

THE BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
BROOKLYN & LONG ISLAND

Colm Tóibín

THE
NEWS FROM
DUBLIN



STORIES

Five Bridges

She promised that the climbing would be easy.

'Even for you,' she said.

'How long?'

'An hour. Or maybe two hours. Or maybe three.'

'Give or take?'

'Yes, that's right.'

Paul had told her on their last outing to Point Reyes Station that he was leaving, packing up. She would be able to come to Ireland to visit him, he said now, and they should start making plans for that.

'I'll be at my folks' house, at least at the beginning, and they really would love to meet you in person. It'll be nice when you come.'

'It's sad they never came here,' Geraldine said. 'They could have visited any time. They said they would.'

'No money, I suppose, and too far.'

They were still a mile or two from Stinson Beach. If he took the slow way back into the city, they would be late. He had to be careful to drop her off on time. She would grow nervous at the thought of her mother waiting.

‘Don’t text to say you’ll be late. Just don’t be late.’

This, which had appeared twice on Geraldine’s phone a year earlier, had become a mantra for Paul and his daughter, a way of lightly mocking Geraldine’s mother, during these trips in his car on Saturday afternoons.

As Geraldine fell silent, Paul realized that he should not have said that his parents had no money. Geraldine would worry about this, and it was not even true. She was almost twelve years old now, and he had resolved a while ago never to tell her anything that wasn’t true.

‘I spoke to Mom about you leaving,’ Geraldine said, ‘and she thinks you might be deported if you don’t.’

Geraldine was using her adult, responsible tone.

‘And Stan says,’ she continued, ‘that they’ll be checking on all sorts of people.’

He held back from saying that he hoped someone would check on Stan.

‘Would I come to see you on my own?’ she asked.

‘To Dublin? Yes, I suppose. Yes, you would. It would be a lovely journey. They treat young girls with great respect—’

‘You said the last time,’ she interrupted, ‘that I could have one wish before you go and I asked Mom and she said yes, I could have one wish, within reason.’

‘That’s just like her, isn’t it?’

‘To agree, yes. But not really. She didn’t actually agree. She said I had to stop asking for so many things. But I just want this. I hate her sometimes.’

She folded her arms. If this had been a normal outing, Paul would have told her that she shouldn’t hate her mother. Now he could wallow in the luxury of saying nothing.

‘But I think she will say yes,’ Geraldine continued.

FIVE BRIDGES

He knew that she was waiting for him to ask what the one wish was.

‘Mom said if you were arrested, they’d probably come looking for her.’

‘But they couldn’t! She’s an American!’

‘They’d come looking for her to see if she could help. I mean to get lawyers for you.’

‘Maybe she would help.’

‘In your dreams,’ Geraldine replied.

She took out her phone and began to scroll down, her attention focused. She tried, he knew, not to do this too much when she was with him. She had even asked him to tell her to put the phone away if it annoyed him. He enjoyed leaving her in peace this time. She could do what she wanted.

It was dark by the time they reached Sausalito and made for the bridge. She put her phone back in her pocket.

‘What I want is this,’ she said. ‘I want you and me and Mom and Stan to go to Mount Tam. It’s where we often go. There’s a sort of hostel. Do you know the place?’

Once more, she was mimicking an adult voice. He found himself wondering if she did this with Stan, too.

‘Not sure.’

‘It’s a lodge, a place for hikers to sleep. It’s a climb.’

She told him how long the hike would take.

‘To go up or go down?’

‘Both. You can see everything from up there. I bet you can see the bridges.’

‘All of them?’

‘All five, maybe more. Isn’t there one more?’

‘Is your mother going to agree to this?’

‘I need your agreement first.’

COLM TÓIBÍN

‘Why can’t you and me just go?’

‘That’s the point. I want all of us to go. Just one night.’

‘What do you want me to do?’

‘Agree.’

‘I agree.’

As she reached again for her phone, he thought of something.

‘You must make clear to your mother that this is your idea and your idea only and that it took a lot of time to convince me to agree.’

‘Well, it did.’

As soon as Paul got back to his apartment, he texted Sandra to let her know directly from him that he really was planning to go back to Ireland very soon.

Within a minute he got her customary response: ‘Txt recvd.’

The following day a text came from Geraldine: ‘Tell mom u really want to go on the hike with us 3.’

And then, almost immediately, another text from Sandra: ‘Was this your idea?’

He was tempted to reply ‘No’ and leave it at that. And then he wondered if it might be better not to reply at all, to pretend he hadn’t received her text. But he knew he should resolve this now, reply while both Geraldine and Sandra were on their phones. He wondered if Stan was standing over them.

He read the text over before he sent it. He did not want to appear too friendly. ‘Geraldine said she wants us all to go on this hike. Just one thing we do together before I pack up. I am happy to do it if you and Stan are.’

Sunday was his busy day. Although he called himself a plumber, he had never actually got a licence and lacked the finer knowledge of the trade. He could, however, fix a leak; he could replace a washer;

FIVE BRIDGES

he could use a soldering iron; he could deal with most types of valves; and he could put in new taps. He had his own way of unblocking pipes. Anything more complicated he left to others. Since he had stopped drinking, he could set out immediately if there was an emergency. He didn't need to advertise; people he'd worked for passed on his number to others. He could be depended on to respond to a call from anywhere in the Bay Area.

He went into his tiny bathroom and looked at himself in the mirror. He should get a haircut before he went home, or even before he went on a hike. And get his eyebrows tidied up. And he should try to shave more often. Almost no one had been in this apartment since he had split up with Nuala Breathnach, who used to sing on Thursday nights at the Greyhound Track, the bar in Oakland that he frequented. At first, Nuala had actually claimed to like this cramped, cluttered space with windows that rattled when buses and trucks went by.

In the end, she told him, and then anyone else in the bar who would listen, that the reason she was returning to Mayo was the state of Paul's apartment – the awful sheets, the flat pillows, the pile of clothes on the old armchair, the smell of stale beer.

'That sort of thing is over,' she said. 'There isn't one fellow at home who's still living like that.'

Soon he would not be living like that, either. He would have to begin clearing out the apartment, put most of what he had in bags and take them somewhere. He liked the idea of travelling back with hardly any luggage, just the cash he had saved hidden in pockets and in socks.

'Hike bookd for Stday 18th' came from Sandra two days later. And then a text from Geraldine to say that he could collect her at nine, and they would meet Sandra and Stan in the parking lot.

All he needed now, he thought, was a text from Stan to say how much he was looking forward to meeting him.

They had to have realized, even if he had not spelled it out, that, having been in the United States for more than thirty years on a simple tourist visa, once he left he would not be allowed to return, probably not ever. He had made sure to have his passport renewed, but it was his Irish passport. He had asked a few friends if it would make a difference that he had a daughter in America, but everyone thought not.

Once, towards the end of the pandemic, when there was an Irish party in Daly City, he had joined others in asking the Irish consul if there was anything that could be done about their status. She was careful, he saw, not to give them room for hope.

Geraldine would have to come to Ireland if she wanted to see him. She could even get an Irish passport in addition to her American one.

He sometimes blamed Sandra for not including him in Geraldine's life when she was little, but, when he thought about it, he knew that that was his fault and only his fault. He should have offered Sandra support, including regular financial support, as soon as he knew she was pregnant – even after she'd made it clear that she didn't want to see him or have him around. He was drinking too much. But maybe that wasn't the problem.

Being undocumented at a time when no one bothered much about illegal Irish people had almost suited him. But he should have changed as soon as he learned that he was going to be a father. Sandra might even have considered marrying him.

The last night that he had seen Sandra, a month before she was to have the baby, he should have had one aim: to make her believe that he would help her. But, just before he set out to meet her at a restaurant, a job came up that he couldn't ignore, an old client

FIVE BRIDGES

living on her own. And, when he got to the restaurant late, he should not have taken another call from this woman.

In the end, Sandra would not even let him drive her home. She did not reply to texts or messages. He stopped sending them. He did not see her again for four years.

He looked around the apartment. In the bathroom, he would start by throwing out some useless razors and old bottles of shampoo. Maybe he would clean the tiles. Or maybe he wouldn't, he thought. It was fine. He could cross the bathroom off his list. With a black plastic rubbish bag in his hand, he began to empty the cupboards in the kitchen. Maybe some plates and cutlery could go to a thrift shop, and some furniture. But who would want any of this rubbish? He should have bought new stuff years before, and he should have had the posters framed, the ones that had not fallen down or faded. It was almost a relief, he felt as he looked around, not to have to make any more plans that he would not carry out. He would clean up what he could, pack the little he needed, and let the landlord know he was leaving when he was on his way to the airport. He would not stick around to get his deposit back. The landlord could probably charge the next tenant four times the rent that Paul had paid.

It could be worse, he whispered to himself, and then resolved that he must stop saying this, even though it was true. His parents, who were in good health, would welcome him back home, as would his sisters and their families. He would not stay here until he was helpless when they came to deport him, the oldest living illegal immigrant in America.

It could have been worse, too, had he gone on drinking or found some drug that would have spared him the trouble of sitting in bars. He could, indeed, have continued to pretend that

Geraldine didn't exist, even as she got older. He could have been the father living in the same city who had never once been in contact with his daughter. He could, as an old man, have passed her on the street.

All these things might have happened had he not been saved by Sean F. Sinnott.

He scoffed at the word 'saved', as did his friends who had also been rescued in some way by Sinnott.

Sinnott came from outside Wexford town and either owned the Greyhound Track or ran it as though he owned it.

Sinnott watched his customers in the same way that he watched his staff: 'I don't hire losers and I don't hire chancers and I don't hire anyone from Swanlinbar.'

If a customer had relatives visiting from Ireland, Sinnott made a fuss of them, with drinks on the house and the best table. If a group of people who weren't Irish came in, Sinnott danced attendance on them to emphasize that the Greyhound Track had no prejudices. If a man was drinking alone, Sinnott made sure that he was left in peace.

Paul was surprised one day when Sinnott came and sat beside him on a barstool.

'There's a young fellow from near Ballyshannon was found dead in a flat he had out near the airport in Oakland. He'd been there for a week or so.'

He showed Paul a photograph.

'Did you know him?'

'No.'

'I don't just want to raise money to send the body home. I can do that easily enough. I'd like to know if there are others here still living on their own like that. A lot of fellows went home or settled down. But some are still living on their own, working for

FIVE BRIDGES

themselves. I think we should make sure they're OK. Just check in on them.'

'Do you mean me?'

'I could mean you, yes.'

He took out a Biro and wrote six letters on a beer mat: 'SIMIBA.'

'Single Irish Men in Bay Area.'

'How do you know I'm single?'

'You look single.'

Paul stretched and yawned.

'I'd like to organize a meeting with you,' Sinnott said, showing him the photo again, 'and a few other fellows to make sure this sort of thing doesn't happen again so easily.'

Paul did not respond.

'I'm from Wexford myself,' Sinnott said, moving in close as though to say something confidential, 'as you probably know. Your mother is from there, isn't she?'

'She is. How did you—'

'Don't bother now,' Sinnott interrupted. 'Give me your number and I'll text you. And can you give me something towards this guy's funeral? As much as you can.'

Paul ignored the personal texts and group texts he received from Sinnott over the next month, until his phone pinged one night when he was close to the Greyhound Track. He texted Sinnott back and they met at the bar.

'I can't stay long,' Paul said.

'I'm the same, and that man there is the same, and his friend, too. None of us can stay long,' Sinnott replied.

'My mother,' Paul said, 'how do you know where she's from?'

'I was trying to get your attention. It was an inspired guess. I have no idea where she's from.'

‘You made it up?’
‘When the pressure’s on, I have the power.’
Sinnott spread his arms out like someone in show business.
‘I’m trying to gather together fellows who are here on their own.’
‘Well, that’s me summed up,’ Paul said, before realizing that he should have said nothing.
‘I need your help,’ Sinnott said.
‘You sound like a priest.’
‘I was nearly a priest, but that’s hardly an accusation. I was hit hard by that young fellow dying, that’s all. I promise that’s all.’

A week later, Paul went to a meeting in an upper room at the Greyhound Track to find Sinnott with four or five others, two of whom he vaguely recognized.

‘I have to go in a second,’ Paul said. ‘I don’t know what I’m doing here.’

‘I thought there’d be more,’ Sinnott said. ‘I was expecting more.’

He began a speech to the group outlining his own feelings about home.

‘Would you get to the point,’ a man with a Kerry accent interrupted. ‘If I want a sermon I’ll go to mass.’

Over the next few months, more men came to this weekly meeting, where, despite Sinnott’s inability to get to the point, they organized themselves into groups of four, like card players, as one of them said, and talked, about work and health insurance and the problems with ICE and the IRS. There were also a few who wanted to start a band, a mixture of country music and Irish traditional. There was even one who wanted to set up five-a-side

FIVE BRIDGES

football games. A few of them mentioned girlfriends, but no one spoke about inviting any women to these meetings.

Sinnott seemed to have won himself the right to move from one group to another, but he tended not to speak. No drinking was allowed. They stayed for two hours, and then they all appeared relieved to get away from one another. Two of them worked in tech and one was an accountant; two were part-time barmen, part-time singers and actors. The rest, it seemed, did anything that paid.

One evening, as the meeting was coming to a conclusion and Sinnott had quietly joined Paul's group, Paul told his companions that he had a daughter. None of them responded. If one of them had said even a word, or expressed surprise in any way, he was sure he would have said nothing more.

'At least I think I do. They told my girlfriend that she was going to have a girl.'

No one asked him a question. He would leave it at that, he thought. He hadn't even said Sandra's name. But he found himself needing to go on.

'I've never seen the girl. I often think about her. She must be four. She's probably in the Bay Area somewhere.'

Sinnott looked up at him and held his gaze. He wished Sinnott would tell him now, in front of the others, what he should do. But Sinnott didn't speak and, before long, the group broke up.

As soon as Paul got home, he went online to see if he could locate Sandra.

When he did find her, he was careful. He had his hair cut and tidied up the apartment even before he emailed her at the office where she worked. When he received no reply he called, and when he could not get through to her on the phone he waited. In

his email, he had tried to make clear that he was not looking for anything from her. He gave her his phone number.

One evening, from a bar, he called Sinnott.

‘You’re drinking,’ Sinnott said. ‘Can we talk when you are not drinking?’

The next evening, when they met, Sinnott listened to the details.

‘Write her a letter,’ Sinnott said. ‘Have it typed. Make sure the first paragraph has what you most want to say to her. You need to sound like someone who has his life in order.’

‘And then?’

‘Explain to her that your mother is from Wexford and there’s no real harm in you.’

Paul laughed.

He heard nothing from Sandra for a month. But then a text came that said, ‘Letter recvd.’ He showed it to Sinnott, who advised Paul to do nothing hasty.

‘You are halfway there,’ he said.

At first, Sandra let Paul come to the rambling house she shared with some others in Bernal Heights. For a few hours on Saturdays, he could play with Geraldine and watch games on her screen with her. She was four and a half and seemed to enjoy calling him Dad and telling him what she wanted to do next. Just as she took his arrival as a normal part of her week, she made no fuss at his departure. She was able to take up the conversation, such as it was, or the game they had been playing, a week later, as though very little time had passed.

Sandra avoided him, often letting one of the others who lived in the house welcome him and see him out. Eventually, he began to take Geraldine to the park, and then he was given

permission to take her on a trip in his car. He knew that he was being closely observed. If he had once turned up late or failed to bring her back on time, or if there was even a whiff of beer on his breath, Sandra would have intervened.

When she moved in with a man called Stan and married him, Paul found out by text, the tone brisk.

Soon, Stan became a figure in Geraldine's normal conversations.

Paul had a photograph of Geraldine on his mobile phone. He wished he could see more of her. But at least she was in the city, just twenty minutes' drive from him each Saturday. And at least she was happy and had everything she needed to make her comfortable.

Paul stopped going to the weekly meetings, but Sinnott kept in touch with him and spoke to him if he chanced to be at the Greyhound Track. They discussed Sinnott's search for love and his addiction to Grindr.

'I can't keep the app on in the bar, but one day I forgot to turn it off and when I looked – it was a Thursday at about seven – there were five guys in the Greyhound Track on Grindr. Can you imagine?'

'I had one of those apps for a while,' Paul said. 'The straight one. I didn't know what sort of photo to put up, so I put one of an Aer Lingus jet. But still I met a few girls. They were nice, some of them.'

'Five guys in an Irish sports bar! I looked at the photos, pretending I had some urgent texting to do behind the bar.'

'And then what did you do?'

'Two of them were on their own, one was working for me, one was with a loud group of fellows from Tipperary, and the other I never found.'

‘The long-lost one.’

‘Now you’re talking. It’s a hard city if you’re looking for something,’ Sinnott said.

‘I think I know what you mean,’ Paul replied.

Around the time that Paul was first given permission to take Geraldine out in his car, a new type of fitting for basins and sinks was installed in the bathrooms and kitchens of housing developments in the Bay Area. As those fittings began to leak, Paul’s number circulated, especially once he sourced a good washer that could replace the dud. Four or five calls a day came, and then more. Every caller seemed to know the drill. They could expect him within an hour, and he would accept cheques but would also be happy if they paid in cash. Because he knew what tools and fittings he would most likely need, in the expectation that the leak came from the usual source, he would generally solve the problem in one visit. No one objected to paying him more than the going rate.

A few times, he was contacted by one of the large construction companies. The first occasion, they called him out on a job. It felt like standard work in an area he knew well. But, when he arrived, he saw a group of fellows waiting for him.

‘Do you want to see the leak?’ one of them asked, to general laughter. He could not tell where they were from.

He was lucky that he had not stepped too far from his car. He got away from them as quickly as he could.

Another time, he grew suspicious when a number came up that had a strange prefix. When he took the call, a woman gave him an address that made no sense. Nonetheless, he told her what he had told all of the others – he would, if she confirmed, be there in an hour and could accept cheque or cash. She did not

FIVE BRIDGES

call back, but for days urgent messages and texts came from that same number, requests to follow a link. When he clicked on the link the first time, he got a warning from the IRS saying that they were on his case. He was glad that he was using a cheap phone; he could not easily be traced.

When the pandemic came, Stan, who seemed to understand the technology, set up Zoom calls every week for Paul and Geraldine. Only once, half an hour into an hour-long Zoom, did Paul catch sight of Stan, who was crossing the room and shied out of the frame very quickly. He looked younger than Paul had expected him to be. He was wearing a suit and tie, like someone with a real job.

One morning, after Paul came back from some early calls, putting the cash he had earned inside a new pair of socks that he placed at the back of a drawer with other cash-filled socks, he decided to phone his mother in Dublin and tell her about Geraldine. It might have been wiser, he knew, to have informed one of his sisters first, but he didn't want advice or remonstrations from them.

'It's nice you had a girl,' his mother said almost distractedly. 'Now, when was she born?'

'She's nearly eight.'

'And she's American?'

'She lives with her mother, who's American.'

He heard his mother gathering her strength.

'I don't suppose you and the girl's mother are, by any chance, married?'

'No, we're not.'

'What is her name?'

'The mother or the girl?'

'Now I'm going to put your father on. He's in the other room and he still thinks that you have to wipe down every package that

comes into the house. But I know otherwise. It's in the air, this thing. I'd be grateful if you could tell him that I am right and make him believe you.'

She made no further reference to his daughter.

In the final months of the pandemic, his mother and his father and he and Geraldine sometimes met on Zoom at ten in the morning California time. Geraldine and his mother took easily to the new medium, Geraldine showing new paintings she had made and his mother showing the pile of books she had read since the pandemic began.

'When all this is over,' his mother said to Geraldine, 'we might take a little trip across the Atlantic – sure it's no distance – and see you in the flesh.'

"In the flesh" means "in person"; Paul said.

'She knows what it means,' his mother said.

'I'd have to ask Mom and Stan,' Geraldine said. 'But that would be great.'

The night after the election, Paul went to the Greyhound Track, where he found Sinnott, who joined him at the bar.

'They won't deport me,' Sinnott said. 'I got married to a nice local girl as soon as I arrived. I was always grateful to her. But what about you? If they saw you coming along the street, they'd deport you on the spot. You look illegal. There's nothing can be done about it. Why don't you get married? Why else do we have Americans, for God's sake? What else are they for? I could even find you a fellow who would marry you. For your rugged looks and all that.'

'I don't want to marry anyone.'

'How much money do you have?'

'That's what I wanted to ask you. Have you ever met anyone

FIVE BRIDGES

who has a load of readies and needs to know what to do with them?’

‘Wrapped in socks?’

‘How did you know?’

He put out his arms, as though seeking applause.

‘Stop talking shite,’ Paul said. Sinnott sipped a coffee and looked around.

‘How much in readies?’ he asked.

‘A lot for me.’

‘Do you have a bank account?’

‘Just about. I keep enough money in it to pay the bills. And I lodge the cheques I get. Otherwise, it’s cash.’

‘Your customers must resent you. That cash thing might work at home, but people don’t like it here. It’ll backfire, eventually. The people here prefer to be crooked while pretending to be holy. And if ICE or whoever finds you on a job, putting in one of your famous washers, they’ll take you away. And they’ll visit your apartment while you’re being held, and you can say goodbye to your cash.’

‘They would steal it?’

‘No, not that. But while they were still counting it you would be on your way to the airport or whatever new way they might have of sending a fellow like you home.’

‘You think it’s funny?’

‘I think you should take the law into your own hands and get out of here, cash in suitcase, before they put you out.’

‘You think they’re serious about it?’

‘In the first month or so, yeah – they’ll do it for show.’

‘If I tried to leave the country, are you sure I wouldn’t be detained on the way out?’

‘You know the drill. They would let you out easy enough. But they’d never let you back in.’

‘I came when I was eighteen.’

‘You grew up here, so.’

‘I have a daughter here. I told you.’

‘Maybe some president in the future will soften up on the plight of Irish plumbers and their American daughters, but it will take a while.’

When Paul saw Stan accompanying Geraldine to his car on the morning of the planned hike, he was immediately aware of all the rusting tools and leftover pieces of piping on his back seat. He wished he had cleaned out the car. He opened the door and got out to greet them, shaking Stan’s hand as soon as he and Geraldine approached.

‘There’s a place to park,’ Stan said, ‘but it’s often full. If you get there first, try to see if you can hold a place for us, or call us if you can’t find a spot.’

He made Paul feel as if he could not entirely be trusted on the matter of parking.

‘We’ll do what we can,’ Paul said.

‘I wanted to see your apartment before you go,’ Geraldine said once they were on the road, ‘but Mom says I can’t.’

‘It’s pretty bare,’ he said. ‘I’ve thrown most things out.’

For a second, close to the turn-off for Marin, Paul, in the silence of the car, thought that he was out on a job and tried to remember the address. He had never been with Geraldine this early in the morning.

Just before the overlook for Muir Beach, they found a parking space and secured another spot not far away. Paul got his boots from the trunk and struggled as he changed into them.

‘I don’t think you’ve ever gone hiking before,’ Geraldine said. ‘Not a long hike.’

‘You’ll have to help me,’ he said. ‘Slow down, maybe, if you see me lagging behind.’

‘When are you actually leaving?’

He turned away from her, not prepared for the question. He did not want to say that he was flying to Dublin on Monday. He had two more days in America. On Tuesday night, he would be sleeping in his old bedroom in the family house in Dublin. His apartment, where he had been living for more than twenty years, would be empty; his plan to leave it tidy had been fully abandoned. No one would ever guess why he had left behind so many pairs of socks that looked as though they had never been worn. He must be sure, he resolved, to check every last one in case there were stray banknotes still curled up inside.

It was strange, he thought, how often, even after all these years, he expected Americans to behave like Irish people. Thus, he presumed that Stan had been saving his comments on the state of Paul’s car for now, when he and Sandra had arrived and parked. He expected Stan to approach the car, which Paul had already sold to Sinnott as a surprise for his new boyfriend, and peer in at its contents. Stan would then state how urgently this jalopy was in need of cleaning, and Sandra might remark dryly how men never change.

But Stan said nothing at all. He just smiled. And Sandra did not seem to notice his car.

He wondered if insulting each other’s cars was something Irish people still did. Or had it ever been? Was it something he had imagined? He would ask Sinnott when he saw him tomorrow for his final non-drink in America.

They were going to climb using a trail through Muir Woods, Stan explained, even though it would take longer, because the incline was more gradual. All in all, he said, if they took it slowly

but not too slowly and stopped only for one short picnic, they would be at the hostel before dark.

‘It will be dark at five thirty,’ he said. ‘I checked that.’

‘Oh, I forgot to tell you,’ Geraldine said, ‘that I have the Limonata you like in my knapsack. Two cans.’

‘Gerry, you are the best,’ Paul said. ‘You—’

‘Don’t call her Gerry,’ Sandra, who was just ahead, interjected. ‘You know what her name is.’

Geraldine stopped dead. She turned and looked at Paul, raising her eyes to heaven.

‘I have a lovely name,’ Geraldine said, and then whispered, ‘or I did, until just now.’

‘You guys need to get going,’ Stan shouted from a bluff above them.

Geraldine remained close to Paul as they set off up a steep winding path. Soon, Sandra and Stan were out of sight.

‘I think the other way up is much easier,’ Geraldine said when she saw Paul out of breath.

He decided not to ask her why, in that case, they had taken this route. As she strode ahead, he noted how strong she was, how long her legs were becoming, and how confidently she moved. He wished he had chosen a heavier jacket as the air became colder the higher they climbed.

‘Are you a complete illegal in America?’ Geraldine asked.

‘Yes, I am. That is a good description of me.’

‘Do you have health insurance?’

‘Kind of.’

‘What would you do if you got really sick?’

‘I would go back to Ireland.’

‘But that’s not why you are going back now?’

‘What an adult you are!’

FIVE BRIDGES

‘And you can’t just go to Ireland now and then come back in the summer for a vacation?’

‘That’s right.’

She set out their lunch picnic in a flat area that had a view of the ocean below.

‘I like coming here with Mom and Stan,’ Geraldine said. ‘But I prefer going to Point Reyes with you.’

Sinnott had advised him that when he got home he should move out of Dublin, away from his parents’ house, as soon as he could.

‘Going home is shell shock. Don’t take it out on your mother and your father. Get out of Dublin. The midlands would be a good place. Plenty of leaks there, God knows. They need plumbers.’

‘I’m not really a plumber,’ Paul said.

‘Why don’t you train as one the minute you go home?’

‘I’m nearly fifty.’

‘Stan is good,’ Geraldine said as she tidied up after their picnic. ‘You mustn’t worry about him.’

He wondered if Geraldine used this tone with Sandra and Stan, too, sounding middle-aged.

‘He seems nice,’ Paul said.

‘He plays weird music sometimes. And it’s all vinyl, so it takes up lots of space.’

‘No one is perfect.’

‘Do you really think that?’

It seemed to him that Geraldine wanted him to say something more about Stan. He would have to be careful.

‘I think you and Stan and Sandra are good together.’

She looked dreamily down at the water.

‘Problem is, if your mother ever came over from Ireland, I mean if she ever decided she should, I don’t know where she would stay.’

‘Well, maybe you’ll come to Ireland first.’

‘Would I need an Irish passport?’

‘You could get one if you wanted. But an American passport would do.’

By the time Paul and Geraldine reached the hostel, Stan and Sandra had already opened a bottle of white wine and were sitting at the lookout spot.

‘You want the good news or the bad news?’ Stan asked.

‘What’s the bad news?’ Geraldine asked.

‘The good news is that this place is as beautiful as ever. I can’t believe you didn’t know it, Paul. We have our time in the kitchen reserved in an hour. And I remembered to bring everything we need for a drop-dead spaghetti with my own homemade pesto. I get the pine nuts—’

‘They only booked two rooms for us,’ Sandra interrupted. ‘That is the bad news.’

‘No way!’ Geraldine said.

‘One has a full bed,’ Stan said, ‘and the other has twin beds. That one has a balcony, but you can hardly sleep on a balcony in the middle of January.’

Stan sounded like a client listing what he wanted fixed. But what he was saying, Paul understood, was that there wasn’t a room for Paul. He also knew that he could not let Geraldine down. He would have to stay somewhere.

They sat and watched the last rays of sunshine fold out on the calm, glassy ocean as the shadows deepened in the tall trees. When Paul went to look around, he noted a second vista that seemed to

FIVE BRIDGES

open towards the city. There was a haze over what might be the Golden Gate Bridge. It was hard to be sure. He was tempted to go back and get Geraldine so they could find a map on his phone with the bridges firmly identified and then work out if one of them, maybe even the Bay Bridge, might be visible from up here.

But he would leave the three of them alone. Stan or Sandra had made the booking. They could sort it out. He would not offer to find another place to sleep. It occurred to him that it might make sense for him and Stan to use the room with the twin beds. He hoped that Stan viewed the prospect with the same revulsion as he did.

When he returned, Stan was alone on the deck with his feet up on the wooden railing. He turned around and pointed to the wine and a spare glass.

Paul didn't bother telling him that he didn't touch the stuff. He stood and looked at the back of Stan's head. It was always the same, he thought, in every house whose call he answered. If he was greeted by a guy like Stan, then there would be some difficulty. The job he did would be criticized; the payment would not be ready. And there would be an undercurrent of how-much-better-off-I-am-than-you.

'It's paradise here,' Stan said.

'Yes, it's great, really nice.'

When Sandra and Geraldine reappeared, Sandra leaned against the railing, facing them.

'Geraldine says she wants to share a room with Paul,' Sandra said.

'Really?' Stan asked.

'This is my special outing,' Geraldine said. 'So I can decide. You and Mom are in one room, the room with one bed. And Dad and I are in the other, the room with two beds.'

Paul wondered if Sandra had ever heard Geraldine call him Dad before as confidently as this.

When it grew cold on the deck, they moved inside. Soon, Stan was busy boiling a large saucepan of water for the pasta. Sandra and Geraldine found a backgammon board and began to play. Paul tried to follow the game, but it was too fast.

Stan came to say that he needed help to chop the lettuce for the salad, but Paul ignored him. Eventually, Sandra, having won a game, went to the kitchen, leaving Geraldine to explain to Paul how to guess the odds in backgammon and when it was best not to take a chance.

They shared a table with another group. Once they had finished the pasta, Sandra stood up and said she would go and ask one more time if an extra room had become available, but she quickly came back to say that there was no change. Stan began to talk to the group beside him, finding that the daughter of one of the couples had gone to the same high school as he did.

‘You go out for a walk,’ he said, ‘and you meet someone you know.’

‘But you don’t really know them,’ Geraldine said.

‘We do now,’ Sandra interjected.

It was agreed that Paul and Geraldine would clean up the table and do the dishes. When that was done, having put their jackets on, they went out to join the others and take in the waxing moon over the ocean. Stan had his phone focused on the night sky and, with a man who had been at the table, was trying to identify certain stars.

‘I’m cold and I’m tired,’ Geraldine said to Paul in a low voice. ‘Can we go in?’

He accompanied Sandra and Geraldine to the room with the

FIVE BRIDGES

twin beds. Geraldine rummaged through her bag to find her toothbrush and toothpaste and went to the bathroom down the corridor. Now, for the first time in all the years, Paul found himself alone with Sandra, who made herself busy smoothing out the blanket on Geraldine's bed.

When she eventually stood and faced him, she smiled as though there had never been any problem between them.

'Geraldine normally goes to sleep fast,' she said. 'She's great like that.'

Paul hoped that Geraldine would hurry back.

'This is a nice place,' he said. 'I didn't know it existed.'

'We love coming here.'

He was happy to say nothing more. Neither of them, he saw, wanted to begin a big discussion. But the room was small and he felt awkward. He found himself smiling weakly and then scratching his head. Sandra sat down on Geraldine's bed.

Paul went out and stood on the balcony, sorry that he could not think of a way to make things less strained between them.

When Geraldine came back, Sandra kissed her, wished them good night, and left the room. Paul slipped out, too, so that Geraldine could change into her nightclothes, returning to the deck, which was now emptied of guests. Stan must have gone to bed.

He took in the scene below, the ocean all bright and glistening in the moonlight and then everything dark beyond, but, when he heard sounds, he worried that Stan or even Sandra might be about to join him. He edged down a corridor and into one of the bathrooms.

Geraldine appeared to be sleeping when he came into the room, and he closed the door as quietly as he could. Nonetheless, she turned when she heard him.

‘Sorry if I woke you,’ he whispered.

‘I wanted to say good night, but I didn’t know where you’d gone.’

‘I wasn’t far away.’

‘Make sure you wake me in the morning as soon as you’re awake,’ she said.

Almost immediately, she was asleep again. Paul felt tired. When Geraldine made a soft, sighing sound in her sleep, he went to turn off the lamp in case it was disturbing her. He stood and looked at her. How perfect she was now, he thought, as he had when she had walked ahead of him on the trail.

He would probably never see her again in America; he would miss her life here. But she would visit him in Ireland – he was sure she would want to do that – and perhaps she would make visits in years to come when she had a real life of her own, her own children, a husband, even.

He removed his shoes and put his jacket back on and tiptoed to the balcony, closing the door tightly behind him. At first, since the balcony was facing away from the ocean, he could see nothing, but then a cloud cleared and he thought he could make out some stars, and even further down below some lights in the distance, but he had no idea what they were.

In the morning, they would be able to see one or two of the bridges, if not from here then from one of the other decks or balconies. They might have to wait until the fog cleared. He would show Geraldine from this vantage point some of the places where he had worked, tell her about the journeys in his car down leafy avenues to new condos or old bungalows or bigger suburban houses. And the people waiting for him, desperate to have a leaking tap fixed. He would describe some of these people to her. He knew she loved that.

FIVE BRIDGES

More images of the world below came into his mind. He smiled at the thought of how many houses he had visited over thirty years, how many taps, how many washers. It hardly mattered, he supposed. Someone had to do it. He would not put a thought into it once he got home. And, if he could sleep for a while now, he would think about something else in the morning and make sure to wake Geraldine once he himself had woken up, as she had asked him to do.