All the years of growth and change, from childhood to old age, the whole of a human lifetime: for the ocean and the land it's just the blink of an eye. The Earth has its own cycles and ambitions that last ages and eons rather than months and years. On 18 July 1995 it was time for the mountain they call Soufrière Hills to wake up.

There were signs. For three years there had been stirring, seismic yawning to indicate the final stages of a slumber that had endured since prehistory. But you know how minor tremors are: they reverberate through the ground and on into human gossip, what one was doing at the time and a whole series of 'what ifs', only to disperse from consciousness once more as the forces, the going to work, the fishing and the writing of a letter with a pen reclaim their centrality.

They knew it was a volcano. But with the thick of the forest covering the slopes it must've seemed a rather friendly one. Yet when a mountain chooses to move, finally, there are none that can deny it. So it was when Soufrière Hills erupted.

Plymouth wasn't directly affected at first, but a month later, on 15 August 1995, their mountain brought fifteen minutes of darkness to the day, as a large ash cloud descended on the town. Plymouth had to be abandoned in the following year.

Wake up. The volcano is waiting. It's 2006, the day we're going to Montserrat. The little plane with propellers will take us, there and back across the short stretch of Caribbean from Antigua to the new airport in Montserrat. We'll see what they call the Emerald Isle of the Caribbean: the forested north, the planned but soulless settlements where one-third of the evacuees from the island's south now live. We'll drive to vantage points to collect our thoughts in view of the exclusion zone, the half of the island given in to rubble and mud. We'll see their Soufrière Hills spewing forth boulders that tumble down the hillside leaving tails of dust. From the distance those rocks look as pebbles, so easily are they tossed. We'll see the great brew of their cloud and smoke that as far as Antigua changes the colour of sunsets. It's the ash and cinders the vulcanologists call tephra, the airborne fragments called pyroclasms. We'll hear their mountain: a continuous, distant rumbling is the voice of the Earth.



We will see their mountain from across the sea in Antigua.

Below
The ash and cinders the volcanologists call tephra.

