

I

August 1997

TESS

In the kitchen at home, there was a plate that Mum bought on holiday in Tenerife with a hand-painted motto: *Today is the first day of the rest of your life.*

It had never registered with me any more than Dad's trophy for singing, or the New York snow dome my brother Kevin sent over one Christmas, but that last day of the holiday, I couldn't seem to get it out of my head.

When I woke up, the inside of the tent was glowing orange, like a pumpkin lantern. I inched the zipper door down carefully so as not to wake Doll, then stuck my face out into dazzling sunlight. The air was still a little bit shivery and I could hear the distant clank of bells. I wrote the word 'plangent' in my diary with an asterisk next to it so I could check it in the dictionary when I got home.

The view of Florence from the campsite, all terracotta domes and white marble towers shimmering against a flat blue sky, was so like it was supposed to be, I had this strange feeling of sadness, as if I was missing it already.

There were lots of things I wouldn't miss, like sleeping on the ground – after a few hours, the stones feel like they're

growing into your back – and getting dressed in a space less than three feet high, and walking all the way to the shower block, then remembering you've left the toilet roll in the tent. It's funny how when you get towards the end of a holiday, half of you never wants it to end and the other half is looking forward to the comforts of home.

We'd been Interrailing for a month, down through France, then into Italy, sleeping on stations, drinking beer with Dutch boys on campsites, struggling with sunburn in slow, sticky trains. Doll was into beaches and Bellinis; I was more maps and monuments, but we got along like we always had since we met on the first day at St Cuthbert's, aged four, and Maria Dolores O'Neill – I was the one who abbreviated it to Doll – asked, 'Do you want to be my best friend?'

We were different, but we complemented each other. Whenever I said that, Doll always said, 'You've got great skin!' or 'I really like those shoes,' and if I told her it wasn't that sort of compliment, she'd laugh, and say she knew, but I was never sure she did. You develop a kind of special language with people you're close to, don't you?

My memories of the other places we went to that holiday are like postcards: the floodlit amphitheatre in Verona against an ink-dark sky; the azure bay of Naples; the unexpectedly vibrant colours of the Sistine Chapel ceiling, but that last, care-free day we spent in Florence, the day before my life changed, I can retrace hour by hour, footstep by footstep almost.

Doll always took much longer than me getting ready in the mornings because she never went out without full make-up even then. I liked having time on my own, especially that morning because it was the day of my A-level results and I was trying to compose myself for hearing if I'd done well enough to get into university.

On the way up to the campsite the previous evening, I'd noticed the floodlit facade of a church high above the road,

pretty and incongruous like a jewel box in a forest. In daylight, the basilica was much bigger than I'd imagined, and as I climbed the grand flights of baroque steps towards it, I had the peculiar thought that it would make the perfect setting for a wedding, which was unlike me because I'd never had a proper boyfriend then, let alone pictured myself in a long white dress.

From the terrace at the top, the view was so exhilarating, I felt an irrational urge to cry as I promised myself solemnly – like you do when you're eighteen – that I would one day return.

There was no one else around, but the heavy wooden door of the church opened when I gave it a push. It was so dark inside after the glare, my eyes took a little time to adjust to the gloom. The air was a few degrees cooler than the heat outside and it had that churchy smell of dust mingling with incense. Alone in God's house, I was acutely aware of the irreverent flap of my sandals as I walked up the steps to the raised chancel. I was staring at the giant, impassive face of Jesus, praying that my grades were going to be OK, when suddenly, magically, the apse filled with light.

Spinning round, I was startled to see a lanky guy about my own age, standing beside a box on the wall where you could put a coin in to turn the lights on. Damp brown hair swept back from his face, he was even more inappropriately dressed than me, in running shorts, a vest and trainers. There was a moment when we could have smiled at one another, or even said something, but we missed it, as we both self-consciously turned our attention to the huge dome of golden mosaic and the light went out again with a loud clunk, as decisively and unexpectedly as it had come on.

I glanced at my watch in the ensuing dimness, as if to imply that I would like to give the iconic image more serious consideration, perhaps even contribute my own minute of electricity,

if I wasn't already running late. As I reached the door, I heard the clunk again, and, looking up at Christ's solemn, illuminated features, felt as if I'd disappointed Him.

Doll was fully coiffed and painted by the time I arrived back at the campsite.

'What was it like?' she asked.

'Byzantine, I think,' I said.

'Is that good?'

'Beautiful.'

After cappuccinos and custard buns – amazing how even campsite bar snacks are delicious in Italy – we packed up and decided to go straight down into town to the central post office where I could make an international call and get my results so that wouldn't be hanging over us all day. Even if the news was bad, I wanted to hear it. What I couldn't deal with was the limbo state of not knowing what the future held for me. So we walked down to the *centro storico*, with me chattering away about everything except the subject that was preoccupying me.

The fear was so loud in my head when I dialled our number, I felt as if I'd lost the ability to speak.

Mum answered after one ring.

'Hope's going to read your results to you,' she said.

'Mum!' I cried, but it was too late.

My little sister Hope was already on the line.

'Read your results to you,' she said.

'Go on then.'

'A, B, C . . . ' she said slowly, like she was practising her alphabet.

'Isn't that marvellous?' said Mum.

'What?'

'You've an A for English, B for Art History and C for Religion and Philosophy.'

'You're kidding?' I'd been offered a place at University Col-

lege London conditional on my getting two Bs and a C, so it was better than I needed.

I ducked my head out of the Perspex dome to give Doll the thumbs-up.

Down the line, Mum was cheering, then Hope joined in. I pictured the two of them standing in the kitchen beside the knick-knack shelf with the plate that said *Today is the first day of the rest of your life*.

Doll's suggestion for a celebration was to blow all the money we had left on a bottle of *spumante* at a pavement table on Piazza Signoria. She had more money than me from working part-time in the salon while she was doing her diploma and she had been hankering for another outside table ever since Venice, where we'd inadvertently spent a whole day's budget on a cappuccino in St Mark's Square. At eighteen, Doll already had a taste for glamour. But it was only ten o'clock in the morning, and I figured that even if we stretched it out, we would still have hours before our overnight train to Calais, and probably headaches. I'm practical like that.

'It's up to you,' said Doll, disappointed. 'It's your celebration.'

There were so many sights I wanted to see: the Uffizi, the Bargello, the Duomo, the Baptistry, Santa Maria Novella . . .

'You mean churches, don't you?' Doll wasn't going to be fooled by the Italian names.

Both of us were brought up Catholic, but at that point in our lives Doll saw church as something that stopped her having a lie-in on Sunday and I thought it was cool to describe myself as agnostic, although I still found myself quite often praying for things. For me, Italy's churches were principally places not so much of God but of culture. To be honest, I was pretentious, but I was allowed to be because I was about to become a student.

After leaving our rucksacks in Left Luggage at the station, we did a quick circuit of the Duomo, taking photographs of each other outside the golden Baptistery doors, then navigated a backstreet route towards Santa Croce, stopping at a tiny artisan *gelateria* that was opening up for the day. Ice cream in the morning satisfied Doll's craving for decadence. We chose three flavours each from cylindrical tubs arranged behind the glass counter like a giant paintbox.

For me, refreshing mandarin, lemon and pink grapefruit.

'Too breakfast-y,' said Doll, indulging herself with marsala, cherry and fondant chocolate, which she described as orgasmic and which sustained her good mood through an hour's worth of Giotto murals.

The fun thing about looking at art with Doll was her saying things like, 'He wasn't very good at feet, was he?' but when we emerged from the church, I could tell she'd had enough culture and the midday city heat felt oppressive, so I suggested we take a bus to the ancient hill town of Fiesole, which I had read about in the *Rough Guide*. It was a relief to stand by the bus window, getting the movement of air on our faces.

Fiesole's main square was stunningly peaceful after Florence's packed streets.

'Let's have a celebratory *menu turistico*,' I said, deciding to splurge the last little bit of money I'd been saving in case of emergencies.

We sat on the terrace of the restaurant, with Florence a miniature city in the distance, like the backdrop to a Leonardo painting.

'Any educational activities planned for this afternoon?' Doll asked, dabbing the corners of her mouth after demolishing a bowl of spaghetti *pomodoro*.

'There is a Roman theatre,' I admitted. 'But I'm fine going round on my own, honest . . .'

'Those bloody Romans got everywhere, didn't they?' said Doll, but she was happy enough to follow me there.

We were the only people visiting the site. Doll lay sunbathing on a stone tier of seats as I explored. She sat up and started clapping when I found my way onto the stage. I took a bow.

'Say something!' Doll called.

'Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow!' I shouted.

'More!' shouted Doll, getting out her camera.

'Can't remember any more!'

I jumped down from the stage and made my way up the steep steps.

'Shall I take a picture of you?'

'Let's get one with both of us.'

With the camera positioned three steps up, Doll reckoned she could get us in the frame against the backdrop of Tuscan hills.

'What's the Italian for cheese?' she asked, setting the timer, before scurrying down to stand next to me for the click of the shutter.

In my photograph album, it looks like we are blowing kisses at the camera. The self-stick stuff has gone all yellow now, and the plastic covering is brittle, but the colours – white stone, blue sky, black-green cypresses – are just as sharp as I remember.

With invisible crickets chattering in the trees around us, we waited for the bus back to Florence in uncharacteristic silence.

Doll finally revealed what was on her mind. 'Do you think we'll still be friends?'

'What do you mean?' I pretended not to know what she was asking.

'When you're at university with people who know about books and history and stuff . . .'

'Don't be daft,' I said confidently, but the treacherous

thought had already crossed my mind that next year I would probably be holidaying with people who would want to look at the small collection of painted Greek vases in the site museum, or enjoy comparing the work of Michelangelo and Donatello, and the other Ninja Turtles (as Doll referred to them).

Today is the first day of the rest of your life.

There was a little twist of excitement and fear in my tummy whenever I allowed myself to think about the future.

Back in Florence, we made a small detour for another ice cream. Doll couldn't resist the chocolate again, this time with melon, and I selected pear which tasted like the essence of a hundred perfectly ripe Williams, with raspberry, as sharp and sweet as a childhood memory of summer.

The Ponte Vecchio was a little quieter than it had been at the start of the day, allowing us to look in the windows of the tiny jewellery shops. When Doll spotted a silver charm bracelet that was much cheaper than the rest of the merchandise, we ducked through the door and squeezed inside.

The proprietor held up the delicate chain with miniature replicas of the Duomo, the Ponte Vecchio, a Chianti bottle and Michelangelo's *David*.

'Is for child,' he said.

'Why don't I buy it for Hope?' Doll said, eager to find a reason to spend the rest of her money.

We were probably imagining, as we watched the man arrange the bracelet on tissue in a small cardboard box stamped with gold fleurs-de-lys, that this would be something my sister would keep safely in a special place and that, from time to time, we would all unwrap it together and gaze upon it reverently, like a precious heirloom.

Outside, the light had deserted the ancient buildings and the noise of the city had softened. The mellow jazz riff of a busker's clarinet wafted on the balmy air. At the centre of the bridge, we waited for a gap in the crowd so we could take photos of each

other against the fading golden sky. It was weird to think of all the mantelpieces we would appear on in the background to other people's photos, from Tokyo to Tennessee.

'I've got two shots left,' Doll announced.

Scanning the crowd, my eyes settled on a face that was somehow familiar, but which I only managed to place when he frowned with confusion as I smiled at him. It was the boy I'd seen in San Miniato al Monte that morning. There was a reddish tinge to his hair in the last rays of sunshine, and he was now wearing a khaki polo shirt and chinos, and standing awkwardly beside a middle-aged couple who looked like they might be his parents.

I held the camera out to him. 'Would you mind?'

The perplexed look made me wonder if he was English, then, his pale, freckly complexion flushing with embarrassment, he said, 'Not at all!' in a voice Mum would have called 'nicely spoken'.

'Say cheese!'

'*Formaggio!*' Doll and I chorused.

In the photo, our eyes are closed, laughing at our own joke.

With a six-berth couchette to ourselves, we lay on the bottom bunks, passing a bottle of red wine between us and going over our memories of the holiday as the train trundled through the night. For me, it was views and sights.

'Remember the flowers on the Spanish Steps?'

'Flowers?'

'Were you even on the same holiday?'

For Doll, it was men.

'Remember that waiter's face in Piazza Navona when I said I liked eating fish?'

We now understood that the phrase had another meaning in Italian.

'Best meal?' said Doll.

'Prosciutto and peaches from the street market in Bologna. You?'

'That oniony anchovy pizza thing in Nice was delish . . .'

'*Pissaladière*,' I said.

'Behave!'

'Best day?'

'Capri,' said Doll. 'You?'

'I think today.'

'Best . . . ?'

Doll drifted off, but I couldn't sleep. Whenever I closed my eyes, I found myself in the little room I had reserved in the university halls of residence which, until now, I hadn't allowed my imagination to inhabit, excitedly placing my possessions on the shelves, my duvet cover on the bed, and Blu-Tacking up my new poster of Botticelli's *Primavera* which was rolling gently from side to side on the luggage rack above me. Which floor would I be on? Would I have a view over rooftops towards the Telecom Tower, like the one they'd shown us on Open Day? Or would I be on the street side of the building, with the tops of red double-decker buses crawling past my window and sudden shrieks of police sirens that made it feel like being in a movie?

The air in the compartment grew chilly as the train started its climb through the Alps. I covered Doll with her fleece. She murmured her thanks but did not wake, and I was glad because it felt special to have private time to myself, just me and my plans, travelling from one stage of my life to the next.

I must have fallen asleep in the small hours. I awoke with the rattle of a breakfast trolley. Doll was staring dismally at viscous raindrops chasing each other down the window as the train sped across the flat fields of Northern France.

'I'd forgotten about weather,' she said, handing me a plastic cup of sour coffee and a cellophane-wrapped croissant.

*

It wasn't that I was expecting bunting, or neighbours lining the street to welcome me back, but as I walked up Conifer Road after leaving Doll outside her house on Laburnum Drive, I couldn't help feeling disappointed that everything was exactly the same. Our council estate was built in the late sixties. It was probably the height of modernity then with its regular rectangular houses half pale brick, half white render, and communal lawns instead of front gardens. All the streets were named after trees, but apart from a few spindly flowering cherries, nobody had bothered to plant any. Some of the right-to-buy households had added a glazed porch at the front, or a UPVC conservatory to the through-room downstairs, but the houses all still looked like the little boxes in that song. With a month's distance, it was clear to me that I had outgrown the place.

Mum only had a rough idea of when I'd be getting back, but I was still slightly surprised that she and Hope were not positioned by the window or even sitting on the front lawn, waiting for me. It was a lovely evening. Maybe Mum had filled the paddling pool in the back garden? Perhaps there was too much splashing for them to hear the bell?

Eventually, a small, familiar shape appeared on the other side of the frosted glass.

'Who's there?' Hope called.

'It's me!'

'It's me!' she shouted.

It was never quite clear whether Hope was playing games or being pedantic.

'It's Tree!' I said. 'Come on, Hope, open the door!'

'It's Tree!'

I could tell Mum was responding from somewhere in the house but I couldn't hear what she was saying.

Hope knelt down to speak through the letter box at the bottom of the front door. 'I get chair from kitchen.'

'Use the one in the hall,' I instructed through the letter box.

'Mum said kitchen!'

'OK, OK . . .'

Why didn't Mum come down herself? I was suddenly weary and irritable.

Eventually, Hope managed to open the door.

'Where is Mum?' I asked. The house was slightly chilly inside and there was no warm smell of dinner on the air.

'Just getting up,' said Hope.

'Is she poorly?'

'Just tired.'

'Dad not home yet?'

'Pub, I 'spect,' said Hope.

I manoeuvred my rucksack off my back, then Mum was at the top of the stairs, but instead of rushing down delighted to see me, she picked her way carefully, holding the banister. I put it down to the slippers she had on under the washed-out pink tracksuit she wore for her aerobics class. She seemed distant, almost cross, and wouldn't catch my eye as she filled a kettle at the sink.

I looked at my watch. It was after eight o'clock. I'd forgotten it stayed lighter in the evenings in England. I started to think I should have found a phone box and rung home after getting off the ferry, but that didn't seem a serious enough offence for Mum to give me the silent treatment.

I noticed Mum's hair was unbrushed at the back. She had been in bed when I arrived. Just tired, Hope had said. She'd had four weeks of coping on her own.

'I can do that,' I offered, taking the kettle from her.

I felt the first whisper of alarm when I noticed the collection of dirty mugs in the kitchen sink. Mum must really be exhausted, because she always kept the place spotless.

'Where's Dad?' I asked.

'Down the pub, I expect,' said Mum.

‘Why don’t you go back upstairs and I’ll bring you a cup?’

To my surprise, because nothing was ever too much trouble for Mum, she said, ‘All right,’ then added, as if she’d only just remembered I’d been away, ‘How was your holiday?’

‘Great! It was great!’

My face was aching with smiling at her and not getting anything back.

‘The journey?’

‘Fine!’

She was already on her way back upstairs.

When I took the tea up, my parents’ bedroom door was open and I caught a glimpse of Mum’s reflection in the dressing-table mirror before I entered the room. You know how sometimes you see people differently when they’re not aware you’re looking at them? She was lying with her eyes closed, as if some vital essence had drained from her, leaving her insubstantial, like an echo of herself. For a couple of seconds I stared, and then she stirred, suddenly noticing me standing there.

Her eyes, bright with anxiety, locked on mine, telegraphing, *Don’t ask in front of Hope*. Then, seeing I was alone, closed again, relieved.

‘Let’s sit you up,’ I said.

She leaned against me as I plumped up the pillows behind her, and her body felt light and fragile. Half an hour before, I’d been walking up the Crescent, hating how familiar and ordinary it was, and now everything was shifting around me like an earthquake and I desperately wanted it to go back to normal.

‘I’m poorly, Tess,’ she said, in answer to the question I was too scared to ask.

I waited for her to say, ‘It’s OK, though, because . . .’ But she didn’t.

‘What sort of poorly?’ I asked, giddy with panic.

Mum was diagnosed with breast cancer when she was pregnant with Hope. She hadn’t had the chemo until after

Hope was born, but she'd recovered. She'd had to go regularly for a check-up but the last one, just a few months ago, had been clear.

'I've got cancer of the ovary and it's spread to my liver,' she said. 'I should have gone to the doctor before, but I thought it was a bit of indigestion.'

Downstairs, Hope was singing a familiar tune, but I couldn't work out what it was.

My brain was trying to picture Mum before I left. A bit tired, perhaps, and worried, I'd thought because of my exams. She was always there for me: in the kitchen at breakfast time, keeping Hope quiet as I raced through my notes; and when I came home, with a cup of tea and a listening ear if I wanted to talk, or if I didn't, just pottering around washing up or chopping vegetables, a quietly supportive presence.

How could I have been so selfish that I didn't notice? How could I have even gone on holiday?

'There was nothing you could do,' Mum said, reading my thoughts.

'But you were fine at your last scan!'

'That was in my breast.'

'And they don't check the rest of you?'

Mum put a finger to her lips.

Hope was on her way upstairs. The nursery rhyme was 'Goosey Goosey Gander', except she was singing 'Juicy Juicy Gander'.

'Upstairs, downstairs, in my lady chamber . . .'

We forced ourselves to smile as she came into the room.

'I'm hungry,' she said.

'OK!' I jumped up from the bed. 'I'll make your tea.'

If I'd needed further evidence how bad things were, it was the empty fridge. Although there was never a lot of money in our family, there was always food. I felt suddenly angry with my father. In our house the division of labour was very trad-

ditional: Dad was the breadwinner, Mum was the homemaker, but surely he could have stirred himself in these circumstances? I pictured him in the pub milking the self-pity, with his mates buying him pints. Dad was always moaning about the hand life had dealt him.

I found a can of Heinz spaghetti in the cupboard and put a slice of bread in the toaster.

Hope was staring at me, but my mind was so full with trying to take it all in, I couldn't think of anything to say to her.

The spaghetti began to bubble on the stove.

I slopped it onto the piece of toast, recalling the bowl of perfectly al-dente pasta we'd eaten in Fiesole the day before, with a sauce that tasted of a thousand tomatoes in one spoonful, and Florence in the distance, the backdrop to a Leonardo painting, so far away now, it felt like another life.

The dictionary confirmed that 'plangent' means resonant and mournful. It comes from the Latin *plangere*: to beat the breast in grief.