

The Island

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Among those attending Cassandra's Birthday Drinks, Christina counts all seven of the people who sit on the Island. Seven including herself. The Island is a large communal desk unit in the middle of the fourth floor office. There are also ten or so of Cassandra's non-work friends in the bar, sitting on a table in the corner, slightly separate from the other work people, most of whom do not sit on The Island. It is Friday evening. There has already been a birthday cake.

Christina has felt for a long time that she is boring. This evening she feels she is boring because it occurs to her that she always seems to be moving into conversations from the side. I am a crab of boredom, she thinks, scanning the bar. She sees that Mark, from The Island and Nitesh from customer services, are talking animatedly with Kiwi Jess from marketing. Kiwi Jess is not Jess Jess, who is also from marketing and not from New Zealand. Not being Kiwi Jess lends Jess a certain clarity, Christina thinks. It makes her more distinctly herself: Jess Jess, doubly Jess. Sometimes Christina wishes another Christina would also join the company, from New Zealand, or France, or anywhere, so that Christina could be Christina Christina, more distinctly, with greater clarity. Though at the same time she worries that the new Christina might become Christina Christina ahead of her, and who would she be then? Kiwi Jess works on floor three, and does not sit on The Island, though being from New Zealand means that she is from an actual island, and this also occurs to Christina, though she does not know what to do with it.

Mark is saying something to Kiwi Jess with his hand in front of his mouth, trying to imitate a voice coming over a tannoy system or from a walkie-talkie. He says 'Er, NO. I think you better check AGAIN, Nitesh,' and they all laugh, Nitesh a little sheepishly, Christina very faintly, because she has only just approached from the left-hand side of Mark so has not heard the earlier part of the story. 'I was thinking,' starts Christina, 'that Mark and I sit on The Island, but Jess is from an actual island'. The three of them look at her, considering the idea, but unsure what to do with it. 'I hadn't thought of that,' says Jess, who, Christina notices, pronounces 'that' like 'thet', which is an interesting thing about her. 'What about me? I'm not from any island,' says Nitesh, charitably. 'Yes you are, you lemon, you're British,' says Mark. 'Britain is an Island.' 'Oh yeah, I suppose it is. What about Northern Ireland, though, that's not part of the mainland?' 'Yeah but it's part of Ireland, a country called fucking IRELAND which is also an island,' says Mark. Whatever they were talking about before with the walkie-talkie voice, this new subject of islands is less interesting. Kiwi Jess is already looking over to Stuart, their manager, who has just given a gift and a card to Cassandra over at the table near the door where the cake ceremony was performed.

Before they realise, Christina, Mark, Nitesh and Kiwi Jess have allowed a pause in their conversation to become a silence. There is nothing immediately to be added on the subject of islands. Kiwi Jess has now become faux-distracted by Stuart's gift to Cassandra and has said, 'Ooo let's have a look!' and walked over. It is just Mark and Nitesh and Christina now and she can feel both the weight and cold temperature of the drink in her hand. It is a pint of lager. She does not especially like lager because it makes her gassy, but when her manager Stuart asked her from the bar what she was drinking a few minutes earlier, Christina felt

under pressure, like it was a test, because Stuart is her superior, so she immediately replied by asking, 'What are you going to have?' and he said, 'A lager, I think,' so she just said, 'OK. That sounds good,' without thinking what a lager was. That is, a whole pint of real lager. Now she is standing with this lager and it is cold and heavy. Maybe she should drop it. It would smash and explode and make something happen, but instead she shakily lifts the pint of lager to her face because drinking justifies the pause that might follow a conversation like the one that has just finished about islands. They all take a sip. Mark proceeds to down half of his pint in one go and says, 'Want another one, Nitesh? You alright with that one, Christina?' He is planning his escape and Christina can sense a little panic in Nitesh at the idea of being left alone with her. 'I'm not sure what I want, actually,' Nitesh replies, craning to have a look at the bar. He wants to escape too, and having to look at drink options is a good excuse, thinks Christina. 'Don't be a wanker,' says Mark, who is already growing impatient. 'But I don't know if I want the same again.' Christina looks at him, then at Mark. 'Oh go on then. The same,' Nitesh says.

Christina and Nitesh are standing in a bar on a Friday evening. This feels suddenly very factual. 'So how's your week been?' Nitesh asks. He doesn't want to know the answer. He's asking, but he doesn't really want to know. If Christina tells him specific details it will be boring, but if she says, 'Oh fine, the usual, y'know,' there will be nothing to say and it will be like the conversation about islands all over again. [It's a little odd to slip into the first person here for only three sentences. This might work better if flagged as thought, like you've done about? 'He's asking me, but he doesn't really want to know, she thinks'? Or put into third person?]

'Oh fine, the usual,' says Christina. 'Yeah, same here. God, we're really up to our necks in it what with four managers leaving, all at once, right? I

never saw Stuart going.’ ‘Yeah. I wonder who’ll they’ll get in to replace them all,’ Christina says, without really wondering, because how could they possibly know? Another dead end. ‘Hey, so guess how old Cassandra is!’ Nitesh says with the sudden enthusiasm because he has thought of something else to say. ‘Oh, I don’t know, twenty-six?’ Christina knows that Cassandra is twenty-six, because in the lift that morning she had asked Cassandra how old she was today. For a moment, Christina thinks of saying ‘twenty-five’ because guessing wrong might be more interesting, but instead she says ‘twenty-six’ in a way that sounds like a guess. ‘Hey! Good guess! You’re good at this. You should be a professional age-guesser!’ Nitesh says. There is no such thing as a professional age-guesser, thinks Christina. She knew that Cassandra was twenty-six and so said twenty-six. She feels a little annoyed with Nitesh, because, boring as she is, suggesting that she should be a professional age-guesser is a compliment of such disingenuity that it foregrounds his awkwardness about the fact that she is boring, and now they both have to stand there with the fact of it between them, like a big, white balloon. If Nitesh found her remotely interesting he would not have to pretend there was such a thing as a professional age guesser. Christina knows this is unfair on Nitesh, who is only, after all, trying to be nice. He is a kind man. Christina wonders suddenly if she feels anything sexual towards Nitesh but before she can decide anything either way Mark shouts, ‘Nitesh! Going for a fag if you want one!’ He has Nitesh’s beer. At last, this is Nitesh’s getaway. His escape. When they get outside, Nitesh may even thank Mark for it. Openly thank him. He will now answer Mark, ‘Yeah, sure!’ and then, ‘Catch yer later, Christina,’ so that he doesn’t have to ask her if she wants to join them, because he does not want Christina to join them. ‘Yeah, sure,’ says Nitesh, ‘see you later Mystic Meg!’ He probably doesn’t even smoke, thinks Christina.

Christina looks around the room. She takes a big gulp of her heavy lager for something to do and notices the loss in its weight. She immediately decides to investigate this further by taking another gulp, but before she can a burp starts rising up and stops her. She burps into her mouth, straining her lips like a trumpet player's. Then she takes another, registers the change in weight again and walks towards Cassandra and Stuart. Cassandra sits on The Island, but Stuart has his own desk because he is the manager. 'Happy birthday, Cassandra, are you having a nice time?' Christina asks, as if they were friends. 'Hey sweetie. Yeah good. Bit weird with two different groups, y'know, work crew and uni crew, but there's a bit of intermingling. Lil' bit of mingling going on over there I see between Lizzy and Colin! I mean, buy me a hat, I hear wedding bells!' Cassandra says, mainly to Stuart. Everyone knows that Stuart and Cassandra had sex four months ago. This is why Cassandra is suggesting that Lizzy and Colin, whoever Colin is, are hooking up, because it is a way of importing sexual tension into the conversation but without alluding to the sexual tension between Cassandra and Stuart. Even Christina knows that. 'I think your mate Colin's done well for himself there!' says Stuart. 'Oh really? I didn't know you thought so highly of Lizzy, well . . .'

Cassandra raises her eyebrows and rolls her lips in and out against themselves, the way people do after they apply lipstick. 'I just think that his hipster beard is doing a lot of the work if you know what I mean,' says Stuart, talking through his teeth, faux-discretely. 'Oh that's harsh. I fancied Colin for a while in uni. He's really sweet actually. I think Lizzy's got a catch there. And what would you know anyway, Stuart!' Christina can see through the glass doors at the rear of the pub. On the patio Mark is laughing his absolute hardest. He is bent over, slapping his leg. Then he laughs so hard he starts coughing. Nitesh looks

around a little embarrassed. Mark is very loud. Nitesh seems to momentarily catch Christina's gaze through the glass, but looks away quickly and sips his drink. He isn't smoking. 'What do I know?!' says Stuart, faux-outraged, 'What kind of name is Cassandra, anyway!' 'It's the name of a Roman goddess who can see into the future, I'll have you know'. 'Oh really, and what does tonight have in store for me then, Cassandra the goddess?'

Christina slides out sideways from the conversation and crosses the bar, trying not to look out onto the patio. Around each table, everyone is talking. Christina wonders how they are all doing it, talking as if it were easier than not talking. She draws from her mind the image of a giant steel girder, swinging from the arm of a crane, pictures it smashing through the wall of the bar, obliterating everything, the tables dashed aside, legs and arms reaching and waving. Lightheaded, she heads towards a wall to lean against then pauses in front of a painting and pretends to find it interesting until it becomes interesting. It is of a cat playing a violin to four kittens who are lined up in front of a fireplace, watching with awe-filled expressions. The cat playing the violin wears leather boots and a large red hat with a white feather. He is very enigmatic. Christina can play the violin. She examines the cat's paws on the neck of the instrument and concludes that they look improbable. He is not really playing the violin. Christina remembers that old violin strings were made of cat gut. The interior of the painting, with the fireplace and the nightgowns the kittens are wearing, suggest the scene is taking place a long time ago. This is a horrible painting, thinks Christina. She forces herself to drink the rest of the lager. It takes three big gulps. She does four burps into her mouth. Cassandra, she thinks, is not a Roman goddess. She is a character from Greek mythology, not Roman. It does not matter.

She has heard Cassandra say the phrase ‘Roman goddess who can see into the future’ perhaps as many as six times over the five years they have sat together on The Island. What good would it do to correct her, now?

Christina goes to the bar. There are four people in front of her in the queue. She wishes there were more people in the queue. She wishes she could queue there, quietly, on her own, forever. When her turn comes around she orders two vodka shots. She drinks each in two sips. Her breath feels thick and medicinal. She imagines lighting it. Christina makes her way to the toilet feeling a little drunk and giddy. The sign on the door of the ladies says ‘Bitches’, so she walks further into the corridor in order to see what the men’s door says. ‘Punks’. Walking back and up the corridor and into the Bitches’ room she finds a cubicle and wonders if she will cry when she closes the door. She does not feel like crying now, but she has an inkling she will cry once the door is closed. She has cried like this before. She has cried hard enough that someone has heard her. She has sobbed and sobbed, not wanting to tell anyone why she is crying and then been put into a taxi home by Lizzy. If she really thinks why she cries at times like this she has to admit it is because she feels she is very boring, but also because she deliberately wants to sour and interrupt the nice time everyone else is having. She has to admit that she draws comfort from ruining things for other people when she feels that she is boring. It seems to give her some of the air everyone else is breathing so naturally. Christina closes the door. She is now feeling quite drunk. She takes down her tights and knickers and has a long wee. It lasts so long that she has time to feel the urge to put her hand between her legs and get some wee on her fingers. She decides to wee a little on her fingers. It feels warm. She brings her hand up. The wee is delicately wet on the tips of her fingers but entirely clear, like water. The light in the bathroom is

very white, and she moves the whiteness around on the wetness of her fingertips. She hears someone come into the toilet. If she wanted to cry, now would be a good time, but Christina has wee on her fingers, and by the time she dries her hand on some loo roll the moment for crying has passed. She would have to start crying, breaking the silence, and it might not come right away, it might sound somehow forced. She would not be discovered crying, which is how this is supposed to work. Someone is weeing in the cubicle next to her. Christina stares at the white door of the cubicle, counting down from ten to see if the steel girder will come smashing through it. When it doesn't, she wipes, stands, adjusts, clicks the lock and goes over to the sink. In the mirror she sees herself looking drunk, but OK. 'Who are you?' she asks her the drunk-but-OK person in the mirror. 'Sorry?' says a voice in the cubicle. 'Not you,' says Christina quietly. Who are you? She asks the person in the mirror again, though this time in her head, which is also the head of the person in the mirror. She thinks about the thoughts she is having in that other head. They are taking place in that head, right there. How are you different to me? What makes you different from anyone else? She asks inside that head. Why are you so boring? Why can't you say something interesting for once? What's wrong with you? Why don't you kill yourself? That might actually make you interesting. That might actually be the dignified, interesting thing to do. Christina's mind is flat. The toilet walls are tiled and white. Christina feels that her mind is a white tiled room. She doesn't want to be in this tiled white room anymore. She asks herself, 'Why don't you just go and grab Nitesh and kiss him, and then take him home and fuck him? Why don't you just go up to Cassandra and grab the thong out of her bum and yank it?'

‘Oh hi Christina.’ Lizzy is standing next to her at the sink. ‘Hi Lizzy. I didn’t know it was you.’ ‘Can’t see through doors, can you, babes! I like your dress.’ ‘Oh thanks.’ ‘Boring, isn’t it, all this,’ says Liz. ‘I got stuck talking to this Colin guy, going on about cryptic fucking crosswords and how poetic and profound they are, can you imagine? How’s your evening, going?’ ‘Oh fine, y’know.’ ‘Yeah, exactly. Well . . .’ says Lizzy, shaking her hands dry, ‘don’t have too much fun,’ before walking back into the bar. Lizzy works in HR. Lizzy used to go out with a TV presenter. He had an affair and it was in the news. Lizzy knows about Christina’s two months off, last year. Christina thinks that if she could do anything with the rest of her Friday evening it would be to go home with Lizzy and get under the duvet and not say anything at all with her. In the morning they could have a nice breakfast and not saying anything at all either. She wishes they could live together and not mention the TV presenter or the people on The Island or the two months last year, or anything at all.

She wishes life could be like that, but instead it is like this, and she is boring, and doesn’t know how not to be. Walking back into the bar Christina finds that Mark is now loudly trying to persuade Nitesh to do some shots. Lizzy is with them and is pretending to be boisterous with Mark. The man called Colin looks nervous as Lizzy puts salt into the V where her thumb meets her hand. Cassandra and Stuart have moved onto the patio. Through the glass Christina can see they are talking very seriously. Cassandra’s other friends are still over at the table in the corner. Christina cannot see anyone else from The Island. She walks over to the table by the door where Cassandra has made a little display of her cards and presents. There are coats on all the chairs, and crumbs and smeary napkins from the cake earlier. Christina picks up one of the cards. She

knows this is nose-y but she does not care. She likes that it feels a little risky. The writing inside the card is all in caps:

DEAR CASSANDRA

EVEN THOUGH I'M LEAVING, YOU CAN STILL COUNT ON ME
TO BE THE QUICKEST TOUCH-TYPER IN THE COMPANY
IN CASE YOU EVER WANT TO TEST ME AGAIN.
DON'T BE A STRANGER.

STUART

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Christina doesn't know what this means about the typing, but it seems to be about sex. She looks around at the bar because a cheer has gone up. Lizzy is standing with a shot glass on top of her head. Christina catches Colin's eye, because he is looking around a little embarrassed. Lizzy is telling Mark that he's *actually* stupid. She's saying, 'You're an OK person Mark, but let's face it, you're not remotely clever'. Mark says, 'Alright, alright, I'm no fucking Einstein OK, but you've got to admit I'm class. I'm fucking class, right?' Christina decides to keep Stuart's card to Cassandra for herself. She will take it now. She will leave right now with it. She finds her bag round the side of the table and thinks about putting the card inside, but stops herself. She wants to hold it. She wants to walk out of the pub holding it. She wants to walk down the street and onto the tube carrying the card. She has to swap the card from hand to hand to get each arm, in turn, into the sleeves of her coat. She is holding the card, even when Lizzy, noticing she is leaving, says, 'Oh babe, you going? OK babe, see you Monday!' and Christina waves at her with what she thinks

of now as her 'card hand'. Christina waves with her card hand at Nitesh and Mark and Colin, then turns and waves with her card hand to Cassandra's uni friends and says, louder than she expected to, 'Bye! Nice to meet you,' although she has not met any of them, but it doesn't matter at all because as she walks through the door, the card bending to the tightness of her grip, she feels not like herself, not like Christina from The Island, but like Christina Christina, more distinct and clear.