A Small Part of Me

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Extract

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THE STORM

The day her mother left was the same day that the Reed family drowned in the river, all of them.

It is summer, close and sticky. Christina is six years and ten months old – nearly seven. She is wearing a cotton print dress and a blue and yellow sun hat. She has taken off her shoes and is dipping her toes in the stream. She is allowed to play here.

The flies buzz around her head and annoy her. She picks up a stick and bats it about but it makes no difference, and when she looks down she notices that the stick was muddy and her sundress is spotted with little dark dots all down the front. She whines but there's no one to cry in front of. She hates to get dirty.

The stream is another land. In the place where she likes to go, there is a little muddy trail down to the edge and on the other side a lovely big, leafy chestnut tree. It is cooler here and the leaves whisper above her head, playing with the sunlight and teasing her eyes. Christina is hot and she puts both of her feet completely in the water. She begins to go forward, sliding on the mossy stones and staggering across to the other side. The cold stream feels nice. She squeezes her toes, enjoying the soft, soily shore as she gets out on the bank. She squats down then and looks back at the way she has come. The reeds and cow parsley are so high she can only just see above them – a little bit of the lawn, the end of the bridge and their big grey house. The water tinkles in front of her and she spies several large stones, which will be perfect for her plan. She wants to build a bridge.

Christina stands up and starts pulling up a reed. It's sharp and tough and makes her hand sore. She groans with the effort. Finally she has four. She takes a reel of red cotton out of her dress pocket and a small pair of scissors she found in her mammy's room and lays out her four long green reeds.

Christina makes her family: Papa Reed, Mama Reed, Babby Reed and their Angeline. When she has to concentrate hard, Christina sticks out her tongue. Some of the children at school laugh at her when she does this, and once the music teacher made a joke about it and now she refuses to learn the piano. She can't help it. When she's working hard she forgets everything, even herself. This is why she doesn't hear her father calling and is shocked to see him when she looks up, standing on the other bank.

Christina, he says, will you come into the house?

I don't want to, Daddy. Look, look what I've made.

That's lovely, but I want you to come in now.

She looks up at him and squints because the sun is in her face. Why?

Behind him, coming across the lawn, is a figure in brown. She walks very slowly, and Christina believes she could be floating. It is her mother. And now, across the bridge, running, is Angeline, her shiny black hair swinging back and forth. As she reaches her mother, Christina thinks that her mammy looks like a queen and Angeline is her maid, so that means that she must be a princess. Christina twists the thread around Babby Reed one more time, then leans over and pats the earth with her hands.

I want to stay here and play, she says.

You have to come in, he says, and Christina senses something different in his voice, a note of something...urgent, dangerous. She stops what she's doing and stares at him. He leans across to her, his arm stretched out, his hand shaking.

No, leave her, Tomás, her mother says. Please, let's just leave her be.

Her daddy looks at Christina and then at her mother. She is tall today, long and thin, like one of the Reeds. And she smiles at Christina. It's a tiny smile, so you might not notice. Her lips move but her eyes say nothing.

Everything all right?

Angeline stands with her hands on her hips, panting from her run across the grass. She is in a bright yellow dress, like the sun, with green sandals and a green scarf in her hair. Her dark eyes sparkle.

I'm making some people, a family, Christina says.

Let's see.

In one bound, Angeline is across the stream and crouching down beside her. Christina explains.

This is Papa Reed and Mama Reed and Babby Reed. And this is Angeline.

Angeline laughs, and it feels like a tickle running down her side. An Angeline?

Yes, every family should have an Angeline.

It is then, when she looks at her sweet Angeline's face and nuzzles her, that she can see that her parents are gone. And there is a feeling of something left behind. It is the smell of overzealous weeds, their noxious odour on that distant, dream-like August afternoon; it is Christina's first smudge of guilt.

The sun slips behind a cloud, the stream runs dark and all the colours of Angeline fade.

Christina stands, and collecting up the Reeds, she carefully slides them into her pocket. I want to go in, she says.

Angeline frowns. I thought you wanted to make a bridge, she says.

I'm hungry. Christina chews her lip.

Okay, Angeline says, and she takes one big giant step back across the stream.

Are you going to jump it? she asks. She opens her arms wide and looks like a large yellow flower, swaying on the other side.

Christina shakes her head.

Go on, says Angeline, you can do it.

No. Christina twists her foot in the dirt.

Go on, girly, I know you can jump it!

Angeline waves for her to come and the sun darts back out, bouncing off her dress so that she looks like a large light just switched on.

She can catch me if I fall, Christina thinks, so she takes one big leap and she makes it. For one second she's extremely happy, but then she feels her pocket and she knows instantly what is wrong. The Reed family fell in.

The Reeds, she wails, and Angeline wades out into the stream but it's too late. Christina can see them, twirling around and around in the water, flushed downstream.

So they run alongside them then, right to the end of the garden, but it's no use. She has to wave goodbye as she sees them pulled into the big river, and then in a flash they go under, never to come back up again. Angeline puts her arm around her.

Never mind, darling, she says, you can make some more.

How? The Reeds were people. You can't make the same people twice.

Angeline knots their hands together. That's true, she says. Let's imagine they've gone somewhere better then – a miniature cloudland, at the very tippy top of the sky.

What's miniature?

Tiny.

Would it be nice there? Christina sniffs.

Just perfect, Angeline replies, quite beautiful, and imagine they are all together, no one got left behind.

When they go back in the house, it's quiet, just the tick of the clock and the sound of the river outside, two constants that never change. Angeline makes the tea and Christina sits at the big kitchen

table cutting out her new paper doll and all her clothes.

Where's Mammy? she asks.

Out, says Angeline.

Where's Daddy?

Out too.

Christina stops her cutting and watches Angeline at the kitchen sink, her hands sheathed in gloves the same colour as her dress, her head bent over the bucket of potatoes as she peels them. The window is in front of her and Christina watches the dark clouds gather. She senses the hum in the air, and it makes her hair itchy.

Is it going to rain? she asks.

Angeline raises her head. Clever girl, she says, I think you're right. And pulling off her gloves, she says, Come on, quick, help me bring in the laundry.

They dash out back across the river, onto the grass, and pull the clothes off the line without even unclipping the pegs. Christina is excited. It's a race, they have to make it back inside before it rains. And they nearly win. She's just outside the back door as she feels the first hot drops on her head.

The sky turns black and the dog runs behind the sofa. Angeline switches on the lights and they stand at the window and wait for each sheet of lightning and then count for the thunder.

The storm is close, Angeline says, and as she speaks the lights go out. Christina giggles nervously.

Angeline opens the bottom press and pulls out some candles. They light more than they need, lace each shelf of the dresser with three candles each, each windowsill with two and four in a line on the kitchen table. Christina is afraid to leave the room. The kitchen is safe, filled with little pools of golden light, warmth, the smell of the food and the heart of the family. But if she went into the hall, the breeze of the storm would pass through her, chill her and make her think of scary stories.

They sit at either end of the kitchen table, Angeline and her, connected in silence, waiting for the storm to end, for someone to come home. Angeline smoothes her hair down with one hand and Christina can see wisps of it lift, like tiny electric charges in the static air. Her eyes are circles of comfort and Christina goes over to her and climbs on her lap. The rain whips against the glass panes, her heart beats fast.

It'll be over soon, Angeline whispers.

It's hard to remember a whole day as a child. Everything we were in that time has been broken up, still in us, but as tiny shards. We get confused. If we go back sometimes our memories are wrong. Things get mixed up.

Christina is sure of this, though. The day her mother left was the day the Reed family drowned. The very same one.

ATLANTIC

CHRISTINA

She drove straight there without thinking. It was habit. The house looked the same, although the garden could do with a tidy, and she noticed that Declan hadn't bothered to open the curtains in any of the bedrooms. That annoyed her.

Christina parked a little further down the lane, almost in a ditch. It would probably have been fine if she'd parked the car right outside the house. Their closest neighbours, the Healys, would be out at this time in the morning, but she didn't want to risk being seen, or worse still, getting caught.

She walked around the house twice. The row of evergreens swished behind her in the early morning breeze, the grass still sparkled with dew and she could hear the cattle lowing. The place had never seemed so nice.

She tried the door, but of course it was locked. It didn't matter because the downstairs bathroom window was open. She stumbled over the loose paving and pulled it back. There was still steam on the mirror and she was tempted to draw a face, but it was important that no one noticed she had been there. She couldn't leave any trace behind.

She slowly went up the stairs and into the bedrooms, each one dark, still holding her children's sleep. She sat on Johnny's bed and stared at all his football posters, rows of men lined up in green, the tribes she had never been able to understand. On his desk were a pile of history books and scribbled notes. He must have an exam today.

She opened his wardrobe and flicked through his clothes, but suddenly she felt sick. She couldn't take anything from here. What if Declan came home for lunch? What if he noticed?

She stood in the landing, swaying, her past and present converging. How had she lived in this house for seventeen years? It felt so empty.

She looked at her bedroom door, at Cian's toddler finger marks on the white gloss which she had never bothered to touch up. It was shut tight and she had no desire to open it, not now. Instead she turned to her right, pushed the door to Cian's room open and was surprised to see how tidy it was. There on the floor was the little wooden train set Santa had brought the Christmas before last, and on the walls hung all of his puppets, their bright smiling faces nodding at her. His bed was still crumpled and she bent over it, smoothing the duvet, lifting up the pillow and pressing it to her face. She could still smell his hair. The crack in her heart deepened. Wounded, she opened his drawers, pulling shorts and T-shirts out from the back, stuffing them into her carrier bag.

Christina tore herself down the landing. She could still hear the echo of her children as they left the house that morning. She stopped then, gripped the top of the banisters and sighed heavily; she could feel the well of her regret deepen. How could she have let this happen?

With one foot on the top stair, she glanced back, and it was only then that a thought occurred to her. She needed some memories to keep her sane. Just a few pictures would do.

Christina pulled down the loft ladder and climbed up into the attic. It didn't take her long to find the photo albums; a pile of them had been stacked in a small green box. She put them in the carrier along with Cian's clothes and was turning to go back down when she saw it.

The sewing box.

It was hers. She had every right to take it.

CIAN

Daddy is shaking him. He squeezes his eyes tight, but it's no good.

'Come on, Cian, up you get,' he says.

Cian rolls onto his tummy and then pushes up. He twists his body so he's sitting and looks around. He's in his own bed. When Mammy was there he always went across to her and snuggled in the bed with her. She was so soft.

But now she's gone, and Daddy doesn't like it when he does that. He just carries him across the landing and puts him back in his own bed, which would be cold. So now when he wakes in the night, and he always does, he just hangs onto Paddington and as many of the others that he can feel around him – Ludwig the badger, Aunt Lucy, Batty Barry and Billy Moose.

Cian rubs his eyes and slowly walks out of his room and down the stairs, clutching onto Paddington. The telly is already on – Johnny is watching *Rescue Heroes*. Cool. Cian likes it in the mornings because Johnny lets him watch his cartoons, not boring teenage programmes like after school.

'Hiya bro,' Johnny says, pushing the cereal box over to Cian. He has to pour his own now, and there's only cold milk. Mammy always makes it with warm milk, but he doesn't say anything any more because it makes Daddy and Johnny mad. Sometimes Cian thinks that they both hate her, especially his brother. No one tells him why. And if he asks, no one tells him anything anyway – only his granny said something. Why does my Mammy have to live somewhere else,

on her own? he had asked her, and Granny had said, She's not able to look after you properly, Cian.

But why?

His granny wouldn't answer him then, and instead she gave him five euro to spend in Sheila's shop. He hadn't forgotten, though. He wanted to know why.

He said to his daddy that he wanted to live with Mammy, but his daddy told him the judge said no, and you always have to do what the judge says.

Daddy is running around. He's talking on his phone and pulling clothes off the hanger over the stove, smoking at the same time. Like a juggler, Cian thinks. My daddy is like a clown. That's what he wants to be when he grows up. But Daddy's job is very important – he buys and sells horses and he's always on the phone. Everyone has a phone except him. He showed Daddy his new coat, which has a special pocket inside it just for your mobile, and told him he had to have a phone now. But Daddy just laughed at him. It's not fair, Cian had said, Johnny has one. And Daddy said that when he was seventeen and doing his Leaving Cert, he could have one too. That was ages away. He was only six. He wasn't even sure how many years that was.

Johnny is out the door now. He has a lift to school. Daddy shouts out good luck as he gets into the big blue car. Johnny has an exam. Daddy said that if Johnny did well he would buy tickets for them all to go to the next Meath match. Football's boring, but Daddy and Johnny think it's great. Daddy says he has to do the GAA summer camp this year, but he'd rather stay at home, watch telly and play with his toys.

Cian goes back into his room to get dressed. He used to let Daddy do it, but he got so angry and shouted at him if he moved that he does it himself now. Mammy used to dress him while he watched telly. One moment he was in his jammies and the next all ready for school. That was great.

How many weeks was it since she had gone? It felt like ages.

Daddy is calling to him. 'Come on, Cian, we'd better go.'

He places Paddington back under the covers – poor Paddington is sick today – and picks up his school bag. Daddy is standing by the back door. His hair is sticking up like a hedgehog and his skin is all prickly on his face.

'What day is it, Daddy?' Cian asks.

'It's Friday.'

'Is that the day before the weekend?'

'Yes.'

'So am I seeing Mammy tonight? Am I staying with her? Does the judge say I can?'

'Yes, you are. And I say you can. It's up to me now.' Daddy sounds cross.

Cian is smiling because he knows that Mammy will be meeting him after school. He tries to hide his face from Daddy. He looks down and sees a little green thing on the road.

'A frog!' he squeals, bending down and picking it up. 'Can I bring it to school? Please, please, please? Can I show my friends? Please, Daddy?'

'Don't be ridiculous, Cian, of course you can't. Come on, throw it away, you're going to be late.'

Throw it away! Mammy wouldn't say that. She wouldn't let him keep it either, but she'd make him find a little leaf somewhere and put him down, gently, very slowly. He looks around, hunting for a leaf.

'For God's sake!' Daddy is in the car, hollering from the window. Cian panics and throws his little friend. He sees the small green thing flying through the air, and says, 'Oh sorry, sorry, sorry!', hoping he doesn't break his bones.

CHRISTINA

It was a beautiful article, her mother's sewing box.

Made out of mahogany with little brass handles on each side, the box was a perfect cube. Christina opened the little door. There were four rows of drawers, two drawers to each row, except the bottom one, which was one big drawer. She had never used it. Angeline gave it to her years ago, just after she got married. But she had been so caught up in her new life as a young wife that she had completely forgotten about it and shoved it in the attic. At the time she hadn't wanted to think about her mother or be reminded of her in any way, even if it was only through her sewing box.

The box probably hadn't been opened since her mother had last used it, because Angeline certainly never sewed – she had always sent stuff out to Mae Cassidy, from socks to curtains.

Christina nervously fingered the outside of the box. To think that her mother had probably been the last person to touch its contents. She shook herself angrily.

What did she expect, for her to come popping out?

She impatiently pulled open the first drawer to find several packets of ancient snap fasteners, one of them with *War Time Pack/Guaranteed Rustless* written on the back. The sewing box was older than she thought. It must have belonged to her mother's mother.

In the next drawer was a little doll made out of tiny coloured beads. Mainie. Christina remembered that little doll. Her mother had

made it for her. She picked it up and twisted it between her fingers, letting it drop on the floor.

In the third drawer there was a thick plastic needle case with a picture of a yellow rose on it and the lettering *Rose of England Needlecase.* She opened it up and pulled out one long needle.

The fourth, fifth and sixth drawers were full of reels of cotton, some really old wooden reels and some more recent plastic ones. Each drawer was a spectrum of colour, with bits and bobs of elastic, tiny pin cushions and one or two thimbles.

One reel was strange. It was wooden, not plastic, and the biggest by far. Wound around it was hair, not thread – human hair. And it wasn't just from one head. There was a strong black shiny strand like horsehair, a delicate line of red hair and then a soft brown piece. They were all knotted together to make one long multi-coloured thread. Christina pulled it through her fingers. A part of her wanted to snap it off.

There was only one drawer left – the large one at the bottom. Christina opened it. It was empty apart from a round metal box. She pulled it out and flipped up the lid. A hundred buttons came cascading out, none of them matching. She remembered playing with these, the exotic buttons made from shells and pearls, and then the treasure trove ones, small round coins of silver. She fingered each one and then slowly put them back in the box.

That was it then. But as she pushed the button box back into the drawer, she could see something else right at the back: a curl of thick paper.

It was a photograph. Christina pulled it out. It was creased, as if someone had held it many times. Some of the black and white detail was lost in the folds, but the image was still strong. It was a picture of her as a little girl. She was standing next to a large snowman, grinning broadly, with a wool hat on her head and mittens on her hands. And next to her wasn't her father or Angeline – next to her

was her mother. She was a tall, thin woman with long ginger hair. She was smiling too. She was holding her hand.

Christina started. A pulse passed through her body and she fell back on her heels, knocking her bag over. She had never seen a photograph of her mother. She turned the picture over.

Greta and Christina, January 1976

It was written in her father's handwriting. She flipped the image over again and stared at the stranger in the snow, her own flesh and blood. She let the picture drop, brushed the tears from her eyes and looked up at the skylight in the attic. The wind was chasing clouds across the sky, hiding the sun. She pulled herself straight, and leaned over in the near-dark. The roof of the attic pressed in on top of her head, the wooden boards pounded in her ears, as she picked the photograph up off the dusty floor. It was then that she noticed the needle sticking out of the top of her middle finger. She had felt nothing. A tiny bead of red dripped onto the white print.

Greta and Christina, January 1976

That was the year she'd left.