. You would think it would be an innate human instinct but no, I inhale and then forget to exhale and so I find my body rigid, all tensed up, heart pounding, chest tight with an anxious head wondering what's wrong.

I understand the theory of breathing. The air you breathe in through your nose should go all the way down to your belly, the diaphragm. Breathe relaxed. Breathe rhythmically. Breathe silently. We do this from the second we are born and yet we are never taught. Though I should have been. Driving, shopping, working, I catch myself holding my breath, nervous, fidgety, waiting for what exactly to happen, I don't know. Whatever it is, it never comes. It is ironic that on dry ground I fail at this simple task when my job requires me to excel at it. I'm a lifeguard. Swimming comes easily to me, it feels natural, it doesn't test me, it makes me feel free. With swimming, timing is everything. On land

you breathe in for one and out for one, beneath the water I can achieve a three to one ratio, breathing every three strokes. Easy. I don't even need to think about it.

I had to learn how to breathe above water when I was pregnant with my first child. It was necessary for labour, they told me, which it turns out it certainly is. Because childbirth is as natural as breathing, they go hand in hand, yet breathing, for me, has been anything but natural. All I ever want to do above water is hold my breath. A baby will not be born through holding your breath. Trust me, I tried. Knowing my aquatic ways, my husband encouraged a water birth. This seemed like a good idea to get me in my natural territory, at home, in water, only there is nothing natural about sitting in an oversized paddling pool in your living room, and it was the baby who got to experience the world from below the water and not me. I would have gladly switched places. The first birth ended in a dash to the hospital and an emergency caesarean and indeed the two subsequent babies came in the same way, though they weren't emergencies. It seemed that the aquatic creature who preferred to stay under the water from the age of five could not embrace another of life's most natural acts.

I'm a lifeguard in a nursing home. It is quite the exclusive nursing home, like a four-star hotel with round-the-clock care. I have worked here for seven years, give or take my maternity leave. I man the lifeguard chair five days a week from nine a.m. to two p.m. and watch as three people each hour take to the water for lengths. It is a steady stream of monotony and stillness. Nothing ever happens. Bodies appear from the changing rooms as walking displays of the reality of time: saggy skin, boobs, bottoms and thighs, some dry and flaking from diabetes, others from kidney or liver disease. Those confined to their beds or chairs for so long

wear their painful-looking pressure ulcers and bedsores, others carry their brown patches of age spots as badges of the years they have lived. New skin growths appear and change by the day. I see them all, with the full understanding of what my body after three babies will face in the future. Those with one-on-one physiotherapy work with trainers in the water, I merely oversee; in case the therapist drowns, I suppose.

In the seven years I have rarely had to dive in. It is a quiet, slow swimming pool, certainly nothing like the local pool I bring my boys to on a Saturday where you'd leave with a headache from the shouts that echo from the filled-to-the-brim group classes.

I stifle a yawn as I watch the first swimmer in the early morning. Mary Kelly, the dredger, is doing her favourite move: the breaststroke. Slow and noisy, at five feet tall and weighing three hundred pounds she pushes out water as if she's trying to empty the pool, and then attempts to glide. She manages this manoeuvre without once putting her face below the water and blowing out constantly as though she's in below-zero conditions. It is always the same people at the same times. I know that Mr Daly will soon arrive, followed by Mr Kennedy aka the Butterfly King who fancies himself as a bit of an expert, then sisters Eliza and Audrey Jones who jog widths of the shallow end for twenty minutes. Non-swimmer Tony Dornan will cling to a float for dear life like he's on the last life raft, and hover in the shallow end, near to the steps, near to the wall. I fiddle with a pair of goggles, unknotting the strap, reminding myself to breathe, pushing away the hard tight feeling in my chest that only goes away when I remember to exhale.

Mr Daly steps out of the changing room and on to the tiles, 9.15 a.m. on the dot. He wears his budgie smugglers,

an unforgiving light blue that reveal the minutiae when wet. His skin hangs loosely around his eyes, cheeks and jowls. His skin is so transparent I see almost every vein in his body and he's covered in bruises from even the slightest bump, I'm sure. His yellow toenails curl painfully into his skin. He gives me a miserable look and adjusts his goggles over his eyes. He shuffles by me without a good morning greeting, ignoring me as he does every day, holding on to the metal railing as if at any moment he'll go sliding on the slippery tiles that Mary Kelly is saturating with each stroke. I imagine him on the tiles, his bones snapping up through his tracing-paper-like skin, skin crackly like a roasted chicken.

I keep one eye on him and the other on Mary, who is letting out a loud grunting sound with each stroke like she is Maria Sharapova. Mr Daly reaches the steps, takes hold of the rail and lowers himself slowly into the water. His nostrils flare as the cold hits him. Once in the water he checks to see if I'm watching. On the days that I am, he floats on his back for long periods of time like he's a dead goldfish. On days like today, when I'm not looking, he lowers his body and head under the water, hands gripping the top of the wall to hold himself down and stays there. I see him, clear as day, practically on his knees in the shallow end, trying to drown himself. This is a daily occurrence.

'Sabrina,' my supervisor Eric warns from the office behind me.

'I see him.'

I make my way to Mr Daly at the steps. I reach into the water and grab him under his arms and pull him up. He is so light he comes up easily, gasping for air, eyes wild behind his goggles, a big green snot bubble in his right nostril. He lifts his goggles off his head and empties them

of water, grunting, grumbling, his body shaking with rage that I have once again foiled his dastardly plan. His face is purple and his chest heaves up and down as he tries to catch his breath. He reminds me of my three-year-old who always hides in the same place and then gets annoyed when I find him. I don't say anything, just make my way back to the stool, my flip-flops splashing my calves with cold water. This happens every day. This is all that happens.

'You took your time there,' Eric says.

Did I? Maybe a second longer than usual. 'Didn't want to spoil his fun.'

Eric smiles against his better judgement and shakes his head to show he disapproves. Before working here with me since the nursing home's birth, Eric had a previous Mitch Buchannon lifeguard experience in Miami. His mother on her deathbed brought him back home to Ireland and then his mother surviving has made him stay. He jokes that she will outlive him, though I can sense a nervousness on his part that this will indeed be the case. I think he's waiting for her to die so that he can begin living, and the fear as he nears fifty is that that will never happen. To cope with his self-imposed pause on his life, I think he pretends he's still in Miami; though he's delusional, I sometimes envy his ability to pretend he is in a place far more exotic than this. I think he walks to the sound of maracas in his head. He is one of the happiest people I know because of it. His hair is Sun-In orange, and his skin is a similar colour. He doesn't go on any traditional 'dates' from one end of the year to the other, saving himself up for the month in January when he disappears to Thailand. He returns whistling, with the greatest smile on his face. I don't want to know what he does there but I know that his hopes are that when his mother dies, every day will be like Thailand. I like him and

I consider him my friend. Five days a week in this place has meant I've told him more than I've even told myself.

'Doesn't it strike you that the one person I save every day is a person who doesn't even want to live? Doesn't it make you feel completely redundant?'

'There are plenty of things that do, but not that.' He bends over to pick up a bunch of wet grey hair clogging the drains, which looks like a drowned rat, and he holds on to it, shaking the water out of it, not appearing to feel the repulsion that I do. 'Is that how you're feeling?'

Yes. Though it shouldn't. It shouldn't matter if the man I'm saving doesn't want his life to be saved, shouldn't the point be that I'm saving him? But I don't reply. He's my supervisor, not my therapist, I shouldn't question saving people while on duty as a lifeguard. He may live in an alternative world in his head but he's not stupid.

'Why don't you take a coffee break?' he offers, and hands me my coffee mug, the other hand still holding the drowned rat ball of pubic hair.

I like my job very much but lately I've been antsy. I don't know why and I don't know what exactly I'm expecting to happen in my life, or what I'm hoping will happen. I have no particular dreams or goals. I wanted to get married and I did. I wanted to have children and I do. I want to be a lifeguard and I am. Though isn't that the meaning of antsy? Thinking there are ants on you when there aren't.

'Eric, what does antsy mean?'

'Um. Restless, I think, uneasy.'

'Has it anything to do with ants?'

He frowns.

'I thought it was when you think there are ants crawling all over you, so you start to feel like this,' I shudder a bit. 'But there aren't any ants on you at all.'

He taps his lip. 'You know what, I don't know. Is it important?'

I think about it. It would mean that I think there is something wrong with my life because there actually *is* something wrong with my life or that there is something wrong with me. But it's just a feeling, and there actually isn't. There *not* being something wrong would be the preferred solution.

What's wrong, Sabrina? Aidan's been asking a lot lately. In the same way that constantly asking someone if they're angry will eventually make them angry.

Nothing's wrong. But is it nothing, or is it something? Or is it really that it *is* nothing, *everything* is just nothing? Is that the problem? Everything is nothing? I avoid Eric's gaze and concentrate instead on the pool rules, which irritate me so I look away. You see, there it is, that antsy thing.

'I can check it out,' he says, studying me.

To escape his gaze I get a coffee from the machine in the corridor and pour it into my mug. I lean against the wall in the corridor and think about our conversation, think about my life. Coffee finished, no conclusions reached, I return to the pool and I am almost crushed in the corridor by a stretcher being wheeled by at top speed by two paramedics, with a wet Mary Kelly on top of it, her white and blue-veined bumpy legs like Stilton, an oxygen mask over her face.

I hear myself say 'No way!' as they push by me.

When I get into the small lifeguard office I see Eric, sitting down in complete shock, his shell tracksuit dripping wet, his orange Sun-In hair slicked back from the pool water.

'What the hell?'

'I think she had a . . . I mean, I don't know, but, it might

have been a heart attack. Jesus.' Water drips from his orange pointy nose.

'But I was only gone five minutes.'

'I know, it happened the second you walked out. I jammed on the emergency cord, pulled her out, did mouth-to-mouth, and they were here before I knew it. They responded fast. I let them in the fire exit.'

I swallow, the jealousy rising. 'You gave her mouth-to-mouth?'

'Yeah. She wasn't breathing. But then she did. Coughed up a load of water.'

I look at the clock. 'It wasn't even five minutes.'

He shrugs, still stunned.

I look at the pool, to the clock. Mr Daly is sitting on the edge of the pool, looking after the ghost of the stretcher with envy. It was four and a half minutes.

'You had to dive in? Pull her out? Do mouth-to-mouth?'

'Yeah. Yeah. Look, don't beat yourself up about it, Sabrina, you couldn't have got to her any faster than I did.'

'You had to pull the emergency cord?'

He looks at me in confusion over this.

I've never had to pull the cord. Never. Not even in trials. Eric did that. I feel jealousy and anger bubbling to the surface, which is quite an unusual feeling. This happens at home – an angry mother irritated with her boys has lost the plot plenty of times – but never in public. In public I suppress it, especially at work when it is directed at my supervisor. I'm a measured, rational human being; people like me don't lose their temper in public. But I don't suppress the anger now. I let it rise close to the surface. It would feel empowering to let myself go like this if I wasn't so genuinely frustrated, so completely irritated.

To put it into perspective here is how I'm feeling: seven

years working here. That's two thousand three hundred and ten days. Eleven thousand five hundred and fifty hours. Minus nine months, six months and three months for maternity leave. In all of that time I've sat on the stool and watched the, often, empty pool. No mouth-to-mouth, no dramatic dives. Not once. Not counting Mr Daly. Not counting the assistance of leg or foot cramps. Nothing. I sit on the stool, sometimes I stand, and I watch the oversized ticking clock and the list of pool rules. No running, no jumping, no diving, no pushing, no shouting, no nothing . . . all the things you're not allowed to do in this room, all negative, almost as though it's mocking me. No lifesaving. I'm always on alert, it's what I'm trained to do, but nothing ever happens. And the very second I take an unplanned coffee break I miss a possible heart attack, a definite near-drowning and the emergency cord being pulled.

'It's not fair,' I say.

'Now come on, Sabrina, you were in there like a shot when Eliza stepped on the piece of glass.'

'It wasn't glass. Her varicose vein ruptured.'

'Well. You got there fast.'

It is always above the water that I struggle, that I can't breathe. It is above the water that I feel like I'm drowning.

I throw my coffee mug hard against the wall.