

*There she sat in a beach hut in Donaghadee, seven years later, with the woman who could have been her mother-in-law.*

When asked the unavoidable, “what do you want to be when you grow up?”, thirteen-year-old Christina Reale said with doughy eyes, “I want to see the world”. As she grew, so did her love of cliches and red roses. She wanted, simply, to experience love stories. Falling in love seamlessly with new cities, languages, and—occasionally, she decided—men. Men that were resilient, wise, committed, and kind. Becoming an orphan at seventeen threw a wrench in that plan.

But none of that mattered now.

Drew interrupts her during the second half of her double shift at Pepper’s Pizza in Chapel Hill. He swings open the door as it hits the wall a bit harshly. Several customers turn at the commotion as Christina stands in front of her table staring at her best friend, unamused.

“They sent out decisions today.”

University of North Carolina study abroad decisions. She has no money to her name, so a scholarship is the only escape.

She looks back at Drew without the slightest change in demeanor.

“Sort of in the middle of something, Drew. I’ll check when I get home, it’s no big deal.”

“Right...” he responds quickly, clearly not believing her.

“I’m not working tonight so you know where to find me.”

“I’ll be right back with your drinks,” she concludes to her table.

She walks straight past the fountain and into the kitchen without meeting an eye.

“Christina? You good?” A line cook calls.

“Grabbing more straws from the storage. Someone skipped their side work at lunch,” she says.

She opens the door to the storage closet and closes it behind her. She pulls out her phone, hands shaking, tears forming, as she loads her school email.

“Dad, please,” she mutters.

The letter loads in what feels like the longest sixteen seconds of her life.

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Edinburgh, Scotland. The home to all the great writers. Sir Walter Scott. Robert Louis Stevenson. Christina Reale.

And it’s her home for only a year, so certainly she will make the most of it. In her first few weeks, she found both libraries. The one she studied at and the one in the student union that was actually a bar. She went to all international student events. She joined school societies. And, to make up for the beer she was drinking, decided to join the kickboxing team (until, they may inevitably kick her out). She is not homesick, unaware of what that feeling even is.

That is, until home finds her.

“Hello?” She answers, surprised in the dairy aisle of Sainsbury’s in Cameron Toll.

No answer.

“Hello?” She asks again as she pulls her phone away from her ear to end the call.

“Christina?” Drew’s voice echoes back at her.

She freezes.

“Drew! Hi! How on earth did you get this number?”

“You gave it to my mom in case there was an emergency, remember?”

“What? Oh God, what happened?”

“No, no, no--Chrstina it’s fine I’m sorry. I just--missed you. Wanted to hear your voice, you know?”

“Oh.”

The silence, however short, leaves her incredibly flustered.

“Uh-well, maybe we can skype later! This phone call is going to get quite expensive, but Liz wants to do a call so maybe you could just go over to her place and we could all chat!”

“Yeah,” Drew says listlessly.

“Or--you know--we could talk alone some other time.”

“Drew,” Christina begins, “you don’t sound okay. Are you okay?”

“I just really miss you and was thinking about us and things like that.”

“Okay. Well, it’s good to hear your voice! I guess we can talk another time then.”

The phone abruptly clicks before she has the chance to say goodbye. She smiles thinking about how it reminded her of when they were kids. They used to lie in his parents’ backyard and watch the stars on cooler, North Carolina evenings. She remembers wishing on a star for her dad’s cancer to disappear. She remembers even wishing that one day she’d marry Drew.

Clearly, wishing on a star is overrated.

Yet, she thinks, she is on her year exchange abroad, after all.

A few weeks later, Christina finds her routine which includes a long walk to campus as she whimsically stares at the green hills and Arthur’s Seat. Part of her routine includes several hours at her favorite café. One November, dreary day, she looks up from her computer in The Elephant House, to see her flat-mate, Rebecca, staring back at her.

“I only came in here ‘cause I saw yeh through the window.”

A Scottish accent from Edinburgh is one thing. Inverness, however, is another world.

“What?” Christina asks, barely looking up from her screen.

“I’ll never understand why you come here all the time. It’s touristy, no? Tourism is not very on brand for Christina from Carolina.”

“North Carolina. There’s a difference between the two. And soon to be New York, thank you,” she responds again, finally making eye contact.

“And I love JK Rowling. So touristy or not, I want to come grab a table here and stare up at the castle that once inspired her to write ‘Hogwarts’ on a page.”

Rebecca laughs as she pulls out the empty chair at Christina’s table.

“Real talk,” she begins, setting down her bag. Christina takes the cue and shuts her computer.

“Kickboxing society is fun, no?”

“I mean, I’m not the most fit of the bunch but I like it,” she answers earnestly.

“Great, well, I’m going to give you an inside tip,” Rebecca answers, lowering her voice as if to reveal a secret. She leans in and continues.

“The best part are the parties.”

“I’m more of the ‘read at home’ type,” she answers mid laugh.

“Oh c’mon, love, you’ve barely been out! You’re such a free spirit and bright and have all this energy. When ye smile it’s like Julia Roberts. Let’s put it to some good use then!”

Her long smile expands at the comment. “Okay. What am I agreeing to?”

“8pm we have friends to the flat for a prelash. Wear a blank white shirt. Trust me.”

“What? What kind of party is this?”

“Graffiti.”

That night, Rebecca doesn’t disappoint. One handle of gin with ten new friends from around the world, and Christina finally understands what a Graffiti party is.

“Still believes in SNP” Audrey from Melbourne scribbles across Rebecca’s back.

“Whatever you do, do not lose this marker I’m about to give you. You’ll regret it immediately.”

The girls take their markers and road drinks in coffee cups as they hail a cab to Stockbridge in New Town.

“Craig has this huge flat that his parents used to rent out but let him use it now that he’s at uni. It’s gorgeous,” Rebecca says simply.

“Also, if we all end up sleeping on the floor, remind me to take you to Hamilton’s for breakfast down his street.”

“Sir, can you turn that down?” Audrey politely asks the cab driver so she can interrogate her new friends.

“Christina, spill it. Have you found any guy yet that you’re hoping to shift with?”

Rebecca snorts with laughter. “Audrey, you don’t say ‘hoping to shift with’. It’s more of you hook up with someone and then say you ‘did the shift’.”

“Whatever,” Audrey says, joining the laughter.

“My point is--have you taken interest in anyone yet?”

“I’ve barely paid attention, honestly. As much as I’m loving being surrounded by accents of course.”

“You will melt everyone with that American accent, love,” Rebecca confirms.

“What? I don’t have an accent.”

“You sure do and you better thank Hollywood because it’s made you the best catch in the room. And you’re so tall, like a model,” Audrey retorts.

“Stick with me and I’ll show you how it goes. Craig is my victim of the evening. Don’t--how do you say-- ‘wait up for me’.”

The cab pulls up as the girls continue to giggle, ringing flat 5C. Craig flings open the door as the contents from his red solo cup splash onto the floor.

“Ah fuck. Leave it. Sure I’ll have to clean everything later.”

Christina squints to read “Lost again to William” through the numerous phallic symbols scribbled across his shirt.

“Would you ladies like some punch?”

Audrey looks at him and smiles coyly.

“Where’s William?” she asks plainly. As Audrey initiates her game, Rebecca and Christina make their way to the “punchbowl” which in reality is a large storage container accompanied by a ladle.

“I can sense she’s doing that thing where she pretends she’s not absolutely ecstatic that he’s flirting with her. She doesn’t even smile. And then she pretends to flirt with someone else? Why do we always do this?”

“The drinks, love. Also, warning, this punch tastes like shite.”

“And what about you?” Christina asks, confirming Rebecca’s description with the first sip of the punch.

“Any guys on the horizon?”

“None for me. I’ve known this lot too long.”

“Yeah, I feel that way about the guys at home,” Christina says nodding.

“Except, I sort of have this weird feeling that my best guy friend is suddenly interested in me.”

“Absence makes the heart grow fonder. You did say you love cliches right?” Rebecca says, taking a sip of punch.

“Yeah. I mean maybe. We’ve just known each other for so long. Our parents were friends and with mine not being around anymore...”

“Sounds like there could be worse life sentences,” Rebecca says with a wink.

“I can already tell he’s special to you. But in the meantime, let’s find you a good snog, shall we?”

“Oh, that won’t be happening.”

“Christina, come on then! Have a little fun! You’re living far away, no one will know your mistakes!”

“No, it’s not that!” she says, taking another sip of punch.

“I just--I’ve heard I’m intimidating when it comes to that sort of thing. I’m just a bit...stubborn?”

“Assertive or independent,” Rebecca corrects her.

“So let’s relax a little bit, shall we? Take a look round.”

Taking another sip, Christina rolls her eyes and humors her friend.

“Him?” Rebecca points.

She shakes her head. “I have a complex about being so tall, that guy won’t like me,”

“Tall? Aidan is tall.”

Christina looks over at Audrey and William.

“No, not William. Aidan,” she says as she puts her hands on Christina’s shoulders to point her in the right direction.

And, to her dismay, he is absolutely gorgeous.

Over six feet. Bright, green eyes. Christina stares at his smile as it curls on each end while he speaks to a group. A group, not surprisingly, of five or so single women.

“He looks...arrogant,” Christina says immediately.

“What? Christina, he’s really not. Go talk to him.”

Christina looks to see *Kiss me I’m Irish* scribbled across his shirt.

Rebecca, reading her mind, laughs.

“He’s from Belfast.”

Something about him really pisses her off.

“So, how often does that actually work?” she asks as she struts up to the group.

Aidan, surprised, does a double take.

“So, you’re the new American, eh? You know there’s an old Irish saying that translates to, ‘there’s no second chance at a first impression’.”

“Very poetic.”

“Well, it’s Chris right? To answer your question, this shirt has a ninety percent success rate.”

“It’s Christina.”

“Can I call you, Chris?”

“No.”

“Can I call you anything else? Christina sounds so formal, no?”

“You can call me, ‘Ten Percent’.”

“Well, Chris,” he begins sardonically.

“Come here, then.”

He stares at her for a moment before putting his hands on her shoulders. Christina freezes, suddenly extremely insecure, staring into his eyes and questioning what suddenly turned her stomach inside out.

Before she could move, Aidan spins her around and scribbles across her back. They hear Audrey laughing as she turns to ask innocently,

“What does ‘not the 10%’ mean?”

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Christina awakes suddenly to the sound of running water. Her mouth feels like it was stuffed with cotton. Her head is already throbbing.

She opens her eyes. As she expects, it is not her apartment.

“Shit,” she says aloud.

She looks around her as she gathers her surroundings. A stack of Physics textbooks and a soccer ball.

*I have to get out of here.*

Completely mortified, she vows to stay silent and run. She slides out from under the covers as she locates her underwear and jeans scattered across the floor. She finds one heel intact and one broken. She feels tears begin to form. Remaining on all fours, she quietly lifts the comforter to examine the contents under the bed. She moves another stack of papers as she sees the pair of cleats that go with the soccer ball.

*Thank God.*

The next problem is, her shirt is gone. Entirely. Was it in the bathroom? It didn't matter. She had no time to lose. She looks over to see the shirt reading “Kiss me, I'm Irish” in the corner. She swallows her pride and darts out the front door.

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She had never really, “dated” or had someone she “just slept with”. But the two weren't questioning what they were doing. They weren't questioning what would be or assume what wouldn't be. They just *were*. And they were really good to each other.

Perhaps it started as sex. But now, they speak candidly about everything. They talk about past relationships. They talk about present quirks and future dreams. Suddenly those conversations grow into late nights in bed talking about their thirties and forties. Soon those late nights become early mornings with breakfast in bed. Those mornings sometimes lead to peaceful afternoons in the library, the two sneaking a kiss or two amidst the chapters.

Without prompting, the two are wise beyond their years; they live in both joy and vulnerability during the time they have.

And, today, Aidan would drive her to the airport. The car ride is silent as Aidan holds her hand the entire ride as Christina stares at each landmark for the last time. Arthur's Seat. The Edinburgh monument. The *Top Shop* on Princes Street that she went to all too often with Rebecca. Waverly station. The clock of the Balmoral Hotel. Aidan squeezes her hand as they drive past. The sun is shining in Scotland today. It is the first time they catch a glimpse of it after several months.

As they drive through New Town, Christina gracefully wipes away tears hoping that he wouldn't notice behind her sunglasses. Aidan kisses her hand all too knowingly and to no surprise, holds it until the last possible moment.

They drive up to the door for departures as Aidan pulls the car over to park. He squeezes her hand again as he lets himself out to grab her bag and open her door. She grabs his hand as she exits the car and meets his eyes. Both stare with tears forming. Aidan takes her in an embrace as he pulls her to his chest.

*Say it now.* She thinks to herself.

"Christina," he begins.

She pulls back.

*Don't be so cliché that you tell him you love him before you get on a plane.*

"I don't believe in good-byes," Christina says before Aidan catches a word edgewise.

"So, I'll just say—be seeing you."

Aidan wipes a tear from his right eye before hugging Christina again. He pulls her close and whispers in her ear,

"You know where to find me."

Christina kisses him—too nervous to say anything back.

*But what if he truly asked you to stay?*

She takes a deep breath and parries,

"Be well, Aidan."

She takes the bag and wipes another tear as she briefly goes on her toes to kiss his cheek again. She walks through the doors noting that leaning against his car, he watches her every move.

*Ask me not to go.*

There is something a bit invigorating in not knowing what would come next.

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With summer's passing, she starts her senior year of college, slipping into old routines easily.

Christina and Aidan, wise beyond their years, choose to remain friends. Distance and alternative paths were not reason enough to throw away the friendship they created.

"The best woman in my life, she is. I still regret not taking ye to Belfast while you were here," he says on a Skype call during the first few weeks of her senior year.

"Oh sure," Christina said.

"And introduce me as what to your mother? The girl you were sleeping with?"

Aidan offers a soft, sincere, smile.

"Oh. I told my mum all about you. I told her you were my other half."

The calls become less frequent, but friendship remains. The following Spring, Christina calls Aidan with her big news to receive a less than enthusiastic reply.

"Engaged?" Aidan repeats back to her.

"Aren't ye a little young to be engaged?"

Christina goes quiet. Why are so many people questioning this? What's so wrong with marrying your best friend?

"I mean younger than I thought but--it's Drew. He's everything to me. He went back to college for me. His parents are like my parents. I'm really happy, Aidan."

The joy leaves her, exhausted from defending herself to everyone.

"I'll ask this once and then I'll never say it again. Are you sure?"

She smiles.

"Of course, I am."

"Well, then, congratulations are in order, Chris."

She smiles again.

"We're moving to New York, you know."

"Well, good then, another dream ticked on your list."

"I'm excited for us to live those lists, Aidan."

"What are ye moving for? School? A dream school at that?"

"Yeah--another 'tick' as you say. I got in."

Aidan's crooked smile expands upon his face, much larger, of course, than at the news of her engagement.

“Brilliant and beautiful as always. You are going somewhere, love.”

She feels almost guilty for a moment; how her heart still skips a beat when he calls her “love”.

Aidan hangs up the call with a tear in his eye. His mother stands in the doorway.

“Did you tell her?” Emily asks, exasperated.

“No,” he begins clearing his throat.

“She’s happy. I won’t be the one to rob her of that joy.”

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Christina was always proud of her intuition. One that in certain stages of her life felt like a clairvoyance. Through all the waves of her struggles, an unwavering optimism soared. Something inside her that made her dreams and desires very clear--a means to manifest almost tangible.

And in this moment on January 5th, she knows that something is very wrong. She feels guilty. She is planning a wedding and studying at Columbia. She and Drew even made it through a hiccup when he decides to officially leave college. Their love grew in the roots of friendship; he was incapable of not amounting to the man that she’s always seen.

And if it was not with her engagement and not with her career, she entertains the notion that it is all in her head. She is distracted momentarily from all of this as she reaches into her bag, stumbling to grab her vibrating phone while not spilling her coffee.

A +44 country code flashes across the screen. She breathes a sigh of relief, knowing it must be Aidan. He had ignored her “Merry Christmas” wishes and recent calls. She smiles as she answers, expecting his long-winded apology.

“Well it’s about time,” she says, starting to smile.

“Christina? Christina Reale?”

A familiar accent speaks back to her.

“What? Yes--who is--?”

“My name is Emily Craig. I’m Aidan’s mother.”

Her heart falls into her stomach. Her soul is screaming.

“I finally had the chance to look through his phone and knew I needed to tell you.”

She knows that good news rarely follows that statement.

Stage four inoperable brain tumor. Hospice. Twenty four years old.

Aidan used to say to her late at night that “everything happens for a reason.” Emily says it was one of the last things he said while he had the ability to speak.

“I kept telling him he needed to tell you but he refused treatment and said he didn’t want you to worry about him.”

Christina lost both of her parents before eighteen. She once had no equity or home; death and distress were not new to her.

She blacks out. She has no recollection of what the rest of the conversation sounds like. She only knows this.

*This is grief that I have never known*

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On February 2nd, Christina received another call from Emily confirming her worst fear. Her angel on earth transitioned to one above at four o’clock in the morning.

Weeks later, she still did not know how to grieve. The only friend she had that knew of their time together was Rebecca. Rebecca listened to her cry on the phone from hundreds of miles away a multitude of times.

Last week, Rebecca sent her a package--a means to cope. A Guinness, two packages of HobNobs, and a book.

“Have you seen the movie?” Rebecca said on the phone that night.

“In the book, the couple is Irish. But in the film...”

“Holly is a young American who meets Irish Gerry while studying abroad,” Christina finished with a closed smile.

“I can see why it reminded you of us.”

Christina sits on her couch today in disarray. Classes are cancelled due to snow. Drew is working a double at the bar. She glances again at the book across from her on the coffee table.

A pink and orange exterior. *PS I Love You* written at the top.

She turns to the first page for the first time since receiving the book. It reads

“February 2, 2015,

**A sunbeam to warm you**

**A moonbeam to charm you**

**A sheltering angel so nothing can harm you**

**~ Irish blessing**

**May your dear friend live in your heart, forever**

**All my love, Rebecca**

Christina sits there wishing Aidan had left her something--any possible piece of him.

She wishes others could understand. But, at least she holds this symbol in her hands that depicts a few people *do* remember their story. And perhaps, that validates to her that it was all the more real.

**“Holly held the blue cotton sweater to her face the familiar smell immediately struck her, an overwhelming grief knotting her stomach and pulling at her heart.”**

*I don't know if I can handle this.*

Except she couldn't put it down.

**“Gerry was gone and would never be back. That was the reality.”**

She thumbs each page slowly, selfishly comparing each line to her and Aidan.

*I wish you left me something, love.*

**“Gerry wasn't prepared to go without a fight. Looking back on it, she knew that she needed him more than he needed her. She needed to be needed so she could feel she wasn't just idly standing by, utterly helpless. On the second of February at four'o o'clock in the morning, Holly held Gerry's hand tightly and smiled at him encouragingly as he took his last breath and closed his eyes.”**

She freezes.

“What?” she exclaims out loud.

She turns back to page 31 and begins to read the line again.

**“On the second of February at four'o o'clock in the morning, Holly held Gerry's hand tightly and smiled at him encouragingly as he took his last breath and closed his eyes.”**

Her hands start to shake.

Christina Reale definitely believed in signs.

So she tears the book apart and reads it cover to cover to find her sign from Aidan.

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That October, she walked down the aisle to her best friend. She knew, amidst Drew's struggles, that he had the potential to give her the entire world.

The danger of falling in love with potential, of course, is that not everyone will rise to it. It's hard to believe when you see the best in people.

The two knew each other better than anyone. With that, Christina felt like she was almost predicting each new step as it was handed to her--as if it were a cloth that she noticed unweaving. As she tried each step to mend the cloth, she would manage to only unweave it further.

She told no one about the late nights. The women's names. The calls to work where a manager would reply simply, "Drew left hours ago". She chose Drew out of every person in the world and he chose her.

And for this reason and this overwhelming confusion, she finds herself here. Outside of Belfast.

The plan was, originally, to just stay with Rebecca in Edinburgh. That was until on another-morning-that-Drew-wasn't-home-yet, she saw a glimpse of *PS I Love You* on her shelf. She picked up her phone to dig for the number.

"Emily? It's Christina. I know this sounds crazy but I'm going to be in the UK in a week and was wondering if--what? Yes? I would absolutely love to come to Belfast. I've never been."

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Emily, after losing her son, had purchased a beach hut in Donaghadee. When there was no fog, you could not only see the sea but a glimpse of the Isle of Man on the horizon.

"I was thinking we could have a little Pimm's and girl talk," Emily says, one June afternoon, re-entering her living room with two drinks.

"So, congratulations, you just got married, yeah?"

Christina smiles faintly, moving a wisp of her hair as her wedding band hit the light sneaking in from dusk.

"A little over two years ago, yeah," she answers, forcing a smile.

"Ah, Newlyweds then. Do you all want kids?" she asks politely.

*I'm already married to one.*

"Not yet. Eventually, yes," she responds, adhering to her upbringing in the don't-air-your-dirty-laundry-South.

“Aidan would’ve been such a good dad,” Emily says with a faint smile.

“But up and until the very end he just kept saying, ‘mum this happens for a reason, it’s fine’. I’ll never understand.”

Christina takes a large gulp of Pimm’s as she looks out at the Isle of Man. Aidan had once said he wanted to take her there one day.

“Well, it looks like you and Drew are very happy from your pictures. Aidan said you grew up together, yeah?”

Christina forces the smile again as she nods.

“It’s really lovely that Aidan shared so much with you. And he always spoke so highly of you.”

“That’s so sweet of you to say,” Emily says with a genuine smile forming.

“He thought so highly of you, too.”

To neither of their surprises, the two women exchange any story of Aidan possible. With each tale slowly building upon every chapter of his life and the Pimm’s flowing, Christina finally talks of their relationship and how happy they were when she was at Edinburgh.

She looks down at her wedding ring again as tears fill her eyes. She takes a deep breath. Suddenly, she feels safe. She feels warm and comforted--a feeling perhaps that comes with growing up with a parent. With the same vulnerability that swept over her with Aidan, she tells Emily the story pressing on her heart. She tells Emily the silly connection with *PS I Love You*.

“You know, Aidan must have had a real laugh watching me tear that book apart from cover to cover looking for a sign. I guess, there are no such things as signs,” Christina concludes, allowing herself to cry for the first time in months.

Emily loses the color in her face momentarily as she takes another swig of Pimm’s.

Christina wonders what she said that could’ve upset her. Emily takes a deep breath as she meets Christina’s eyes.

“Yeah, I bet he had a real laugh alright because your sign was in the title. Aidan loved you. He wanted to come to the US and tell you not to get married. That--he wanted to be with you--but sometimes, I guess, we run out of time.”



There are numerous cliches that say one moment can change your life. Christina Reale returns home and dismisses the quiet voice in her head that was incapable of seeing the truth. She pictures a marriage based on independence, compromise, and humility. People change. And just because they do, and just because they hurt you, doesn't make the history you had any less real. She thinks of true love and how it perhaps can lead you across the Atlantic to confess your feelings. She realizes there is no potential--no *what could be*. There is only now.

These are the thoughts that consume her as she concludes packing that man's bags and leaving them by the front door.

Christina Reale still believes in love stories. After it all, she would say plainly that she deserves someone who is resilient, wise, committed, and kind.

But the truth is? She's been here all along.