

Ana knelt in the snow by her mother's body, looking down at her. From above her face resembled a map. A criss-crossed survey of contours and through-lines, tributaries whiskering their way between them. A history of becoming. In the pale wintered sun her mother's face was changed. Evidence of a life but not the life itself. Feel the bump of a small scar by her ear and you could feel a knife dragging against skin. Touch the sunspot and you would wonder the world that could have produced such heat. The wrinkles of her face are laugh-lines from stories told over campfire, frown-lines from the grunting effort of endless work, the weariness of almost six decades held loose in the sag of her cheeks. To trace its forlorn passages is to trace a life. Ana knew them by heart, and just looked. In death it was as if all of her mother's grief was laid bare.

Soon the lines would disappear. Her skin would freeze and crack, and the shimmering frost would create multitudes of harsher lines, unreadable and unforgiving. Its pits and crevices would not even tell a cartographic story, instead it would be indistinguishable from the surrounding ice that lay everywhere and led nowhere. Her eyes would freeze over, her lips too and soon you would say that she was not there at all. That she had never been there. Such was the fate of every dead thing in this endless winter. In a thousand years the body will move with the ice, thawing and refreezing until all that remains is no different to the other minuscule deposits of minerals peppering the dust, save for the fact that once upon a time they said goodbye to a daughter they loved. The thought assaulted Ana and she lost her composure.

The image of her mother's death kept replaying on a loop. Blinks, jerks, breaths, nothing. Blinks, jerks, breaths, nothing.

Ana stared, this cycle of thoughts transfixing her. They had been walking through the snow, searching dead trees for mushrooms. She felt a change in the air and looked up in time to see her mother tilt backwards to the ground, rigid as the deadwood surrounding them. Her eyes blinked, her fingers and hands convulsed and she made a soft *tut tut tut* with her tongue for several minutes. Ana, beside herself with panic, clawed at her mother and shouted and shook her. Eventually the convulsions stopped, ragged breaths took their place, and then they stopped too. A glob of red saliva trailed from her mother's mouth and that was that. The stories she had heard of seizures were filled with violence but watching her mother die had been so matter of fact. It terrified her.

Breathe. Come back. Ana willed herself not to think of it.

She could remember flashes of a time when her mother had been happy. In truth it felt like death had been coming to her in stages. Her face became less animate, her speech stopped entirely and eventually the only clues to her feelings lay in the story of her face. Her mother's history was etched there. Melody deprived songlines. Her name had been Elaine, but Ana supposed it wasn't anymore, and hadn't been for some time. She wasn't sure what to call this body in front of her.

Elaine was the woman conjured in Ana's head when she abstractly thought of her mother, recalled to the present time and again. Elaine was the woman who played I Spy for hours at a time while on the road. Who had cooked for her, cleaned her, held her in strong arms, kissed her in the morning with fruity breath, and smiled at the rare sight of birds. Remembering her this way had been a habit of Ana's for years, probably since her mother stopped speaking. The first few years after she was born lay heavy on Elaine's memory, silencing her. The world hadn't Fallen all at once, but instead lost itself slowly to the hunger, cold, and cruelty of its people. Ana couldn't remember much, yet she felt its influence in her every waking moment. She felt it in her ears springing to life at the soft snap of a branch behind her, and her eyes searching for the smallest movement or twitch of muscle. Threat always loomed.

Ana looked at people's hands before she looked at their faces.

Most of the souls she encountered had lost those early years too, and a vague unease would permeate their conversation if mentioned and very soon you could be sure they would leave with clouded eyes. Not so much the mind forgetting as an unspoken intuition that forgetting might be preferable. Those who could recall spoke little of it - or not at all - but held in their visage shadowed maps to the past.

How do you grieve a world?

Do you grieve for what can now never happen? For the children who will never laugh and the parents who will never be parents? Or do you grieve for the ones who are, who themselves grieve for their children's restless, pathetic lives? And do you grieve for what you cannot know? For the last word that will ever be uttered?

"Please."

Do you grieve for the dead? Nine billion, two hundred and thirty-two million, seven hundred and sixty thousand, one hundred and four. Five. Six. Seven. The blink of a mindless eye is the sum total of those wasted lives.

This dark rumination unsettled her. Her mother will never touch her again, or wake her everyday before the sun. She will never barter goods for them in the way only mutes can, or pick velvet shank with her. She will never fix her rucksack when it fails and she will never wake in the night, eyes wide in silent scream with tears pockmarking the sleeping bag.

Ana sighed, and tried not to feel guilty. She wouldn't miss comforting those night terrors. She began searching her mother's pockets. Cold hands fumbled loose grain, a mushroom, a tattered piece of OS map, a small whetstone and soon every pocket was cleared. She took off her mother's shoes and looped them to her pack and stood and left the body where it had fallen.

The gentle tremors of each step forward provoked thought of her mother's last moments. With clarity Ana realised her mother had spoken. It was not a change in the air but her mother's voice, an unexpected utterance that seemed to disappear as soon

as it had been said. Ana wasn't even sure what it was. The vibrations could still be felt in the very molecules of that place and it disturbed her to think the trees could still hear it while she could not. Twelve years of silence, broken at the end. Although the word escaped her, the sound's texture remained and enveloped her, so much softer than she remembered. Ana clutched this thought with all her might.

She felt comforted as she walked. She knew this track well, having used it most days of the past month. Extending a gloved hand to caress the spines of a struggling pine caused a glitter of snow to descend and join the few inches already there. She paused, head cocked, and listened to the forest. Ana fancied she could hear a steady rhythm to the sounds around her. Sways and gasps of trees rose into harmony with her breath and the beats of her chest pulsed in the heartwood and for a moment she disappeared from herself entirely. She floated on a ceaseless hum of movement, felt sap coursing through her veins and from her feet she felt the ground give way to roots extending down from her soles, passing all manner of insects and other critters. Beneath them lay only rock.

A crash sent her diving to her left as a bough from a long dead pine fell and shattered. She lay back and filled her lungs again, taking a moment. This was a common occurrence but she regretted the lost moment of calm she had been experiencing. She knew it would be a long time before one came again.

Her mother would have sensed the branch coming, Ana suddenly thought. Tears chased their way from her eyes. She squeezed them shut and clenched her fists and punched through the snow.

"Shit."

Blinks, jerks, breaths, nothing.

She groaned in frustration and anguish and looked to the broken branch and then to the tree that had shed it. A Scots pine, one of several dead that were nearby. They were not surviving the winter, though what use a delineation of seasons could be Ana didn't know. Her mother had told her stories about them, about their ancient ancestors who grew here the last time the world was cold and about the battles that had been fought in their shade and the mad men who had fled to their deep. A history of nine thousand years and a future of only a few more. The branch was rotted and brittle and she gazed up to its origin where a mist of disturbed snow was still descending and it flared through her tears. This patch of Highland forest was growing lighter as it died, the sun slipping through ever-growing holes in the canopy. Ana may have pretended otherwise, but she knew the same thing was happening everywhere. Most trees they came across hadn't grown for years and were shedding dead weight. Many had given up entirely and lost their moorings, now leaning against other luckier timbers or collapsed in broken heaps on the ground.

She heaved herself up and brushed snow from nooks and folds in her jacket. In recent months it had become a threadbare state and wasn't keeping her warm. A handful of snow had worked its way into her neck and she shivered as the heat of her body melted it and ran it down her spine. Reorienting herself, she pressed on and forced her breath in and out, trying to grapple some semblance of control. She soon crested the small hillock near their camp. Her camp. It was as she had left it.

The sun was already meandering southwestwards and shadows were creeping ever longer, but she did not wish to spend another night here. She could smell her mother in the tent and struggled to look at all the belongings she would now have to leave behind. In the middle of the small clearing she laid to rest what she could not take. Pillows, a sleeping bag, her mother's clothing and rucksack, an unread Bible, a picture Ana had drawn as a child, some of her own sorry clothes too. Meagre pickings should anyone happen upon them. Over the top she pulled a sheet of tarpaulin and drove sticks through its ringlets: a makeshift cairn. The harsh noise of its rustling pierced through her. She stood and stared at it for a long time, not really sure why she had done this.

The first night of their settlement here had been difficult. A roiling blizzard had marred their arrival, and the trees were casting aside branches every other minute throughout the night. Great crashes and howls had brought her and her mother into the same sleeping bag, and Ana had cradled her head and sung to her. Her voice never reached the depths of emotion she recalled in Elaine's, but she felt the tension of the night dissipate and the wind lessen as she sang of the mountains covered in mist, her favourite. Eventually the wild gloaming passed and they had emerged exhausted to drifts as high as their heads and higher still. The rest of the month had been a hard one.