

1.

*She divides her life into two parts: before the Island, and afterwards. A seismic shift, like two land masses separating. It began, as these things so often do, with no fanfare, nothing to suggest that her life was about to change.*

*The drive to the airport was a copy of all the other drives they took to airports. The rental car was collected from an airport car park packed with similar cars. All the comfortable replications of modern life. In the car she slept, this she is sure of. Because she has no memory of how they arrived. Of course she remembers the cornflower blue skies, the emerald terrain stretching into distant horizons. But these memories are from later. The first real thing she remembers is the house.*

2.

Day 1.

The car turned off the smooth tarmac of the highway and onto a dirt track. The change registered somewhere on a subconscious level. A subtle disturbance shaping her dream. She stirred again. The car stopped, the jolt pulled her back into the world. Her eyes opened. She started and pulled back, hands involuntarily grasping for the seatbelt release before she realised.

David's hand was on her arm. His voice soft, reassuring:

'We're here'.

3.

As he unpacked the car she stretched, massaging her neck. Her back made a satisfying crack as she arched and twisted. Shaking her legs, she stared up at the house. The building was large, easily four times the size of their house. Three stories with a long, steep roof. Large windows punctuated the dark exterior. She remembered the first time David showed her the pictures. She thought the place looked a Nordic experiment in science fiction.

But it wasn't the size. It was the solitude. She scanned the horizon. Not a single structure in sight. If it weren't for the road this would be the only sign that civilisation existed. Through the fog of her half waking state she felt a tremor of anxiety stir.

*They were alone. Here, in the Almighty nothing.*

She took another few steps which was when she saw it. If you looked at the house straight on it was completely hidden but take a few steps either side and it shifted into view like an optical illusion.

The second building was connected to the main house by a short, windowless annex corridor.

Like the house, this building was black. But with no windows. She thought of Malevich's 'Black Square' painting and like it, the building had a hypnotic

quality. The total blackness of the surface drew her in as though she were being pulled into a black hole.

Suddenly she felt the panic rising in her. Her chest tightened. She felt her legs go weak. Panicking, she grasped for facts to counter the feeling. A rational response versus an evolved survival instinct. All the basics she'd learned at medical school. 'The Amygdala, Latin from Greek: Almond Tonsil'. That little part of the brain that controls the flight or fight response. She tightened her leg muscles to counter the feeling. She forced down the memories.

*Glass breaking. Screams. The sound of a siren somewhere in the distance. Hammering on the door.*

She breathed. 'Five, four, three..'

*A shout. The sound of wood splintering.*

'Two, one.'

'Beth?'

She turned as David took the last of the bags out of the car. All neatly arranged in order of size. She knew he'd done it automatically. He gathered the straps in his hands, attempting to lift all of them himself. The handles slipped. He cursed. She walked over to the car. He flexed his hands and tried again to gather up all the straps.

Bending down she wrapped her fingers around the handles of the nearest bag.

'It's okay, I've got it.'

Before he could protest further she picked up her bag and took another for good measure. The heaviest.

He cocked his head to one side. 'You sure?'

Her withering look melted the half formed smile off his face like a blowtorch.

He half-jogged down the hallway. She followed, trying not to hate his puppyish enthusiasm. He'd always been like this - something she used to love.

When he reached the large open plan living room he dropped the bags.

The room was huge. A white expanse. The décor was beautiful in its minimalism. Nothing was out of place, every object carefully placed. Every surface thoughtfully chosen. The furniture, perfectly spaced. The entire room felt like a harmonious system.

David walked to the far side of the room. The wall there was entirely glass except for a metal slider at hip height. He stared at the view. The humbling magnificence of nature stretching as far as the eye can see.

He turned to Beth hoping the view would entice her - but she was gone. A moment later he heard the heavy tread of footsteps on the stairs. Sighing, he turned back to the window and took in the view again. He knew this was the right decision. Now he just had to convince her of it.

4.

Beth dropped the bags on the bed and looked around. Another perfectly balanced space. She opened drawers that slid with a whisper. Pressed the pillows which, doubtless, produced only long untroubled dreams. Opening one of the bags she began to unpack. Inside was a tumble of clothes. She had packed haphazardly. She tossed out a bundle of underwear, t-shirts, sweatpants -comfortable, familiar things landed in the drawers with barely a fold. The delicate balance of the room slowly becoming chaotic. She took a perverse pride in it. A few sartorial hand grenades to shake things up a bit. Shoes dropped on the floor with a satisfying thud. The bags were almost empty. She reached in to pull out the final few items. A pair of socks rolled up tight. Nonchalantly she dropped them in a drawer. And as she did, she heard it. She stopped. Then carefully reached in and took out the socks, unrolled them and reached inside. Taking out the pill bottle, she gave it a shake. The castanet clack seemed so loud in the quiet of the room. A noise like a child's rattle.

Slowly lowering herself onto the edge of the bed, her body seemed to collapse in on itself. She sat unmoving. A glacial sadness. In the room the rattle of the pill bottle echoed like a trapped memory.

David stood at the bottom of the stairs. One foot on the first step his hand on the bannister, as though his body had committed to an act his mind was still debating. He listened. Over the last few weeks it was as if his senses had become fine-tuned. All the static crackle of domestic life that couples produce had been put through a filter. Now he could isolate the smallest sound. The minute changes in temperature. He remembered with nostalgia the way he could just ignore things. How her moods sometimes just passed him by. The shock of being told; 'How could you not know how I was feeling?' was a fond memory.

He took his foot off the stair.

'She's here' he thought, 'That's a start.' Where we go from here, who knows. But we're here'.

With that he turned and was about to go back into the lounge when he stopped. To his right the hallway bent round to the left. Beyond that he knew was a door. His fingers tapped his pocket and he felt the outline of the keycard. He tilted his head and listened for any sound from upstairs.

Maybe he should wait. Make sure Beth was settled in first. Maybe.

Beth came downstairs. Descending step by careful step, soft as kitten's feet. She glanced around, listening for any sound of him. Satisfied she walked to the front door and pulled the handle. It was locked. A good solid door. She unlocked and then re-locked the door. She made a mental note of all the light switches in the hallway. In the kitchen she gave a cursory glance at the expensive kitchen appliances and then inventoried the knives. Six in all, they looked Japanese in design. The kind used in high end restaurants the world over. She tested the weight of each. The largest looked like a small sword. But of course it wasn't the size that mattered she thought. A decent fruit knife and a working knowledge of anatomy was enough to kill someone.

She left the kitchen and walked through the utility room to the back door. Again the door was solid. The satisfying *thunk* as she slid the deadbolt back and forth was as a form of meditation she'd been practising for some time.

Back in the main room she stood in the middle of the room and closed her eyes. She pictured the space. The sleek black suspended fireplace in the centre of the room. The table, eight feet long, three feet high. The coffee table, the sofa, the rug. The bookcases. The Eames chair and ottoman. She made a mental map of the room. Stored, ready. Later, when David was asleep she'd turn the light off and practice navigating in the dark. Just to be sure.

She opened her eyes. Silence. That was the final component in maintaining the equilibrium. 'There's no noise,' she thought. Outside, nature's symphony. The wind, turned from a whisper to a hum to a whistle. But in here, nothing.

*The sound of glass breaking. A siren. Fire. The door opens and Megan is stood there.*

She opened her eyes, banishing the memory and wiped away the tears that were forming.

It was only then she realised David was gone.

He reached the end of the corridor, removed the card and tapped it against the card reader watching the light turn from red to green.

Everything was just as he'd expected. The equipment was state of the art, everything Magnus had promised. And more. He smiled and crossed to the chrome workbench. He plucked the note from around the neck of the bottle and read:

'I hope you enjoy Nature as she is: absurd! - Magnus.

David smiled. He knew little about wine, but he knew Magnus, which meant the wine would be a good vintage. Magnus would have selected it himself, not palmed it off to a secretary or an assistant. He pictured him quizzing the wine seller. Insisting in that indomitably polite way of his that the gift must be 'just so'. Magnus, the perfect host even when he was absent.

He had an urge to call Magnus, just to check in. But it could wait. He ran a hand over the smooth chrome surface of the workbench. He'd get to work, that would keep his mind occupied. He checked his watch.

*'But not today'.*

The thought of the night ahead filled him with momentary dread. In those circumstances he did what he always did. Break down the task:

Half an hour of unpacking. Then he could start on dinner, prep and cooking was at least another hour. Then dinner, then clearing up. Maybe some TV. After the journey she'd probably want to get an early night, which was fine by him, the driving had tired him more than he'd realised. So that was it, the evening plotted and timetabled. Simple.

'Everything ok?'

She nodded.

David was leaning against the kitchen island, doing a bad impression of nonchalance

'Okay, well. I was going to make some tea, do you fancy a cup?'

She tucked a stray strand behind her ear and nodded.

'Great'. Even he realised his enthusiasm was out of proportion but before he could make an adjustment she turned and left.

He watched her go, then gently, with one foot he nudged the cupboard door opposite fully closed. He'd barely had time to conceal the bottle of wine, but he thought he'd managed it. Sliding it behind a pair of ceramic storage jars, just enough to make it seem out of sight, rather than hidden.

As he waited for the kettle to boil, he checked his phone, which had automatically adjusted to one hour behind GMT. No messages, no calls. Again he felt the urge to call Magnus. Just to check in. Make sure everything was..

*'If it wasn't he would have called'*

He nodded to himself. He had to focus on the here and now.

'It could be good for both of us'. That's what he told her. It's what he'd told himself. And there was enough truth in it. Just.

Beth stood at the window, gazing out. Her eyes saccading, as though searching for something in the landscape.

'It's quite a view'

Beth turned. She hadn't heard him enter the room. He was carrying two teas, the strings with the labels danced gently against the cups. A vivid green one for him, a yellow for her. Chamomile, ancient wisdom in a tea bag or a poor substitute for an SSRI? But this was the regime now, infusions replace Inhibitors. Still, she'd gotten used to the taste, and cutting back on the caffeine had probably been a good idea. How many cups did she get through in the day? All the while advising people to;

*'Make dietary adjustments, cut back this, increase that', and at every opportunity she'd be in the Café Nero across the street.*

Not anymore.

David placed the cups on the coffee table and smiled. She returned it, if only for the sake of convention then turned back and stared out at the landscape. And again that sense of isolation. As though they were intergalactic explorers whose craft had just landed on an uncharted planet. Staring out from the airlock, not even knowing if the atmosphere was breathable, let alone if it could sustain life.

'Thank you' he said, growing suddenly serious.

'For what?' she said turning back to him.

'For coming here'.

She smiled, this time less reflexively. There was a vulnerability about him. Away from home, from the camouflage of the familiar he looked different. She hadn't forgotten how much the last few years had meant to him. How much he'd achieved. And how close he was to achieving something extraordinary.

People are in extremis are fragile.

He walked back and sat on the sofa, picking up the TV remote control and deciphering the buttons.

She turned back to the window. As she stared out she wondered idly how thick the glass was. She gently placed her palm flat against the glass as though trying to touch the cobalt blue sky.

'Don't let it get cold' he said.

She didn't move.

Her hand pressed harder against the glass. Harder, harder.

*Glass shatters. Screams.*

'I won't' she replied.

5.

He cooked too much. Beth used to say he '*Cooked like someone's mother*'. There was perhaps some truth in this. For David it was about the act of creation. The chemistry. Taking a set of ingredients and with a little skill, and patience, turning them into something that transcended the sum of its parts. Who wouldn't derive joy from that? But no doubt a therapist would have a field day with it. 'Food as an act of love'. 'As an emotional bribe'. 'As an apology'. 'As a way of soliciting affection'.

He took the fish from the oven and, as per Magnus' instructions cut a few slices of dark rye bread to serve with it. When he'd asked Magnus about food, the old man's eyes had lit up, he gave David a list of dishes, names made up of a riot of consonants, with the odd vowel sprinkled in.

At the thought of Magnus his fingers tapped the keycard in his pocket. Of course, there was work to do - but that could wait. For a few days at least. Let them enjoy the time together.

Beth barely ate. Pushing the food around on her plate as if by shifting the contents around it would miraculously disappear. He said nothing. This wasn't new, it had been happening for weeks, months. But here, surely here, surely, *now*, something would shift.

As he cleared the plates she smiled and thanked him. He took the compliment, hollow though it seemed. They were both so familiar with their roles in this piece of domestic theatre it took no effort. In the kitchen, he carefully sealed up the leftovers and put them in the refrigerator. Then he made coffee.

When he returned Beth was standing at the window. He switched on the exterior lights and two pools of light appeared on the decking. If he'd hoped for reassurance, he was wrong. Long after he'd finished his coffee Beth continued to stare out into the night.

*"Tomorrow,"* he thought. *"Tomorrow will be better."*

The curse of an unfamiliar bed is that it either provides no sleep or summons unwanted dreams.

She woke, groping for her phone. The warm glow of the screen, cupping it to avoid waking David. Drawing some modicum of comfort from its light.

'Huddling for warmth and security around our smartphones'. She looked at the time; 3.13.

The dream was a fragment, possessing that haphazard narrative quality which no artist had ever been able to replicate to a satisfying degree. A state, in which even causality felt contingent.

She got out of bed and, phone in hand, crept into the hallway. Darkness distorted everything - the walls felt closer. The bathroom door further away. The light from the phone faded. She swiped the screen, found the torch icon and tapped. The phone emitted a pale white light.

'Get a grip', she thought.

Sitting in the bathroom, the phone resting on the edge of the bath she glanced around. The room was pristine. As though it had been cleaned, then vacuum sealed until the next residents appeared.

'How the hell did they achieve that?'

She stood, turned, and placed her hand on the flush, bracing for the noise as she pressed the lever.

That was when the phone rang.

A low vibration ebbed under the ringtone. She turned, hands raised self-defensively. The phone continued to vibrate, shifting as it did.

Beth stared. And before she could react, the phone slid down the smooth surface of the bath. And went silent.

Her breathing slowed.

'Stupid, stupid', she muttered running her hand through her hair.

She pressed the flush and turned to back to the bath.

She heard it before she saw it. A thin rasping sound - like gas escaping. It was coming from the bath.

Her brain raced - reasons, logic, danger, flight or fight. Whatever was in the bath made a throaty rattling sound.

Beth stared.

The bathroom door was ten feet away, but it might as well have been ten miles. She simply couldn't move. Even though she knew what was coming. That whatever was in the bath was about to rise up, to grip the sides of the bath and pull itself up and slide over the side. Long white fingers, nails broken and lethal as shards of glass.

The rasping noise came again...long...thin - like wind whistling through a crack in the door. Pushing, insistent...getting stronger...

She awoke. Her elbow banging against the bedside table as she flailed for the lamp. Then she noticed the bedcovers were moving. Being pulled down in short jerky movements. And she saw hidden hands pulling her down, down, down...her fingers found the switch. The lamp snapped on.

And she realised - it was her. Her feet, kicking involuntarily. Not an invisible intruder. She stopped. The bedcovers lay still. She sat up, gulping air, chest tight. Closing her eyes Beth took a slow deep breath, holding, then exhaling. And again. Measured, rhythmical. Eventually the pressure in her chest eased.

Beside her David stirred. She snapped the lamp off. He shifted again, but didn't wake. Beth lay on her back, her hand touched her pillow. A small damp spot had formed. She turned the pillow over and lay, staring at the ceiling. Listening for the tell-tale sound of nails tapping on porcelain. But it never came.

So passed the first night.

## 6.

Day 2.

'Are you sure you don't want to come?'

Beth shook her head.

David paused, holding the car door open. They each stood, not speaking. Another scene in their little play. But this time he tried to improvise. Not his strong suit.

He swung the car door gently back and forth.

Stripped of the background noise of their house, the sounds from the street, the neighbours, the silence here was deafening. Back home there was always something the hum and crackle of life, technology, human interaction, the steady pulse of urban life. Here silence reigned.

'Well, you can always go for a walk if you change your mind'.

This lightly thrown out observation landed with all the grace of an Olympic lead shot.

Beth pulled her arms closer to her body. It wasn't cold yet, not like it would be. But she'd dressed for summer. A thin cardigan wrapped around her. From the moment she got out of bed she had no intention of leaving the house.

David nodded, playing for time. 'Okay...'

He knew this part of her too well. The decisive, principled part of her he'd found so attractive that had recently morphed into wilful stubbornness that drove him crazy.

'Okay, well...'

Beth smiled, a wisp of hair whipped into her face, she brushed it aside.

'Well, I won't be long'.

Beth nodded. David climbed into the Volvo 4x4 and shut the door. He hit the button and the window lowered. He was about to try one last time. But the door to the house was already closed. He took a breath and turned the key.

7.

Beth stood with her back to the door, listening to the sound of the 4x4 as it completed a turning circle and then drove off. It sounded so different to their car back home. The full throated power of the engine. She closed her eyes and listened as it receded. Memorising the sound. When she could no longer hear it, she turned and unlocked the door, before re-locking it. Satisfied she walked back into the kitchen. The place was spotless. David, meticulous as ever. She walked, running her fingers over the worktop, feeling the cold marble surface. She walked over to the knife block and slid out the largest knife. A lethal steel blade with a black handle.

With one hand she gently pushed open the bathroom door. The other hand gripped the knife.

Neat, pristine surfaces. Toiletries neatly placed. She stood over the bath. The tip of the knife tapping absently against the rim.

*Fingernails on porcelain.*

First night. New place. Bad dream. Simple. Rational. Satisfied, she closed the bathroom door and went downstairs.

At the foot of the stairs she stopped. The corridor to her right was shrouded in semi-darkness. She ran her hand over the light switch and the dark was banished. The corridor was empty save for a low beech console table. On top of which was a small statue. In the light, the corridor seemed shorter. Gingerly she began to walk. When she reached the table she stopped to examine the statue. It was a human figure, limbs twisting and stretching, back arched. Bound or breaking free, she couldn't decide.

The corridor bent around to the left, at the end of which was...

She half turned to go back when she stopped. Her arm had fallen to her side and the blade of the knife rested, like a sliver of ice against her leg.

*'Should she?'*

*Why not?* After all it wasn't as if it were a secret. Even emboldened by this rationale she paused for a second, listening for the tell-tale sign of a car. But there was nothing. She walked to the end of the corridor and turned left.

The light was the first thing she noticed. Cold autumnal sunlight filling the corridor. The annex corridor was twenty feet long and made of glass. A transparent umbilical. As she walked along she glanced up. Silver-white clouds, mottled with dark patches stretched over the sky.

The door at the end was unmarked. The key-card reader on the wall gave off a warm red glow. What was behind the door was no mystery. Behind it was the reason they had come. *'One of the reasons'*, she thought, echoing David's repeated insistence. They were here because...

Before she could finish she heard a noise from behind the door. Too subtle, too vague to identify. The dream returned; the thing in the bath. She pictured fingers sliding over the other side of the door. Looking for a way out.

*'Stop it.'*

The image vanished.

She bent her head closer to the door, turning her head slightly, listening. But there was nothing. Her fingers relaxed her grip on the knife.

There was no need to conjure terror. Not anymore.

Fifteen minutes and he still hadn't seen another car. The road stretched ahead of him. Clear, uninterrupted. He thought of that old TV movie about the truck that pursues a car, for no apparent reason. He glanced in the rear-view mirror, half expecting some lumbering sixteen wheeler to appear, bearing down on him, horn blaring. But the road was quiet. Magnus had insisted they take a 4x4, and at first David had hesitated. Back home the city was clogged with them, he didn't want to be one of *those* people. He liked the car they had. Efficient, economical. Non-descript. But Magnus had pressed him. It was a question of practicality. If they wanted to tour the interior of the island they needed one. And if the weather turned they'd be glad they had one. Looking out now at the beautiful clear skies he couldn't imagine it. But that was the other thing Magnus had told him; 'The weather changes like that' he'd said waving his hand with a magician's flourish. 'Sun one minute, rain the next - then snow, then sun again. All in the space of a few hours'. He wondered how such a shifting environment affected people. He wondered about Magnus. Magnus was anything but changeable. The same neat grey suit, the wonderful shock of white hair combed back in the same style. Meticulous, patient, steadfast. That was Magnus. But of course, what went on under the surface, or behind closed doors. Who knew? Perhaps all our interior lives are subject to the same fluctuations. All it took was a stressor. And that could be environmental or psychological. Tiny changes in a complex system could have huge effects. No one understood that better than him.

Beth stood before the bookcase, head tilted to read the spines. She couldn't remember the last time she'd read a book. A whole book. Even started to read one. When she was a teenager, and even at University she'd read every day. The tiny second-hand bookcase she'd bought had been crammed. The huge medical textbooks her course demanded rested on top. The stack getting bigger and bigger as the year went on. Building blocks constructing her future. When she'd moved into the shared house in the second year she'd filled six boxes with books, lugging them into a friend's battered Peugeot and piling them on to the back seat so that she had to lean out of the window and give instructions as her friend backed the car up and turned around.

After she graduated and started work as a GP, she found that there simply wasn't time. One day in an inspired act of 'de-cluttering' the entire collection of paperbacks went off to the charity shop. When she turned up at the shop the following morning at eight thirty in the pouring rain asking if she could buy back; 'Just one or two', the assistant looked at her for a good few seconds, probably, she thought, assessing her mental state before opening the door.

'You probably get this a lot she'd said', laughing and wiping her face.

The assistant had smiled noncommittally.

Now she stared at the books with a look of almost spiritual hunger. The possibilities were myriad. Prose, poetry, Saga's, crime fiction by native authors. Carrying

on the lineage: murder, bloodshed, heroism, sacrifice, justice. The world was no different, she thought glancing around, the trappings just got more comfortable. She passed over them. Her eyes had been drawn to a large thick book sitting directly in the centre of the shelf. She slid her fingers around the spine and worked it loose. Whatever it was it hadn't been read for some time. She opened it, her eyes scanning the pages, illustrations flickered by, shifting and moving like a Zoetrope. Without noticing, she'd drifted to the sofa. She sat down, the book open, in front of her. The kitchen knife lay on the coffee table, within reach.

It was nearly half an hour and now David was desperate to see another car. This wasn't normal. Where was everyone? For a while the giddy thrill of being the only person alive was fun, almost exhilarating. Here he was, *The Omega Man*, with a gunmetal grey 4x4 and the roads to himself. Now it was unnerving. When a White saloon finally appeared on the horizon he laughed to himself. '*Proof of life*', he thought. As the car passed he was tempted to wave but got hold of himself in time.

Magnus had provided him with a list of shops nearby. He'd planned to stop on the way, but decided against it. He didn't want to wake Beth. Let her sleep. Ironic as he'd been urging her to sleep less since...but what difference would one more day make? Out here, with the fresh air, the scenery, the space, the freedom, surely she'd want to explore. How could you not? He'd gone out and bought new clothes: boots, backpacks, gloves, socks, a GPS device, new camera. To the shop assistant the whole thing probably screamed 'Mid-life crisis', so he'd made sure to pick up a few things for Beth too. She'd given them a cursory glance when he arrived home that night. But beyond the usual tepid smile, no reaction. But here, he reasoned, his eyes scanning the scenery, here things would be different. Here...

The phone rang - piercingly loud in the silence of the car. Magnus' name lit up the screen. He jabbed green button.

'Hello?'

There was a pause. For a second David thought he'd hung up. In that nanosecond an avalanche of images overwhelmed him - something bad had happened, something had gone wrong...

'Hello David!'

Magnus. His voice, which always contained a smile. David instantly relaxed.

'Hi Magnus'.

'David, how are you, are you settling in alright?'

'Fine, thank you.'

'Good, good, that's excellent'.

Another pause.

'Well, I just wanted to let you know all is well here. No problems.'

The avalanche abated.

'Also the lawyers have finalised the paperwork, I'll send it to you for approval. I explained you weren't here, but anyway, your share allocation has been approved by the board. Once the trials are finished and the company goes public, well...'

'And that goes for everyone?'

'Yes, allocations based on seniority and contribution'.

He sounded stiff, formal. David could picture him reading from the contract. Throughout the entire process of arranging to take the company public anytime Magnus had had to deal with anything legal or financial he became diffident, it was, in its way amusing to see. A man who was a superb public speaker, who had delivered countless lectures on genetics to packed auditoria. But put him in a room with lawyers and accountants and he'd become timid, almost deferential. When the subject of the IPO first came up and the figures were mentioned he'd drummed his fingers against his mouth, as if to stop himself from uttering something which would be considered 'unbefitting' for a renowned geneticist.

'I don't have to tell you what it could mean'. And there it was again - the learned professor reduced to the excitable graduate student.

He didn't. Not at all.

'Let's just get to the end shall we' David said with a smile.

Magnus laughed.

'Yes, of course. Not count the chicken's eh?'

David suppressed a laugh. He loved Magnus' use of English idioms.

'How is Beth?'

'She's fine. Thank you' he replied, sounding more formal than he intended to. For a moment he was reminded of all those conversations with friends and colleagues. One of those familiar platitudes handed out like a business cards at conferences.

There was a crackle on the line. For a second David hoped he'd lost signal.

'I'm sorry I didn't get to see her before you left.'

'Yes. No. She's...we're all good. The place is perfect.'

'Good. After everything.'

This time the signal did cut out.

'Magnus?'

He leant forward and tapped the screen.

'Hello Magnus?'

Silence. He sat back in his seat - then slammed on the brakes.

The Volvo screeched to a halt, David was thrown forward in the seat, the belt biting into his shoulder. He jerked back in his seat as the Volvo came to a complete stop. He sat there blinking. Catching his breath. And then he stared. Two small, raisin-like eyes, stared back.

If the sheep had any sense of its impending death, it gave no indication. Instead it stared. The black nose twitching ever so slightly. Its thick horns, perfectly

evolved for ramming, curled around its head. For a second David imagined it charging – and himself explaining to the insurance company the reason for the dent in the bonnet. But it didn't move. It stood, its thick fleece accentuating its hindquarters. He reached towards the horn, but hesitated, his hand hovering there. The sheep stared, as if daring him to press it. He dismissed the notion. And hit the horn.

A quick encouraging blast. Nothing.

'Okay.' David thought. *'Sure, they've become accustomed to the sound.'*

He pressed again. A long blast.

The sheep stayed rooted to the spot. For a wild moment David thought perhaps it was actually dead. That it had suffered some massive coronary event, and any moment now would just keel over. But it didn't. The horned, white sentinel wasn't going to budge.

It was then he made the decision. He wasn't going to move. If this was a stand-off he was going to win. He folded his arms.

'Right, let's see then shall we.'

It was absurd. He knew it. But if something in his being had dictated that this was where he made his stand, then so be it. He stared at the sheep. The sheep stared back. His imagination ran wild. He pictured himself, still sitting in the car as night fell then turned into morning. Both of them locked in some epic battle of wills. The victor finally emerging exhausted but triumphant.

The sheep blinked. As if sensing something David leaned forward in his seat. Watching as the sheep slowly and methodically defecated. When it had finished it let out, what he could only describe as, a contemptuous bleat and walked away.

As he drove on, he reprimanded himself for the irrational moment of anthropomorphism he'd let himself indulge in as the sheep had relieved itself. At the same time, he made a mental note to check the latest research on cognition and intelligence in the genus *Ovis*. Because just for a moment, he could've sworn the little bastard had been smiling.

She'd been captivated from the moment she started reading. As though this were a hunger which was finally being sated. Kicking off her shoes she settled into the luxurious comfort of the sofa. The silence no longer oppressive. The vivid world conjured by the book, seemed to fill the room with life. After an hour she became aware of an ache in her wrist from supporting the spine of the book on her lap. She marked her page and sat up, stretching. She rotated her wrist, first one way and then the other. If the months of inactivity had caused her muscles to atrophy to the point where reading was physically debilitating she knew she was in need of exercise. But the mere thought of physical exertion exhausted her. That wasn't how she'd always been. Far from it. Despite the punishing hours at the surgery she still found time to pursue a vigorous course of exercise. Running, swimming, HIIT classes, Pilates. The 'full cliché' she'd told friends.

Now, thinking back she couldn't reconcile the person who forced herself out of bed and into her running gear on those winter mornings. The first few excruciating minutes when the body fights the shock of the cold and the effort. 'Was that me?' she wondered. Of course it was, but the question remained: 'Is it still me?' What is the distance between that person and the one here, now, massaging her wrists and shrinking at the thought of stepping out of the perfectly controlled, temperature regulated biosphere she was in? Of course time had passed. There was a physical difference. But the real disparity was psychological. She wasn't the

same person because the sum total of her experience was different. New input, new output. 'Who was she'? The simplest answer to that question seemed to be; 'What did she do'.

But was it that simple? Was who we were a sum total of our choices. 'Personality' was habit. A repeating pattern of behaviour was what we liked to call 'Ourselves'. To most people simple mechanical functions didn't seem enough to explain the richness of human life. But that of course was simply a product of consciousness. That intuitive feeling that we were more than the three pounds of electrical meat between our ears. Experience changed us, yes, by changing the way we behaved. Behaviour. Choices. And when those choices, weren't yours, when events forced you to behave in way wholly other. When the idea of you, met the reality of you. What happened? When you looked into a mirror after a dramatic change in your appearance, for a moment you might not recognise yourself. She'd looked into the mirror. Who was she now?

Although she wasn't cold she pulled her cardigan tighter around her and walked to the window. Outside, the same magisterial view. She considered what she'd just read. The geological evolution of the country. Glaciers, lava flowing and cooling, sculpting a rugged mass. The ground punctuated by solfatara's. The volcanic tremors, frequent but rarely devastating. A land whose very bedrock was always shifting. A place that boasted no indigenous people. Everyone who came here made a choice, to preserve their past or to carve a new future. The land shapes the people, she thought. Perhaps it could re-shape her.

David put the shopping bags into the car. The sky had clouded over and it looked like rain. He took a moment to re-arrange the bags. Packing them in tightly to prevent them shifting in transit. Satisfied he closed the boot. He checked his phone. The drive had taken longer than he'd thought. He tapped his contacts list. Beth's name was first. His finger hovered over the button. Maybe he should just check-in with her? Explain he'd be longer than he thought? Or was that too much? Spots of rain tapped his jacket.

He remembered the days of returning home to a house that felt like a mausoleum. Blinds drawn. The fetid smell of domestic disregard. The times when, after a punishing day at work he was desperate to be home. Only to find himself sitting in the car, unable to open the door. Sometimes even turning the engine back on and driving away. Circling the block, in an attempt to build up enough momentum, or emotional resilience to go home.

One evening as he finally forced the car door open and half-stepped, half-slumped onto the street, he looked up to see two Police officers approaching. He knew instantly. This was it. She'd finally done it. His nervous system underwent a seismic tremor and he thought he was going to be sick.

The officers, with what he thought was a kind of affected patience, the kind seen in bad actors, asked him if he lived here. He nodded.

'Yes'.

One of the officers looked at the house, clearly eager to draw out the tension for dramatic effect. The other made a note. He wanted to run, to charge down the path and burst through the front door. To have his hypothesis confirmed. This was a time for empirical data, not amateur dramatics. He needed to know if.

'We've had a report of a vehicle that has been in the area, acting suspiciously'.

He briefly, considered correcting the Police Officer's grammar; 'A car can't act suspiciously, it's an inanimate object'.

Then the implication hit him.

'Suspiciously?'

The officer met his eyes, impassive.

'There are a number of families in the area, a school, not too far from here. Obviously parents are concerned'.

He spluttered in disbelief.

'You think..'

'We're just making enquiries'.

'I live here' said David, feeling a tension in his throat.

The officer regarded him, head tilted slightly back, thumbs tucked into his stab vest. His hazel eyes never left David's face. Did cops really have a sixth sense, or was it just that that's what they made you feel?

The other officers radio beeped and there was a burst of static, then a garbled message.

'3 10, received'.

He nodded to the other officer and then gave David a thin, bureaucratic smile of what passed for sincerity.

'Thank you very much Sir, have a good day'.

David watched them return to the patrol car. The implication struck him: She was still alive.

\*

The rain, tapping on his jacket became more insistent. He closed the contacts window and put his phone away. His interventions hadn't always been welcome-far from it. She needed time. And space.

She realised she hadn't eaten yet. In the kitchen she stood, gazing at the cookware, the myriad appliances. This could get overwhelming very quickly, she thought. *'Start small - nothing extravagant.'*

Taking eggs from the refrigerator she scooped a tablespoon of butter into a pan and lit the gas. She dropped two thick slices of bread into the toaster and pushed the lever. The eggs cracked pleasingly. She stirred, took the pan off the heat, stirred again, the mixture thickening. It felt good. She'd never shared David's culinary ambitions, or indeed his talents. The time consuming preparation, the 'necessary chaos' as he called it.

But this felt good - simple and classic. The toaster popped and she pressed the lever again. She reached up and opened the cupboard and took out a large white plate from the top of a stack.

Whether it was the act of cooking or some biological switch tripped she suddenly felt ravenous. Her stomach gave a low growl. She gave the eggs another stir, and went back to the fridge and took out a block of cheese.

In the cupboard at her knees she found a large metal box grater. She was about to close the door again, when she saw it. Holding the plate in one hand she took the wine bottle by the neck and examined it.

A spark of indignation kindled somewhere deep inside.

*'Nice try'*

She was about to take the bottle out when the room erupted.

The plate dropped from her hand and smashed - a sound like a gunshot. Though she barely heard it over the other noise. The piercing high pitched beeping coming from everywhere all at once.

The smoke from the toaster told her. She ran over, slapping the stop button. The two blackened slices popped, like charred 'Jack in the Boxes'. She looked around wildly for the source. The noise was ear splitting. She tried to reach the smoke alarm. No good. Grabbing a chair, she dragged it underneath and clambered up. Her fingers jabbed at the button.

*Stop! Stop! Stop!*

The noise stopped. Except inside her head, where it continued to echo for a few seconds. Finally dissipating. She slid off the chair. Her breathing short and fast. Then she saw the pan. She darted to it and turned the dial. The flame vanished.

She stood at the hob, hands gripping the edge, heart racing.

*'Tachycardia. From tachy, meaning swift, and the Greek Kardia, meaning heart.'*

Her heart rate slowed. Her breathing stabilised.

*'Stupid, stupid, stupid'*, the mantra repeated through gritted teeth.

She stared down into the pan.

*'Shit'*.

She separated what was salvageable. The rest had been smelted to the bottom of the pan. A yellow, brown fusion, like the result of some ill-fated chemistry experiment.

She made more toast, standing by the toaster staring into it as the heating elements glowed orange. When it was done she sat at the breakfast bar and picked at the eggs. Her appetite displaced by anger.

*'Why the fuck did he hide it? Did he really think she was so fragile? That she'd what- down the whole bottle and tear up the house? Had she ever done that?'*

The voice of her therapist: *'Be honest'*.

*'Okay... had she done that recently?'*

She carefully picked up the larger shards of the shattered plate. Sweeping the rest up. She dropped them into the bin in the utility room and threw in some kitchen waste for good measure. Telling herself she wasn't hiding anything. Simply circumventing an unnecessary conversation.

Back in the main room, she picked up the book and stretched out on the sofa. And read:

*'There is among the people a strong belief in what is known as The Hidden World.'*

8.

The noise woke her. She stirred, disoriented. The book lay open on her lap. She marked her page and set it down on the coffee table. Whatever the noise was, it was gone, replaced by a new one. Footsteps - outside. She sat up. Listening as something knocked against the front door. She reached for the knife - then, heard a faint jangling sound. A key slid into a lock. David.

She quickly lifted a cushion and slid the knife underneath as his voice called from the hallway;

'Hey, it's me.'

She met him in the hallway, struggling along with several shopping bags.

'Hey'.

He took in her appearance, the hair mussed, the eyes puffy and immediately thought he should have tried harder to get her to come with him. But how exactly? Deciding to table that particular question he shuffled down the hallway, his arms aching with the strain of the bags.

'Do you want some help?'

'No, I'm fine. Thanks'.

A tin hit his shin. He buried a grimace in a smile and hurried into the kitchen. Beth followed. He hoisted the bags onto the kitchen island and started to unpack.

'I managed to get almost everything. Although I had to improvise a little. A few local delicacies.'

Beth poked around in one of the bags

'Don't tell me there's a sheep's head in here'

David smiled ruefully; 'Almost' he muttered.

Beth couldn't tell if he was joking.

'So...how was your day?' As soon as he'd said it he regretted it. Especially the 'Hi honey I'm home' inflection he'd given it. It was a question loaded with significance.

She stopped picking at the contents in the bag and turned to him.

'Fine' she said. And with that she walked out of the room.

David let out a long, ragged sigh.

'Shit.'

Dinner was a fulsome apology of food. He expected her to pick at it again. Her way of signalling the apology was not accepted. But she ate. Not a lot. But more than yesterday. He relaxed a little. Conversation was neutral. The novelty of their surroundings kept them from straying into anything too emotive. But by the time he brought out dessert, even that seemingly rich seam had begun to dry up. He tried to push the dreaded thought away, the one that lurks at the back of so many couple's minds;

*'What if we've just run out of things to say?'*

Like a man looking for a solid footing as he climbs a wall he spied the book she'd taken from the shelf  
'Learn anything interesting?' he asked.

At first she was almost monosyllabic, but his instincts hadn't left him and he listened intently. Gradually her halting, reticent voice became stronger, more confident.

She told him about the first settlers on the island. Viking explorers and Celtic missionaries. At this David reacted, almost comically enthusiastically. Not the content of what she was saying, which was of course, interesting. But the way she was speaking. The *curiosity*. That was what he loved about her. The way she could become consumed by things that interested her. The way she'd become almost fluent in a language if they went on holiday. Even a three-day city break could incite a burst of learning. Now, sitting across from her as she spoke, he'd gotten a glimpse of the old Beth. He stopped eating, leaned in, listening. The light in the room, the quiet, the peace. Everything seemed so perfect.

Suddenly she stopped. Her chin dropped, a faint blush rose on her cheeks.

'I'm monologuing', She said, with a faint smile.

He scrambled, desperate for the spell not to be broken.

'No, no....carry on. It's fascinating'.

She demurred. Ruffled her hair.

It was a tactic. Downright shameful and manipulative. And thoroughly effective.

'Oh come on' she said.

'No, please. Really, don't stop'.

For a moment she thought he was about to reach across the table and grab her hand.

'Okay, well.

David waited.

She didn't know what demon conjured the thought, but it was out before it could be stopped.

'Do we have any wine?'

He swallowed. Every facial muscle pressed into service keeping his smile in place.

'Ah...'

The sound dragged out like a death rattle. Beth waited. Her head cocked to one side.

'I can get some the next time I go shopping'

It was a politician's evasion, don't answer the question, simply refashion it.

She looked at him for a what seemed like longer than necessary.

'Okay', she said, smiling.

He lifted the empty plates, cutlery jangling, as he slid them together. As he walked out of the room he was sure he could feel her eyes on him.

9.

He dropped his notepad down on the desk.

There was a world in which he hadn't lied. Yes - from the perspective of a dyed-in-the-wool deontologist he had lied. "They did have wine". But looked at from a consequentialist's perspective he'd simply prioritised.

He wagged his pen back and forth between his fingers. He was just trying to do the right thing. If she thought this was a question of control she was wrong. She wasn't the only one capable of making a recommendation based on a diagnosis. He'd done what he did based on the data he had and on past case history. What was wrong with that?

*'Because you lied'*.

He threw the pen down, took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. His notepad tracked his mental fatigue. Neat sentences degraded into fragments, ending in barely legible bullet points.

He stood up, stretched and began to walk. Looking around he still couldn't get over how perfect the lab was. He'd seen pictures, but like the country itself, they didn't do it justice. He wondered if the same person had designed the house. The pure application of minimalism: order, function, beauty. Yes. That was the word that unexpectedly came to mind. The place was beautiful.

Everything from the HapGen automated DNA extraction workstation to the state of the art CenLab centrifuge down to the elegant blue and white micropipettes. He picked one up and held it gently. He had a vision of some archaeological dig, millennia from now. A gloved hand reaching down into the earth and delicately plucking this brittle artefact of a bygone era. How would all this look to them? What would we be to them?

*'What is the Ape to man? A laughing stock...and just the same shall man be to the Superman'*.

He replaced the micropipette. Maybe Nietzsche's Superman wasn't the thing to conjure. Not in a Genetics Lab.

He returned to the desk, reaching for his pen. 'He had done the right thing, he was sure.

'I said, are you coming to bed?'

His head jerked up. Beth was in the doorway.

'What time is it?'

'Late'.

He nodded, closed his notebook and shut down the computer. As he did he nudged the stack of books and a few loose sheets of paper fluttered to the ground.

Beth bent and scooped them up. As she went to put them back she stopped. Among the papers was a copy of a photograph. She stared.

'The Dutch Hunger Winter', he said.

He nodded at the photograph. She looked at him and then back down at the image.

The young boy stood in a doorway. The threadbare vest that hung around his body was thick with grime and hung lopsided. His face was smudged with dirt. His eyes, not meeting the camera, instead searching somewhere beyond the frame. She noticed the spoon that he held, like a talisman or a toy. But it was his legs that shocked her. Brittle as kindling. His emaciated body seeming to defy gravity by remaining upright.

'His name was Henkie Holvast, he was nine years old when that was taken.'

She didn't look up but remained gripped by the image.

'The Dutch Hunger Winter, 1944. The German Army blockaded the Netherlands. Added to which was a particularly harsh winter. Henkie was suffering the effects of famine. He was lucky, he survived. Eighteen thousand people weren't.'

She carefully placed the photograph on the desk and walked to the workbench opposite. The totality of eighteen thousand deaths encapsulated in a single child. The power of image. A child caught at the brink of death. Not at the barrel of a gun, or a bomb, nor any of the other mechanised processes of death and destruction, but by the simplest methodology. An approach that required no munitions, no armaments. Just simple biology. The simplicity gilded the cruelty.

The computer completed its shutdown. David watched as she examined the lab. Her fingers tapped the lid of the centrifuge. He thought she looked like a pianist who hadn't performed for a while. Tentatively reacquainting herself with the keys, before deciding whether or not to play.

'What's interesting is that effects of the famine didn't end with those that experienced it. It's possible the effects were passed on down the generations.'

She turned back to him.

'What do you mean?'

'It's possible the severe restriction in diet had noticeable effects on subsequent generations - not just the children, but the grandchildren. A kind of inherited phenotypic plasticity.'

He winced; *'Jesus, calm down, you're not addressing a symposium'*.

'What kind of effects?'

He jumped on the cue: 'Inherited conditions, diabetes, rates of cardiovascular mortality. Almost as if there was a kind of cellular reprogramming.'

'Doesn't the Weismann Barrier prevent that?'

There it was again. The curiosity. He capitalized.

'It should but it's possible that environmental stressors can cause change, even in somatic cells.'

Beth turned to him.

'Life experiences transmitted through the genes?'

He was familiar with the scepticism. Epigenetics was still a somewhat contentious area of science. As with every emergent theory in history, from Evolution by Natural Selection through to Quantum Mechanics and Dark Matter it had its detractors and its adherents. Even he had been sceptical at the start. But when he began studying the research he found it intriguing. He hadn't had the time though, to pursue his interest fully. Now, he'd begun to look again.

He shrugged. 'Evolution is pressure. It's possible those environmental stressors can accelerate changes.'

This was usually the point in the conversation where people's eyes changed. If he was talking to a colleague, they narrowed into elliptical condescension. If it was with a non-scientist they widened and he began the mental countdown until they said the word 'Mutant's' or indeed 'X-Men'. The mean time was roughly two seconds.

He added the familiar caveat. 'It's just a theory.'

She glanced over the desk at the stacks of books and folders.

'Looks like you've got a busy day ahead of you.'

He laughed. 'Yeah, well... People here can trace their ancestors back for generations. Stable, homogeneous population - perfect place for studying genetics.'

'You make it sound like a laboratory.'

He looked at her, searching for a trace of a rebuke. But her face betrayed nothing.

She picked up a pad of Post-it notes.

'Can I have these?'

He nodded. 'Sure'.

He waited until she'd slipped them into her pocket. It was now or never;

'Actually, I was thinking of going out tomorrow - get a sense of the place. Try the new camera...'

He left the door of invitation open. And while she didn't slam it in his face, it closed firmly.

'You should come to bed.'

10.

As soon as she turned out the light she saw the boy.

It was the eyes. More than his frail body, ravaged by starvation, it was the look in his eyes. A look that went beyond hunger, beyond want, beyond even pain. The plaintive incomprehension of 'Why?'

'Histology, not philosophy,' her mentor Dr Ross had been fond of saying.

But that wouldn't be enough for Henkie Holvast, or the thousands like him. 'You're starving because you have a calorific deficit' wasn't a sufficient explanation. 'You're starving because of an act of political will designed to expedite a military objective' wouldn't do. 'You're starving because mankind is programmed to hate.' Would that make it easier to grasp?

She ran her fingers through her hair, then dropped her arms on the duvet. She needed sleep. She *wanted* sleep. Beside her, David was deep in a comforting Stage 3 by now. Long, slow delta waves washing through his brain.

She turned on her side willing herself to sleep. She occupied her mind with mundanity, recalling every state in the US. Somewhere around Ohio, she lost concentration. She turned on her back. Plays by Shakespeare. She'd barely started when she recalled a production of Titus Andronicus. Lavinia, her tongue cut out, writing the names of her attackers in the sand with a stick.

'Shit.'

She turned again. Kate Bush songs. Albums, tracks, singles, B-sides. She needed to sleep.

But she wasn't even at the end of 'The Kick Inside' when she'd detoured to a memory. A boy, a bedroom. A nervous fumbling kiss.

She opened her eyes. This wasn't going to work. She lifted the covers and slipped out of bed. She glanced around the door of the bedroom and down the corridor to the bathroom. The house was silent.

Halfway downstairs, she stopped to listen. Nothing. At the bottom, she turned on the light. Somewhere in the kitchen, the refrigerator hummed. A steady, reassuring murmur. Like the heartbeat of the house.

She slid the book from the shelf and opened it as she walked to the sofa. Outside was blackness. She flipped through the pages of the book feeling for her bookmark. It wasn't there. She looked down and frowned.

The book was open, but both pages were blank. She flipped forward. All the pages were blank. Behind her, something moved. She turned, the book falling from her hands. The girl stood in the centre of the room. Black eyes, blonde, limp hair. Beth tried to scream. At the same moment, the girl opened her mouth. Beth watched as dirt spilled out of the girl's mouth. Flowing out in a horrific deluge.

The book hit the ground with a thud.

Beth woke, flailing for the lamp. Beside her, David stirred and turned. She clicked the switch. The warm yellow light spread out. Shrinking, if not extinguishing her terror. She lay, propped on one elbow. Her breath slowing. On the floor by the bed lay her phone. She picked it up.

3.13.

She took a long deep breath, exhaling slowly. Then another, wiped a thin thread of sweat from her forehead and felt beneath both arms. Hot, damp. She cleaned her hands with a tissue and closed her eyes.

She lay there in the dark, counting down, one hundred, ninety-nine, ninety-eight, ninety-seven...

11.

Day Minus 35.

'Three, two, one.'

A pause.

'Where are you?'

'On a beach.'

'Can you describe it?'

Beth's forehead wrinkled. She focused.

'It's white, the sand is almost white. It's hot under my feet. The sea is...' She searched for the right word... What was it? She felt herself tense.

'It's okay, carry on.' The therapist's voice: calm, reassuring. Patient.

That word: *patient*. A hideous homonym. She was a *patient*. The therapist *was* patient. The beach vanished. It was replaced by her surgery. The waiting room, the reception desk, her office. She felt the muscles in her calves tighten, her fingers involuntarily folding into fists.

'Just relax.'

She conjured the beach again.

'Blue, the sea is blue,' she cringed at the choice of word. Was that it? Was that what her vocabulary had been reduced to? Was she a child?' *Of course the sea is fucking blue*.'

She felt her face flush with embarrassment.

'It's okay', the therapist - gently encouraging, never judging.

She tried again. White sand, clear skies, blue sea. But the image wouldn't hold. Like a photograph fading in the developing fluid, she couldn't stabilise it.

She opened her eyes.

'I'm sorry, I can't.'

'It's okay. We can try again.' You were doing well - sometimes it takes a while.'

She nodded. Forcing a smile for the sake of convention. But the words rang hollow. '*Sometimes it takes a while?*' To what? To simply imagine something. To picture a beach, how hard could it be? How damaged must her brain be, if it couldn't perform a simple task? Humans had been constructing

vast imaginary structures since they developed consciousness. God, money, nations. And she couldn't even manage a strip of sand and a palm tree.

A silence - which she knew by now wasn't a silence. But an invitation to speak. Lawyers used the same technique in court - a long silence between questions to a defendant. Hoping that somehow the person would feel compelled to fill the space, and in doing so, incriminate themselves.

She wouldn't take the bait. She was too smart for that. And as for the silence, she could live in it. Comfortably. She'd set up home there and no one was going to evict her. She welcomed it.

'Can I make an observation?'

It was a rhetorical question. Beth looked at the therapist. The woman's small thin lips, which Beth had taken against right away as giving the impression of unkindness, twitched into the approximation of a smile.

Beth didn't reply. She hated the faux deference of therapy-speak.

'You're bullshitting.'

Beth's mouth dropped, and she laughed. The sound was so unfamiliar she almost looked around to see where it came from.

'Excuse me?'

The woman went on: 'You strike me as someone so bright, that from time to time, she outsmarts herself.'

Uncharacteristically, before Beth could respond, she continued: 'I don't think you've been as forthcoming as you might have been with regards to what brought you here.'

Beth was stung. Because it was true. She hadn't.

'Please understand, that isn't uncommon. Many of the people I see exhibit a certain amount of dissociative behaviour. Now, I know I don't need to explain what that means, not to you. But it's because I don't need to explain it that I think you are more engaged in it. Only someone who knows the system can start to game it.'

Beth shook her head with another short, sharp laugh. Without realising it, she folded her arms across her chest.

'I really don't know what you're insinuating.'

'It's an observation.'

'Well, sure, you hide behind that all you like. But it amounts to the same thing. You think I'm lying to you.'

She shook her head; 'I think you're lying to yourself. And I think you know it.'

'If I know it, then does that really constitute lying?'

'Touche'.' She inclined her hand towards Beth. 'Like I said - too smart.'

Beth plucked at her T-shirt and brushed away an imaginary piece of fluff.

'So, where do we go from here?'

‘That’s up to you. But you have some time to think about it. I’m afraid our time is up.’

Another sting. ‘*That was it?*’ She’d been what- dressed down, upbraided, rebuked? And now she was being summarily dismissed?

‘Well, *fuck this*’ she thought.

She picked up her bag. Slowly. Then she stood and took her coat from the back of the chair.

‘If you’d like to see someone else, I can recommend several...’

‘No.’ Beth slipped on her jacket. ‘You’ll do.’

She walked to the door without looking back.

‘What colour was the sea?’

Beth turned. And immediately, with a haughtiness she didn’t know she possessed, she articulated, with clipped precision:

‘Cyan.’

## 12.

David woke early. After he’d showered he made himself breakfast: porridge, banana, coffee. He also made up a thermos of coffee and tucked it into his backpack. The pack was new - thirty-four litre capacity, delivering; ‘cutting-edge comfort’, according to the sales assistant.

He remembered Magnus’s warning about the weather, so he’d put on a thermal base layer. He’d also packed gloves, sunscreen, a hat and sunglasses, and checked his GPS. After he was done, he cleared away the breakfast things, added another banana to his pack, along with two protein bars and slipped on his boots.

Of course the one thing he wanted to do - the one thing he had forced himself not to do - was check his phone. He knew there had been no messages. He’d missed no calls. Everything was fine. Magnus had everything under control. They had a dedicated capable staff. If anything had happened Magnus would deal with it. He absently rubbed his forefinger against his thumb. He went through his checklist for the day. He hadn’t planned on going too far. A couple of hours. It would be good to get out of the Lab. The opportunity to let his mind roam free. Walking was what he loved. Back home, before he met Beth it had been his passion.

On his first trip to the Lake District he’d been struck by the rugged beauty of the place. He’d returned as often as he could after that first visit. When he started working at Palmir Biotech he’d spend his holidays there. For him it was a way of continuing to work, even when he wasn’t working. Out there among the Lakeland Fell’s he had some of his most significant breakthroughs. Although he would never tell anyone, he felt inspired by the great Lake poets. Wordsworth, Coleridge, Ruskin, DeQuincey. Although these were men whose work was seen as a reaction against the Age of Enlightenment. Of the Romantic communing with nature and turning his back on the industrial world, he was inspired by the idea of the individual as visionary.

Not that he would have shared these ideas with anyone at work. It was one thing to express an affinity for Wordsworth, another to suggest that he fancied himself as

Milton in a Lab coat. Science was collaboration. Teamwork. Peer reviewing and information sharing. Let fiction have Victor Frankenstein and Dr Moreau.

But the most unexpected, the most significant event, that happened on one of the trips was that he'd met Beth. When they told people about it, there was always a moment of incredulity. The idea that it could ever have happened was so remote. As though circumstances had conspired specifically to keep them apart. But through some astounding counter-intuitive thinking on his part, and a headstrong devil-may-care attitude on hers they contrived to meet.

'Didn't your parents tell you never to pick up hitchhikers?' his friends asked.

'He could have been a serial killer!' her friends had almost screamed.

Both of them shrugged.

'He seemed fine.'

'There had been a sign', he told them, at this they rolled their eyes.

But it was true. There she was standing on the edge of the car park at the motorway service station with a handwritten cardboard sign that read:

'Anywhere but Here!' with a smiley face as punctuation.

He'd stopped the car and lowered the window.

'I'm heading to London'.

She gave him a quick appraisal. Looked over the car. Which she noticed was incredibly tidy.

'Absolute red flag! Tidiness equals psychopath', Maggie had said slapping her hand to her forehead.

But it hadn't put her off. He told her he needed to fill up the car and get something to eat. He suggested they eat together, then at the end of it, if they both still felt okay about it he'd give her a lift to London.

'So, that was like your first date?'

'Absolutely not,' Beth said, downing a vodka shot.

'Yeah, kind of', he said sipping his beer.

By the time they arrived in London (he insisted on driving her to her flat – she, in turn made sure he dropped her off three streets away) they'd swapped numbers. He'd made a point of telling her he was the kind of man who called. Not texted - actually called and spoke to you in person.

'Think you can handle that?' he said in a voice that was supposed to summon his inner Daniel Craig -but may have inadvertently released his latent Alan Partridge.

She laughed. 'Yeah, I think I can'. She got out of the car with aplomb - and into the pouring rain.

He called. In person. She answered. They spoke. Three days later they had, what they finally settled on as 'Date 2.0'

That was then. Now...

A noise above. He tracked it. She was out of bed. It was a good sign. She was up early; maybe he should wait, try again to coax her out. No, one step at a time. He scribbled a note on a post-it and stuck it to the refrigerator, zipped up his fleece, checked and re-checked his pockets. Keys, phone, then slipped on the backpack and headed out.

Beth reached the bottom of the stairs as the door closed. She walked down the hall and tested the handle. Locked. She unlocked and re-locked the door. Then did it again. In the main room she found her book where she'd left it. The floor had no traces of dirt, or phantom child's footprints. Satisfied, she went to make breakfast.

It was a land of gods. Nearly all cultures at various stages practiced some form of Animism. Deities dwelled in rivers and mountains. Natural phenomena were given names and faces. Man catalogued and ordered his environment in order to explain the inexplicable. Ra, Poseidon, Gaia.

Out here, it was easy to appreciate how belief had evolved. When you depended on the nature - when you were at its mercy bestowing reverence was prudent. And from that to weave a complex tapestry of belief that covered the world. And even with new discoveries, with the advent of technology, belief was hard to supplant. In some ways the speed of modernity helped to crystalize beliefs. Even after gaining control of our environment we looked around it with the mind of the earliest people that had ever walked on the earth. At their engagement party he'd got talking to a Chemist, the wife of a colleague. She and a group had just returned from climbing in the Himalayas. Nine days in, at nearly 5000 metres, the weather had, in an instant, turned savage.

Forced to camp they'd hunkered down in their tents. The next day there had been no let up. By the second night even the Sherpa's began to speak in whispers.

'There was a period, when...'

She paused, swallowed - then not meeting David's eye - continued:

"I thought the mountain wasn't going to let us go."

She laughed, waved her hand as if dispelling smoke and reached for another drink.

He paused, stared out at the view. This wasn't Annapurna. Of course if the weather turned quickly you could be in trouble. But here, all he saw was beauty. It stretched in every direction: emerald green's like Ireland, cobalt blue sky, pure white clouds, vast horizons.

He squinted.

Something on the opposite hillside caught his eye. At first, he thought it was a person. But when he focused he saw it was inanimate - black, about six feet tall.

Beth closed the book, carefully marking her page before putting it back on the table. The last phrase, would she thought, stay with her forever - like a poem learned in school, that you retain sixty years later.

The house was silent. Outside the view was clear, the sky calm. She put her finger to her mouth, rubbing the tip of one fingernail against her teeth. The faint clicking sound ticking like a tally counter of her anxiety.

Looking back down at the page she re-read the last line.

*'Even evil must have a place to live.'*

It had been the last story in the chapter. A folktale about a saint who, after a series of deaths is asked to journey to an island off the coast and bless it. There he discovers a demon, hurling men to their deaths onto the rocks below. Feeding the sea with corpses. When the saint returns to the mainland he tells the people that from now on the island is sacred, no one must visit it. The people protest, but he tells them that he has granted the demon leave to stay. Telling them:

*'Even evil must have a place to live'*

The memory of the thing in the bath came to her. The rasping, beckoning sound. Of the girl, wet black earth spilling out of her mouth...but those were dreams. And beyond those were memories. That was a far darker recess. Buried in there was fire, screams, glass breaking, Megan standing in the doorway and then...

*'Even evil must have a place to live'.*

The conclusion was stark. One must make accommodation with evil. She walked to the window and stared out. The sweeping panorama. Earth the colour of Jasper. The beauty. And in this we had to find a place for evil? She shook her head - when evil takes root it spreads. You can't make accommodation with something that will not accommodate.

The problem was the word. 'Evil'. An easy word, a tabloid word, a word so laden with metaphysical baggage. There was no evil, she knew that. Every act, no matter how bloody, how cruel, how repellent, had at its inception some material cause. There was no vacuum in human behaviour. But to believe that one had to come face to face with all the possibility for destruction that we were capable of. She thought again of Henkie Holvast. You'd call the deliberate starvation of a child evil. But there always a cause. A cause demanded understanding, if not forgiveness. Most people yoked the two together - that's why evil was so convenient. Evil was the vacuum.

The book folded in her hands and she leaned back. As she did she remembered the knife. Reaching under the cushion she took it out.

The reprimand was short, sharp;

*'Imagine if he'd found it. What the hell would that look like?'*

She held the knife, one fingertip pressed against the tip. She wondered: if she'd had the knife that day would it have made any difference? Would she have been able to use it? She understood human anatomy, did that make her more, or less lethal? Months afterwards she began to fantasise. Re-playing the scene, acting differently, heroically, or if not heroism, stoicism. Sometimes there was violence: a recurring image of her, with her bunch of keys, the jagged teeth protruding between her fingers, driving them deep into soft flesh. An eyeball popping like a grape.

A shiver slalomed down her spine, she placed the knife on the table and rubbed her arms. Those were dreams, role playing of another, alternate existence. That's not who she was. Except, who she was, isn't who she'd been.

As she opened the book again she suddenly felt David's absence, as if registering it for the first time. He'd been gone for what seemed like hours.

One more chapter she said to herself. Opening the book, she leant back and began to read.

There were three of them, standing on a flat hilltop. The first two were the same size, the last one a little smaller. Cairns. He'd seen them before in the Lake District and in Scotland. The ones there had been little more than piles. A steady accretion of rocks built up by passing walkers. Navigation points. Like a prehistoric GPS.

He approached the first one. What struck him was the colour. Although primarily composed of black volcanic rock, there were other stones, slate grey, some almost blue. The way the colours seemed to shift in the sunlight was hypnotic.

He wondered how long the cairns had been there. Half a thousand years at least. Hard Northern winds sculpting them. A binding together of elements. Stepping back from the cairn he slipped off his pack and unzipped it. He left the pack on the floor and taking up his camera he framed a shot.

Before he could take the picture a throaty, undulating call rang out. Looking up he saw a Raven circling, descending. A rippling black pennant against the blue sky. David watched it turn above him lower, lower. He held the camera as the raven tucked its wings and landed on top of the furthest cairn and stood, sentry-like.

'Perfect'

He raised the camera and pressed his eye to the viewfinder.

Click. He checked the image. Nice.

The bird stood stock still. In profile, its beak was curved and sharp, like a Santoku knife. He took a step closer and pressed the button.

Shifting to his left he re-framed and took another photograph. Then another. Lifting the camera again he re-assessed the background and shifted another step left. Hoping the bird would remain in place. Then raised the camera.

A black shape filled the viewfinder. There was a dry, rustling shriek. David yelled, staggering back. He dropped the camera, raising his arms to fend off whatever it was that had attacked him. Swiping wildly. Nothing.

He looked around in disbelief.

Then, above him, a croak. Another Raven circled as it climbed. On the furthest cairn the first Raven, still stood. Only now it looked in his direction. The large black eyes, blinked. The beak pointing like a dagger.

He exhaled slowly and picked up the camera.

'Okay, I get it, no photographs.'

Above him the second Raven croaked again. Its call echoing off the rocks and spreading like a wave through the air.

The book was now filled with Post-it notes, their yellow edges jutting up like tiny flags. Things to look up, other books to read. She was halfway through scribbling a new one when she heard the door.

'It's me'.

This was a habit. He'd started doing it after... - his way of waving a white flag. Here it seemed especially ludicrous.

She heard him take off his boots. A rustle as he took off his backpack, then he walked into the room.

For a moment his heart sank - had she spent all day on the couch? But he tempered it. She was dressed. Progress.

'Hi'.

'How was it?'

A broad smile. 'Fantastic, amazing views.'

She noticed mud splattered up the backs of his calves. And one elbow had a patch of dirt smeared on it.

'Coffee?'

'Yeah, great.', he tried to keep the surprise out of his voice.

She walked past him into the kitchen. This was...*unexpected*. This was good.

'I'm going to have a shower first' he said.

A cupboard opened and closed in the kitchen.

'Okay'.

He was unzipping the fleece when he saw the book. He walked over and stared down at it. David guessed it must have been around five hundred pages. He picked it up - a tome, for sure. The cover was blank except for the title in a striking cursive script. Turning it over he thought the back was also blank, but when the light caught it he noticed there were symbols debossed into it. He recognised them as Runes, but had no idea what they meant. He turned the book over again and was about to open it when a noise startled him.

He looked up – and froze.

On the handrail that ran around the deck outside, a Raven was perched.

Slowly he put the book down and went towards the window. The bird was staring through the window. At him. He checked himself. This was exactly the sequence of events that produced superstition. Magical thinking. *Post hoc ergo propter hoc*. Despite himself he scanned the sky. Nothing but clouds. His nose was almost touching the glass now. The

bird's head twitched. The black eyes staring directly at him. He thought for a second of those venetian carnival masks. The Plague Doctor. Glass eyes and the curved leather beak, stuffed with dried herbs and flowers, to protect from the effects of the *miasma*.

Leaning forward he tapped on the glass. The Raven stood. He smiled to himself. He was being absurd. It's not like it was the same bird. He tapped again. Harder. The Raven inclined its head, inquisitively:

*'Is that it?'*

At that instant he suddenly thought of Magnus. A sudden, inexplicable urge to grab the phone and call home. Even as he tried to dispel the urge his fingers were fumbling in his pocket for his phone.

He stopped himself - ridiculous. He took his hand off the glass. At that instant the Raven turned and took flight. He laughed to himself as he watched it climb into the sky.

"Nevermore", he muttered.

'What?'

He turned. Beth was stood there. He hadn't even heard her.

'Hmm?' he said.

'What did you say?'

He shook his head; 'Uh...nothing.' He thought he caught a slight expression of concern.

'Coffee's on'.

He snapped out of his Raven reverie. Smiled.

'Thanks - I'll be down in few minutes.'

With that he walked past her and headed upstairs. He was about halfway up when he stopped.

'Do you know the collective name for Ravens?'

Beth frowned. No, why?

'No reason'.

13.

It was the nights that were so different.

The sunlight dimmed, as it did back home. But here there was no attempt to palliate the night. No streetlights buzzed to life as light faded. No traffic moved past the windows. No voices from the street penetrated the door. Nothing shifted to indicate the presence of neighbours. Here there was just the dark. And the stars. The light faded. The light returned. Outside of course was different. Diurnal animals ceded the world to their nocturnal counterparts. Predators awoke. But here in the house they were shielded from this. The world outside was hidden. As if they were floating in space.

Beth was on the sofa, cushions arranged around her. A makeshift den. She looked up from the book. The night had arrived without ceremony. She idly

wondered how long she'd been reading. She tilted her neck from side to side. Unaware of the shadow creeping over her.

'Witchcraft and spirits.'

She flinched.

'Jesus Christ.'

David held up his hands; 'Sorry'.

She exhaled - a long sigh. She tried to relax her shoulders which had spasmed almost to her ears.

David sat at the end of the sofa. There was still the ghost of a smirk on his face. She considered flinging a cushion at his head, but took the dignified tack of verbal reproach.

'You shouldn't mock, they take it very seriously here'.

'Yeah, Magnus told me; 'Respect the Hidden Folk'.

She couldn't tell if he was being contrite or judgemental. But gave him the benefit of the doubt.

'How is he?'

Now it was David's turn to be defensive. It was slight, but his body shifted. All those hours spent having her own behaviour scrutinised, it seemed, had tuned her senses to the micro-expressions of others.

'Fine.' One syllable. Clipped. Guarded.

'How much longer?'

'Not long. If everything goes well.'

And with that the shutters came down. She knew with David she had to go slowly, carefully draw information out of him, especially when it was so wrapped up in emotions. This is what it had always been like with him. Pulling at threads of his history. Parents, siblings, childhood.

'It will'.

He nodded. His eyes scanning the room. She knew that look too. The search for an exit. Not necessarily literal, but conversational. But here, not surrounded by their usual distractions, their routines, the well placed, well lit escape routes there was nowhere to go.

She inclined her hand and rested it on the back of the sofa: 'What?'

He shook his head. 'I just don't want to...' He rubbed his thumb over his forefinger.

Beth raised an eyebrow; 'Tempt fate?'

She smiled to confirm she hadn't meant it as a provocation. He nodded towards the book.

'Can I?'

He saw the pages move fractionally inward, like petals in the wind. She didn't know why she'd hesitated, but something about it felt so intimate. It was like seeing someone naked again for the first time in a long time. There was trust but it was still tempered with embarrassment.

Finally, she handed it over to him.

He flipped through it, careful not to dislodge any of her post-it's that flapped like Tibetan prayer flags.

An image caught his eye. A woodcut reproduction. The chiaroscuro scene, deftly etched. The delicate beauty of the work offset by the content. A group of people stood on a clifftop. One, his hands raised in what could have been entreaty or triumph stood at the centre of the group. The others looked on, expressionless. To their left a second smaller group. Hands clasped to their bodies or outstretched in supplication. But the image in the bottom left of the picture was the most striking. A bonfire. Flames curling upwards like tongues.

David read the text beneath;

"The condemned were taken to a cliff above a great bonfire and pushed to their death in the fire below." 'Nice.'

She took the book back. Too forcefully.

'That was just one aspect.'

'I'm sure it was great, especially if you were the one in charge of the bonfire.'

*That needled her - that tone.*

And as soon as she spoke he could hear the defensiveness.

'It's not like the modern world is without horror.'

It was as if a door had been opened - a safe whose combination had now been cracked.

*What lies within.*

And it was then that their situation became acute. The isolation that went beyond geography. Here there was no way to obfuscate in the name of domestic harmony. Here there was just the two of them. There was no choice but to face one another.

But he wasn't ready. So he did what he always did. He rationalised.

'What happened...that was rioting, an aberration..'

The room seemed to shrink. The calm white walls became clinically interrogative.

She looked at him. Her gaze penetrating.

'It was an *expression*. We're civilised right up until the lights go out.'

He panicked. Tried to recover ground. But instead he opened up a chasm.

'There's no question it was horrific'

'Thank you for your validation'.

'No, I just' he swallowed, 'What I mean is, something like that, it's obviously shocking'

'Obviously.'

'But, it was moment, of collective...call it what you will, madness, rage...but it was a moment. A terrible one, but they seem terrifying and inexplicable because they're so rare'.

'So I should be grateful?'

His fingers clenched, grasping for a handhold.

'Of course not. That's not...look I know how you feel.'

Her face changed as swiftly as someone slipping off a mask.

Her look was now mocking. Contemptuous.

'No. You just know the words'.

His mouth hung open, his throat making a dry sound as words died. And before he could resurrect them into an apology she stood and walked out of the room.

He sat for a moment, buffeted in the wake of her leaving. He rested his head back. Let out a sharp, ironic laugh.

'Nice work'.

Above him the bedroom door slammed. It's thought taste is the most evocative of the senses. He wondered if that was all down to Proust. But sound could be just as effective at opening up a wormhole and flinging you back in time. The sound of a door closing. And back he went.

\*

He shut the door behind him as carefully as he could. The latch clicked and he methodically turned the three new deadbolts. Then stood for a moment in the hallway, trying to glean from any seemingly imperceptible clues what awaited him. But there was nothing. The house was silent.

Hitching up his shoulder bag he delicately hung his car-keys on the rack. A stale smell lingered. He'd vacuumed, dusted, bought several electronic diffusers and distributed them around the house. But still the stubborn odour seemed to permeate. He'd done his best to maintain every room in the house. The kitchen, the bathroom. All looked impeccable. But there was one room that defied order. Like a system in which entropy increased exponentially or an experiment gone wrong.

Placing his hand on the door to the lounge he took a breath.

*'Meet ze monster!'*

The room was the same. The blinds closed, the floor littered with newspapers. Cups were dotted around the room. A cereal bowl, two spoons. Plates, crumbs. In one corner on a bookcase a Peace Lilly sat, neglected. Across the room a Chinese Evergreen likewise forgotten.

The only light came from the TV. Of course - like the shrine of an oracle, this was sacred. He didn't need to look at the screen. The channel never changed. Rolling news. 24 hour media coverage. Streamed narcotics. The headlines scrolled across the bottom. He averted his eyes, but he knew what he'd find there if he looked. A vision of carnage and

destruction. A never ending liturgy for the adherents of a religion of morbidity. The internet was worse, social media had become their very own Book of Revelation.

Beth didn't turn as he entered the room. She sat, feet tucked up, on the sofa. Still in her pyjamas. But he'd learned to expect nothing else. These were the ceremonial robes of the faithful.

'You're late.'

She didn't turn as she spoke.

'I had a class.' He was patient. His voice barely a whisper.

'I thought your class was Tuesday?'

He stopped himself from sighing. She would have heard it - and then what? One had to approach cautiously. Jason, with his mirrored shield, approaching Medusa. No, that was unfair. He tried to sound neutral.

'It is Tuesday.'

But it was no good, the slightest inflection on the word '*is*' and it was all over. It was a rebuke. '*Don't you even know what day it is?*'

But he wasn't giving up. He couldn't. This couldn't go on.

'How was your day?'

Her eyes never moved from the TV.

'Have you been out?' Even as he said it he knew it was utterly ridiculous. The only way she'd have left the house is if it was on fire. And even then...

He tried again.

'Are you going to get dressed?'

'I *am* dressed'. Spat out with an acidic triumphalism that silenced him.

He let his bag slip down his shoulder to the floor. The newspaper headlines caught his eye:

'Riots.', 'Civil Unrest Continues', 'Anarchy'. The papers were weeks out of date. But she'd kept them. To him it was incomprehensible, like leaving a radioactive substance lying around. What was the half-life of a newspaper headline?

Either way, it wasn't good. He bent down and picked up the stack nearest to him.

Beth snapped her head around.

'Leave them!'

He paused, but didn't retract his hand. If this was going to be it, then so be it. It was time.

'I just don't think it's good to keep...to have these reminders.'

'You think we should forget?'

He stammered... 'Ah..no, no...I just don't think it's healthy.'

Now he was in trouble. Who the hell was he to tell her, about healthy versus unhealthy. But she didn't. She just stared at him, as though he'd just espoused some particularly extreme or bizarre theory. She shook her head.

He let go of the papers and knelt in front of her. His voice was trembling.

'It's just...the TV, the radio, the internet..'

'How can you not care?'

Tentatively he laid his hand on hers; 'Right now, I only care about you.'

She stared down at him, her voice flat, emotionless.

'That's how it starts.'

\*

\*