

One

The path down to the beach is precarious. You can see it from the window of the car, framed on either side by weathered stone walls. You unbuckle your seatbelt and fish your right shoe out from under the seat. It slipped off as soon as you got into the car and you've only just realised. You pull the buckle tight against your ankle, until the glittery purple plastic digs into your skin. The shoe is too big for you but your mum is sure you'll grow into it. You wiggle your toes in all the free space at the end.

The video camera is stowed between you and Evan in the middle seat of the car. It's wedged between a folded towel and a water bottle. You pick it up carefully and stroke the black plastic of the case as you would a frightened animal.

'Be careful with that,' your dad says to you.

'I will,' you say, slipping the strap over your head.

You open the door and get out of the car. Both your feet hit the road at the same time and the momentum carries you forward. You catch yourself with your arms outstretched on either side. The video camera careens out in front of you, then returns to hit you in the thigh. Your father doesn't see.

You take the camera out and swing the empty case across your body. It's huge in your tiny hands, too big for you to comfortably hold, the metal design sleek and smooth. You run your fingers over the raised buttons, pressing them as though you're playing an accordion. You imagine it's alive in your hands, the wires and springs functioning as an artificial nervous system.

You flick out the little screen and press record. The camera beeps and a light on its body goes red. You leave your parents behind and start walking. The gravel crunches under your feet before giving way to earth.

The lane curves to the left and every step you take reveals more, the world unfolding before the camera lens. You breathe deeply, smelling the air. You move the camera from side to side, trying to capture the entire experience. Your purple shoes appear and then vanish in a flash of movement.

'This is the way down to the beach,' you say.

The camera is looking at the blue sky, examining the wispy strings of white cloud just below the sun. It's a hot day, the hottest all summer. Your mum smeared sun cream on your face before you left the house, and you can still taste it.

You don't notice the exposed rock breaching the grass as you approach it. The tip of your shoe hits the edge and you stumble. The wind rips through your yellow and green cardigan, the one your grandmother knitted for you.

'I've tripped on this rock before, last year,' you tell the camera. 'I should have remembered.' You zoom in on the smooth expanse of grey rock until it fills the entire screen. There's a patch of something white and a little puddle of

rainwater. A yellow butterfly lands next to it. ‘That was silly of me.’ The camera lingers, then moves on.

The stone walls on either side of the path hold back tangles of blackberry bushes. The world is thick with colour: rich purples, bright yellows. You stop to search for any ripe berries. You push the lens of the camera into the bush, and your cardigan catches on a thorn. A piece of yellow thread is pulled loose as you yank yourself free. In the next field over, a pony watches you silently, its tail flicking.

As the lane dips and then rises again, there are stalks of montbretia as tall as you are. You run your fingertips over the soft orange petals, the long green leaves, showing them to the camera. You want it to understand what this place is to you. You find a spider web glistening with small droplets of dew, too fine to show up on the screen. The spider is a small brown smudge. Already you can hear the sound of the sea, the quiet whispering of the waves.

All at once, you arrive at the beach. The Atlantic Ocean stretches out wide in front of you, bigger than you could imagine. The deep blue waves are capped with white horses. The camera doesn’t immediately adjust to the light of the sun on the water, and for a moment everything is white, and there is no difference between the sea and the sky. You blink, and the world comes back into focus.

You know this beach, this small strip of sand stretching between the fields and the rock formations that protect it from the open ocean. You know how to walk down the rocks to the sand, how to test each one before putting your entire weight on it. You expertly balance the camera, never once afraid you’re going to drop it. It’s easier to

hold it sideways, with the lens facing down. On the little screen, the world falls away and stones fly by.

You recognise the people here; most of them are members of your extended family. You tell the camera who they all are and how they're related to you. You forget some of the names, or perhaps you never knew them, so you make up new ones. You take special care pointing out the people you don't know and the ones from other families who you barely remember from last year. You know, of course, that this is a public beach, a popular holiday spot, but it doesn't feel that way. It feels like it belongs to you alone, at least for one month a year.

The camera pans towards a significant spot. It's sheltered from the wind on two sides by a large rock. Small pink and white flowers grow along the top of it. You can't see the tidal pools behind it, but you know they're there.

'This is where Lorcan's family sit,' you tell the camera. You zoom, amplifying the vacancy of the space. It feels huge to you, unquantifiable in its nothingness. 'They're not here yet.'

You'd been hoping Lorcan would have arrived already, it's part of the reason you rushed down from the car. You have little interest in talking to anyone else. You hold the camera even more tightly. You associate this beach so heavily with him, with your two families here every August, that his absence drains something essential from it.

'Lorcan's not my real cousin, but he basically is. Our parents are best friends. And no one else is my age.'

You scan over the beach to emphasise your point, too quickly to get a clear image. Most of your cousins are teenagers, or else newborn babies. The camera stops on

your grandmother, who is sitting in her chair reading a book, a red chequered blanket draped over her lap, a cigarette in her hand. She waves when she sees you, and you wave back. You love your grandmother, but she frightens you, the way that ageing does. Distance develops slowly, yet suddenly it's there. It has stopped being easy and natural to hug her.

As you take in the scene, you notice some people have bought new chairs, or blankets. Some of them are sitting in new spots. You don't like the taste these changes leave in your mouth. This is a place that never changes, that will always be here, and you don't like seeing newness brought into it, as though one red towel emblazoned with a cartoon car could alienate you from the whole place.

A storm has washed in great clumps of brown seaweed, which now litter the beach. You don't like seaweed, not since Lorcan told you that things like to hide in it. He'd made a face as he was telling you that frightened you so badly you'd had nightmares about it.

You approach one clump slowly, warily. The camera watches the progress of your feet. The shells are white spots in the sparkling sand.

'I don't think anything is hiding under here, do you?' You're afraid of the seaweed, but the camera makes you braver. You hold it out in front of you and watch the screen carefully. Tentatively you nudge the seaweed with your foot. It's firmer than you'd anticipated, dried as it is from the sun. Something about the texture feels off to you, the brittle crackle as the strands of seaweed break apart. A fragment makes its way between one of the gaps in your sandal and lodges itself between your toes. You snap the camera closed and stop recording.

You sit down and take off your shoes, stopping between the left and the right to swirl your fingers in the sand. You wonder if this sand remembers you, if it's the same sand as last year, and if it missed you too. You close your eyes and listen to the sound of the waves.

When you open your eyes, your parents have arrived with Evan. They're heavily laden down with buckets, spades and picnic items. One of the buckets is yellow, and it's yours. You'd begged your parents to take it with you when you left last year, and it spent the winter rolling around underneath your bed.

You watch them, your father holding Evan's hand, your mother carrying the cooler. The towel on your father's shoulder catches the wind and takes flight, landing in the sand. You run and grab it. Your foot tangles in one of the folds and you stagger, before regaining your balance and yanking the towel out from under you.

'If you need anything,' you say, running up to them, 'just let me know.' You've heard other people say these words. They come easily to you. You drop the towel in front of your mother. It falls in a pile in the sand. 'Anything at all,' you say. 'I can look after Evan if you want to go for a swim.'

'That's great,' she says, stepping over the fallen towel, her tone not conveying an acceptance of the offer. Your parents begin setting up your area on the beach. You pick up a folding chair. It's heavier than you thought and stiff with age. The blue fabric is sun-bleached and torn on the top right side. One foot of the chair knocks over your mother's flask as you wrestle with it. The flask is sealed tightly and doesn't spill.

'Can I do anything else?'

You pull at her legs to make sure she's heard you. Now that you're seven, you want to show them you're responsible. You're very excited to be seven. It felt like you were six for ever. You like the shape the number seven makes on the page as you write it. Your mother nods and picks up the fallen flask. She turns away from you and embraces your grandmother. The two of them are laughing, as they have done on this beach together many times. You find watching them fascinating. Your father is methodically unpacking things from bags, not saying anything. No one is paying attention to you.

You scan the beach looking for something to do. You pick up a fishing net. It's heavy in your hands, the weight of it concentrated a metre from your body, and instinctively you swing it around in a wide circle. The blue netting blurs in the wind, the rod nimble in your adept hands.

'Don't hit Evan with that,' your mother says, suddenly alert.

'I'm just helping,' you say. She looks at you, and you drop the net at your feet. Defeated, you sit down and begin to build sandcastles, but they fall apart as soon as you lift the bucket. You think your bucket was changed by its stay under your bed, that it no longer works. Or maybe it's the sand that is the problem, the whole beach itself wrong somehow. You flatten the crumbling civilisation at your feet.

You're bored, something you're not used to feeling in this place, which upsets you. This could be a sign of growing up, that you're going to lose your imagination like your mother always tells you she did. 'I wanted to be an artist once,' she sometimes says, the beginning to a story you're not old enough to understand.

You walk to the top of the beach, camera in hand. You don't have the words to tell the camera how you're feeling, you won't know them for another while yet. Instead you take sweeping panoramic shots of the beach, zooming in to the places where rock meets sea. The white water froths and foams, like a creature's mouth.

Just then, as your mood is threatening to break like a storm, Lorcan and his family arrive at the beach. You haven't seen him since last year. The last thing you remember is his car pulling away, his waving hand visible through the back window. You'd felt like your world was ending, the lump in your throat too big to swallow around. Now you're uncertain and confused.

He's holding a body-board, which is nearly bigger than he is. When he sees you, he puts it down on the ground and waves. You watch him and his family as they unfold and unpack their items. You've become shy, unsure of what to do next. The camera is limp at your side. You put it away.

You look over at your family. Evan is fussing, refusing to settle, and one strap of his dungarees is twisted. There are long tracks in the sand from where your parents dragged folding chairs. You pause and examine the straight lines in an otherwise chaotic landscape.

Your dad sees you falter over the top of his newspaper. He rustles it and looks at you. 'Oh great, the Ryans are here,' he says. 'Let's go say hello.' It's the only encouragement you need. You jump over the twin lines in the sand as you run, your arms pumping at your sides, your fists balled. You father follows behind, slower.

The first thing you notice is that Lorcan is taller. He's taller than you, which is something you resent. You'd always been the tall one.

‘You’re tall,’ you say to him.

‘Well, I’m older than you,’ he says. He sticks his hands in the pockets of his swim trunks. They’re new too, patterned with green and blue fish.

‘Only two years, that’s nothing,’ you say. For some reason this upsets you, although you don’t know why. ‘It’s not even a full two years.’

Now that you’re closer, you start to notice other small changes in Lorcan. His face is different, you think, and his hair too. You’re overcome by these changes which make obvious the differences between the two of you. It makes you feel small and young, like Evan.

‘That’s everything,’ he says. ‘Mum says I can get a phone next year, when I turn ten.’

‘That’s not fair,’ you say. The brag annoys you. You’ve always wanted a phone. Your dad never lets you play on the one he got for work, even though he doesn’t know how to play any of the games on it. You hold all the high scores on Snake.

You want a brag of equal importance. And you have one.

‘Look at this,’ you say. You swing the case around and hold it up in front of you, reassured by the weight of it. You allow your eyes to go wide, your eyebrows retreating high into your hair. You’re putting on a show for him, you want him to be impressed. You already know how he’s going to react, you can see it in your mind’s eye. It takes your fingers a moment to catch the zip and pull it open. The camera drops into your hand. ‘Mum says I can film the whole holiday, as a time capsule.’

You don’t really know what a time capsule is, but the concept excites you. You turn the camera on and focus

it on Lorcan. His blonde head fills the frame. Behind him, the shifting forms of the adults move. He sticks his tongue out at you and you laugh. You zoom all the way into one of his eyes and then all the way out.

‘Tell them who you are,’ you say.

‘Tell who?’

‘You know,’ you gesture vaguely, ‘the people who will watch this.’

‘I’m Lorcan,’ he begins, ‘and I’m really cool.’ He pauses, his thumbs pointing at his chest. ‘I don’t know what else to say . . .’

You turn the camera off and hold it by your side. You gently knock it against your leg, thinking. Lorcan holds his hands up in an exaggerated shrug gesture. You’re disappointed with how bad he is at this, you’d been hoping he’d be a good subject for you.

‘Can I hold it?’ he asks.

You stand, considering. You take him in from head to toe. His hair is shorter than last year, more serious somehow. Lorcan is the only person not in your family you’d trust with something so precious. You know he’ll be careful and your mum wouldn’t mind him holding it.

‘Okay, but only for a little while,’ you say. Your grasp on time is loose, but your grasp on power is strong. You like the sound of the words, the way he looks at you when you say them. You hand the camera over, watching the weight of it transfer from your hands to his.

You make a game of it, unlike any game you’ve ever played on this beach. The lens of the camera makes everything more real. It’s the vehicle to another world entirely, one better and more lifelike than this one. You wonder how this camera, this small metal creature, could

possibly understand the world. And yet when you watch the footage back, there the world is.

You start by describing the rocks, naming each one. The names developed slowly over the years, based on particular grooves or plateaus, or the rock-pool formations and the creatures that inhabit them. You show it how to walk between rocks, where you need to make a big jump, which rocks are wobbly. There are a few things you've been a little bit afraid of before, like going from one rock to the next, but you do it perfectly now.

On the screen, you are tiny, and yet you nearly fill the whole thing. Behind you, the beach is a yellow expanse dotted with greens and browns. You see it all reflected in the circular black lens. Lorcan isn't as steady with the camera as you are, so you bounce in and out of frame. At one point your head is cut off, but you don't notice.

Your confidence grows. You start to speak like they do on the news, with each syllable clearly annunciated. Any trace of your accent gets lost somewhere in the Atlantic. You begin to get a sense of how to fill out the space, the boundaries of the screen etched on the sand. You imagine the beach disappearing behind you, shrinking to fit into a box over your right shoulder.

You arrive at the biggest rock on the beach. It stands guard at the edge of the beach, sheltering it from the worst of the waves, allowing the small bay to form. It's possible to swim around to the other side of it, but your parents won't let you. You have to stay in the bay where they can see you. The brown incline appears smooth and steep, but you know the grooves your feet can slip into. You find traction easily, your toes strong. When you reach the halfway point, the beach two metres beneath you,

you stop and stand, your hands on your hips. You know this is impressive.

Lorcan follows you as you take the camera over the other side, to the secret place you like to come to. The beach is lost behind you, the adults a world away. On this side of the rock the surface is broken up into different ledges, eroded into a landscape which moulds your imagination. It changes from grey, to brown, to yellow and speckled with barnacles. You point out the parts you shouldn't walk on without shoes. Further along and to the left, you reach the place you're looking for.

'This is where we like to play,' you say as you sit down, the stone warm beneath you. From here, you can see the cascading headlands of the coastline, the Aran Islands and the great expanse of water beyond.

'I don't play any more, though,' Lorcan interjects from behind the camera. You make a face at him, both because of what he said and the fact that he said anything at all. He puts the camera down and stops recording. Without the eye of the camera on you, your movements are too grandiose. You put your arms down at your sides, where they remain still. Lorcan looks away, out to sea and across the horizon. You sigh, and his gaze snaps back to you.

'Okay, fine, let's do another take. *Action!*'

He says the word like a proper director. He holds the camera up again, and you're at attention. Your arms spring back out from your sides. On the screen, you are perfectly composed. You relish the opportunity to get it perfect this time.

Lorcan directs you deftly, telling you to move your hands to emphasise what you're saying, showing you how to pronounce the big words the adults use. He's older so

he knows a lot more than you do, although you don't tell him this. You start to craft different stories: in one a sea monster is just out of sight along the horizon, in another you pretend to nearly fall off the rock and into the sea below. You're a great team. Then the camera says it's running out of memory.

'We can keep going,' Lorcan says, 'and just not record?'

The fact that he even suggests this is preposterous to you. You lie down on the rock, your legs starfished out in front of you. The thrill had been in the recording, in knowing that what you did was being preserved. In watching it back and seeing how you look to the outside world.

'What's the point?'

Lorcan stops recording and hands the camera back to you. You watch the videos together. You are totally absorbed by the screen, you can hardly believe it's something you're able to hold in your hands. The tide is well in by this point, so you and Lorcan sit side by side, your feet dangling over the ocean. Every so often, a wave crashes against the rock and hits your feet. Together, you scream and laugh at each recording and you can barely breathe.

'Do you think we could send this to the TV people?' you ask. 'Do you think we could get it in video shops?' The idea is too exciting to contain. The moment you say it out loud it becomes real. You imagine the cover of the case, the advertisements that would play before it starts. People fast-forwarding and rewinding to the good bits.

'I don't know, probably,' Lorcan says.

'Let's ask Mum, it's her camera.'

You carefully put the camera away in its case and make your way back to the other side of the rock. As you crest

the top of it, you realise you've misjudged the tide. You're surrounded by a river of ocean. You know the camera can't get wet.

Slowly, you descend the rock. It's trickier than going up, and at any moment your body weight could carry you face first into the water. You clutch the camera close to your side, eyeing the waves below you. A foot before the waterline, you stop, your toes wedged into a groove.

'Let me take it,' Lorcan says. 'I'm taller now.'

You contemplate this and see his point. You hand the case over to him, making sure he secures it around his neck like your dad showed you.

'I'll be careful,' he says.

'Let me test the water first,' you say solemnly. You dip your toe in; it's freezing. Across the beach, some people are swimming. You steel yourself, waiting for a moment where you feel particularly brave, and then jump in.

'Oh.' The water is only just past your knees. 'Phew.'

You hold out your hands, and Lorcan passes the camera back to you. For one devastating moment, when the camera is in the space between his hands and yours, you think you're going to fumble it and drop it into the sea. You yelp, but then the camera makes contact with your hand and you hold tight. Lorcan places the strap over your head and you keep going.

'I wasn't going to let you drop it,' he says, but you ignore him.

When you make it across the beach, it's hard to get the adults' attention, and then harder still to communicate why what you're talking about is important.

'You were gone for ages, what were you up to?' your mum asks, although it doesn't seem like she's actually

interested in your answer. She has that concerned expression on her face, the one that annoys you. 'You know I don't like you wandering off to where I can't see you.'

'Look what we were doing.'

You hold the camera out to her, but she doesn't take it from you.

'I hope you didn't get any water or sand into that, you know it's delicate.'

You sigh impatiently and snap the camera closed. You look over at Lorcan, but he's no help. You and he have different ideas about what you spent the last hour doing, so it's all coming out jumbled. Lorcan is telling them that you'd been making funny tapes, but you hadn't been joking for any of it. It all felt so real.

Lorcan's dad ruffles your hair with his large hands and says he'll watch the videos with you, but it's too late.

'Hey,' he says, 'cheer up. You'll be seeing a lot more of us, I think.'

'What?'

Your mum says, 'Lorcan and his family are moving to Dublin.'

'That's where we live,' you say.

You're too young to understand the shift this presents in your relationship, how simple things like time and space can affect something so essential to you. It all feels very abstract, now. The videos feel concrete.

When your older cousins come over and ask Lorcan if he wants to go swimming, Lorcan loses interest in the camera entirely. You feel his attention shifting like a physical thing. By now the tide is far enough in that people can jump off the rocks into the deep tidal pool on one side of the bay. You clutch the camera in your hands and

watch him leave. He disappears beneath the water in a great splash.

You want to join them too, even if you're afraid of jumping. Before you can ask, your parents say no. They can see the look in your eye that you're not aware of. The blow is crushing, even if part of you is relieved.

'You're too young,' your dad tells you.

'Lorcan's not that much older than me.'

'But he's a boy,' your mother says.

You sit down on the sand in a huff and open the camera again. You show your parents some of the videos you'd filmed, the one of you sitting on your special rock ledge. Your mum looks at you finally and says, 'You shouldn't sit like that.'

'Why? I'm sitting like that now.'

'It just looks different on camera,' she says.

Your legs look perfectly fine. You mimic the position exactly, with your legs starfished out, but you still don't understand what the problem might be. Your legs are covered in sand up to the knee from where you'd got them wet crossing the water. You rub it off, revealing your bare skin. Suddenly you're thinking about them in a way you never have before.

You sit in the sand, a sea of newspapers around you, and pretend to film the boys jumping into the sea. You hold the camera in front of you and zoom in and out. You even sing a soundtrack. One by one, you watch as they hurtle off the rock and out of frame. It's difficult to capture both the jump and the splash as they hit the water, you have to move your hand so quickly the image blurs. After a few tries, you begin to get it right.

It all strikes you as very unfair. You begin to feel hollow,

lesser somehow, as though the sheer feeling of lack is boring into you, causing you a pain in your stomach. You tell your dad you're not feeling well, but he tells you to stop complaining. The camera runs out of battery. You stare into your own eyes for a second, reflected in the blacked-out screen, and then you put it away. The world loses texture.

You remember how it felt to be behind the lens of that camera, how enthralled you were by your own face. Seeing yourself from the outside, as though you're a stranger to yourself, was exciting. Being able to go back and reshoot, to make each take better, to delete the ones where you said the words wrong. Your mum recognises something in the camera too, although you're not sure what exactly it is that she sees. All you know is that what you film with the camera becomes something other than real life.

You wonder if you'll have to wait until you're ten to get a phone, if your parents will ever relent. Maybe they'd let you get your own video camera. You sit there in the sand and think about all of the things you could preserve, how you could best present them to the outside world. If there is a way you could better present yourself as well. You're thinking about it still when you leave the beach, and when you return home after your holiday. The thought never leaves you.